**Float**

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**Float**

by *togo*

**Summary**

(Formerly A Fear of Water and Fire) A powerful storm strikes King’s Landing. Fleeing from her circumstances, Sansa Stark is caught in the weather and almost drowns. An unlikely character saves her and changes the course of the future. Sansa and the Hound eventually escape the capital after starting a tentative romance, that snowballs into so much more.

8-17-2015: On hiatus in favor of another story. Plan to go back someday when the muse returns and edit chapters heavily and then change some events and dialogue! This was my first serious story and I’m still proud of having gotten so far. Thanks for everyone's help and reviews. This is one of the greatest online communities for writing fanwork!
King’s Landing, the capital of the Seven Kingdoms, was expecting a treacherous storm from the Southeast. Living in the Red Keep for one year, Sansa had never before experienced a Southern storm at the height of the season. The clouds had been darkening for the past several days and only a few of the poor inhabitants of Flea Bottom had fled for the safety of the surrounding lands. The rest stayed, knowing they were safer facing the wind and rain than the reaping, raping and pillaging of the Riverlands. The Stormlands to the South would be no safer, and the Kingswood was swarming with an outlaw band called The Brotherhood.

Safe inside the Tower of the Hand, Sansa Stark sat with a rigid back, watching the first rain begin to hit the window.

“It’s coming,” Arya ran to press her face against the narrow glass window to their Father’s solar. Her younger sister pried open the window, but the heavy iron wrought encasement would not budge. “Bugger your moping, San, come look at the storm!”

The wind picked up violently. The window, open only a few inches, let off a loud shriek as a tunnel of air came rushing into the room. The rush of air sent a stack of paper’s on the Hand’s desk into the air. Sansa’s father ran to shut it, knocking over a bowl of ink in the process, it rushed over the edge of the desk and onto her lap.

“The waves!”

“My dress!”

Sansa scrambled for cloth to soak up the offending black ooze. Arya hadn’t even turned her head to watch the chaos unfold. Ned Stark gave her a sympathetic, yet stern look. Don’t engage. Arya had grown extremely tenacious lately, and any argument would sent her flying from the room in search of.. cats... or shadows... or her dancing master.

“The Queen had this made for me...” Sansa muttered glumly. Thunder struck in the distance.

“No one cares about your stupid dress,” Arya snapped.

Sansa sighed as she blotted the once violet fabric with a ripped shirt her father managed to conjure. “... she’ll take it as a slight if I never wear it...”

Ned Stark huffed and turned back to the onerous task of devouring The Lineages and History of the Great Houses of the Great Kingdoms by Maester Malleon. A massive tome that created a great boom whenever Lord Stark grew weary of holding it, and dropped it on the desk.

Sansa knew no one was listening to her now, and allowed herself to wallow in a little misery. The Queen had commissioned this violet dress made with a bust line lower than she had ever worn before, and a sash tight around the waist. Another attempt at humiliating her future daughter-in-law, covered by the Queen’s graceful and sly comments. Crossing her father’s path earlier, Sansa recalled how he had unraveled her hair and pushed it over her front, muttering that it was the least he could do.

“You’re from the North,” Lord Stark peered over the ancient dusty book top. He furrowed his brow and flared his nostrils, angry at an unseen enemy. “You should wear Northern dresses anyway.”

Sansa paused and then, suddenly angry at how greatly he misunderstood her situation, slapped the
ink covered shirt down noisily onto the floor.

“Don’t you think I want to,” Sansa hissed, “... but I’m not a child,” here, she glared at Arya, “... and I know life isn’t about getting what you want.”

Where had that come from? Arya looked like she was puffing up for a harsh retort but an overwhelmed groan from their father drew her back. Sansa remembered the day’s when their father’s patience seemed endless. The Red Keep had changed them all for the worse.

Lord Stark sat with his head in his hands. His fingers were curled around his scalp and his knuckles were white from the harsh grip on temples. His pale face, the ticking of the clock, the whirling wind and the booming thunder all weighted the atmosphere of the room heavily. Leaning back in his chair, Sansa met her father’s defeated expression.

“The storm is getting worse...” he said quietly. Our loud, he called loudly for Ser Jory Cassel, Lord Stark’s captain of the guard. Sansa didn’t hate Ser Jory, nor did she like him extremely. He represented the physical manifestation of her father’s will. Ser Jory had escorted her to and from the Tower of the Hand more times than she could count, when she was in the throw of all sorts of dark emotions.

Ser Jory had held her when Lady died, and unfortunately for her father’s guard, she could not help but associate that day with his presence. Later, when Ser Jory found Arya in the woods, he tried to meet Sansa’s eye, but she could not bear to look at him. The pain from that day severed what friendship they had.

“... make sure Arya gets to her room safely, she’ll be able to watch the storm just as well from--”

The rest of his sentence was cut off as a great flash of light illuminated the Keep, and the lightning’s great crash shook the walls.

Arya understood before Jory, and took off running through the halls. Her father’s knight gave a yell and ran, hot on her heels.

“Lady Arya!”

Jory’s yells faded into the distance. Sansa was left alone, watching the window and waiting for another show of the storm’s awesome power.

“Sansa...” her father began.

Boom. Cut off again, Lord Stark ran a frazzled hand through his hair. Sansa would not look at him.

“Sansa... sweet--”

Ka-boom. Another flash of light and Sansa felt the force of the thunder’s anger move through her body. The storm had come to smite the whole city.

“Sa--”

Another roll of thunder made Lord Stark rise to his feet.

“Damn this city! Damn this storm!” her father paced angrily to the shutters and slammed them close, breaking Sansa’s gaze on the dark clouds. “This place...”

She finally swallowed her pride enough to look him in the eye. A moment of understanding passed
through the air between them. Neither of us are happy here. Suddenly, sadness washed over her. Her poor father. She could imagine him in the Tower all night, reading that massive tome. Listening to the storm. She could hear his pacing feet and exhausted sighs. In the morning, she would find him asleep on the desk, and muttering his wife’s name. It all struck her all as so sad, so pathetic. The realization that his once strong and noble foster brother had turned into a fat, drunk and careless King. The even harsher reality that, while King Robert feasted his way into an early grave, Ned Stark would struggle to keep a drowning Kingdom afloat.

“Father,” Sansa rose and tentatively clasped his right hand. “Perhaps you should get some rest. The storm will not abate for some time, but I’ve always found the sound of rain quite soothing.”

Lord Stark closed his eyes and pinched his nose painfully. “What a fool I am. I should be comforting you, my daughter, and you try to bolster my spirit regardless... regardless of your own turmoil.”

“Admittedly,” Sansa pursed her lips, and finally whispered. “King’s Landing is not the place I thought it would be...”

“Nor has it met my expectations...” her father opened his eyes.

“I thought you would love these walls. I thought you would blossom here. I only ever wanted you to feel as beautiful as I already know you are. You’re both beautiful, you and Arya both.”

“I don’t think Arya wants to be beautiful,” Sansa squeezed his hands and both shared a hesitant laugh.

For a while, she didn’t know what to say. All father’s thought their daughter’s were beauties. Yet, in the back of her mind, Sansa knew he wasn’t talking about just outward appearances. Sansa’s words caught in her throat and before she knew it, tears were welling up in her eyes. No, don’t cry.

Her father swung their clasped hands deftly, so she wound up in a gruff embrace.

“I never thought I’d be any good with girls. Your mother was always better with you. Arya... she’s just like another boy, but...” her father trailed off, muttering under his breath.

“No,” Sansa exclaimed, pushing away, “it’s not you. It’s the Queen, and Joffrey, and...” she trailed off, she said too much.

“Tell it true, now,” her father nudged her shoulder, “is all... is all well between you and the prince?”

Sansa hesitated, perhaps too long. Her father’s gaze was boring into the top of her skull and she couldn’t find the words to explain herself. It wasn’t... it wasn’t what she wanted. There were times when the golden prince was so distant and coldly cruel... she had no words to defend herself in those moments. Sometimes, they exchanged pleasantries, other times, he was insulting and aggressive. How could she explain the fear she felt...?

“The other day...” she began.

“Lord Stark!”

Ser Jory was back. Sansa fell into silence. What had she been about to say?

The other day, Sansa had feared for her safety for the first time. The grey clouds had unleashed rain earlier that day, leaving the air heavy with water. The prince decided to practice his swordplay with a few of his faithful retainers. After a few unsuccessful bouts, Joffrey had despaired over the poor state of the muddy ground and Sansa said something to his displeasure, something akin to “getting better
with practice”. There was a pause between them, heavy with his unsaid thoughts. Then he took three steps.

Three fast, and menacing steps. Her heart beat wildly at the unrestrained hatred behind his beautiful blue eyes. Sansa remembered gripping the wooden fence nearby.

His eyes… there had been so much hatred in those crystal clear, beautiful eyes.

But the Hound had laid a heavy hand on his shoulder and they turned to leave. It took several moments for Sansa to steady herself, and the fear followed her wherever she went that day. Her heart raced until the moment she fell into a fitful sleep. Joffrey was scary and almost no one could control him.

Her father stood and turned away from her. That was it. Now the moment to tell Lord Eddard Stark had passed, and he was racing out of the room in pursuit of a reckless Arya. Sansa was left alone in the Tower with no one to turn to.

For the first time, in a long time, Sansa let herself shed a few tears over the departed Lady.

Ka-boom. Lightning flashed again and Sansa jumped from her seat. Her heart was racing after reliving her confrontation with Joffrey. Boom. Again, the walls seemed to shake and her heart beat faster, and faster. Anxiety gripped her heart and her father’s small solar seemed oppressive, the air heavy.

Sansa fled the room, desperate for fresh, open air to relieve the constriction in her chest. Her small feet raced down the two hundred steps of the Tower of the Hand and into the corridors of the Red Keep. She knew she couldn’t go into the open courtyards or she’d be blown away, but Sansa felt so trapped, and so anxious she needed something, anything to get away from Joffrey’s presence… even for just a few moments.

It felt like every hall and courtyard had eyes, so Sansa fled further into the Keep, down many stairs, and into deeper rooms she had never explored. Out of breath and panting, Sansa burst through another door and was pushed into the adjacent wall by the wind.

The power of the storm was unbelievable. It knocked Sansa right off her feet.

Not expecting the rush of wind, she scrambled for purchase on the Keep’s red stone walls. The skirts of her ruined dress tangled around her legs. Rain pelted against her face and soon her cheeks and lips felt numb. She felt along the wall for the door she had just came out of, but could find nothing.

Did the wind shut the door behind me?

Completely panicked, Sansa knocked her fist against the wall. Stone, stone, stone, all around her. She stumbled forward. Just another step or two. Left foot, right foot, fighting the wind and rain barraging her at every second.

The ground disappeared from under her right foot. Sansa screamed and then was consumed by a raging torrent. The sound of the storm suddenly dimmed, and her eyes burned when she opened them. Sansa could only see grey-blue. The water dragged her further under even as she kicked toward the surface. I don’t know how to swim! I don’t know how to swim! Arya was always the tomboy, Sansa never learned such an unladylike sport.

A pressure was building in her chest as her lungs fought her mind. She knew if she opened her mouth it would be the end of her, but she so desperately wanted air. Her body was turned this way and that. Sansa tried kicking again but it was no use, she could not tell if she was kicking up or
down, and the water her flooded all her sense. Her head felt lighter than a feather.

Eyes stinging, Sansa finally closed them. Is this how I will die?

She was lifted from the darkness. The noise of the storm returned, and someone was dragging her. Sansa blissfully breathed in the sweet, sweet air.

“You’re alright, girl.” Sansa knew the voice, but couldn’t place it at the moment. A thud sounded behind her, and the noise of the storm died away almost entirely. It was dim in this room, and Sansa fell to her knees to cough.

A hand gripped her shoulder as she spat water onto the ground, and continued to dry heave. It was embarrassing, but Sansa was so relieved she couldn’t have cared. Two large boots appeared in front of her. The largest hand she ever saw was thrust into her vision, many scars decorated it’d digits and knuckles. Sansa took the hand, and was hoisted to her feet.

The Hound brushed her wet hair from her vision. His horribly scarred face assaulted her vision, but numb from almost drowning, she stared into his eyes unabashedly.

“Thank--”

Sansa was cut off by her own gasping. The Hound shook his head, signalling he understood, and Sansa gave him a grateful look.

“Here,” he shoved a small stool at her and she sat with little grace. Sansa shivered at the sudden chill that took her body. Her violet, ink stained dress was soaked and now doubly stained by salt water. Good riddance.

Ka-boom. Bright light illuminated the room and almost blinded Sansa. She saw a large bed had been shoved into the darkest corner.

Wordlessly, the Hound started a small fire. Sansa watched him mutely, still shocked and feeling numb. With strength she did not know any man possessed, he picked up the stool with her in it, and placed her directly in front of the fire. Sansa sat on the edge of the chair to get even closer to the fire and the warmth began to ease the pains in her joints. Her mind unthawed, and she looked curiously around the room. The Hound lit a torch sconce on the wall, and busied himself searching for something.

“Where am I?” she croaked.

“Near the causeway to Maegor’s Holdfast, in the Lower Bailey. How you got in this part of the Red Keep is beyond me, Little Bird. You flew too far from your nest.”

Sansa nodded. She knew why she had left, but wasn’t about to tell Joffrey’s loyal dog. “Your chambers?”

The Hound paused in his search, and Sansa saw his shoulders tense. “Aye, sorry to offend my lady. I will escort you back to your pretty cage as soon as its safe to walk outside.”

“No,” Sansa sighed. Another misunderstanding. Gods, when would these criticisms end? Was she under the scrutiny of the prince, the queen, the court, the lords and ladies, her father, the knights... and the Hound every second of every day? Would it never end?

A towel appeared in front of her. Sansa took the proffered object and began to slowly dry her sleeves and hair. His legs were to the right of her now, he was soaked to the bone just as she was. Sansa
scooted to the left to make room for him to stand in front of the fire. Suddenly, the Hound snarled.

Ka-boom.

“No, what?” His face appeared in front of her, dangerously close. Lightning illuminated every crack and crevice of his mutilation. The walls shook and the Hound peered angrily into her eyes. “Won’t be escorted by the hideous beast. Can’t stand to be near the most dishonorable of non-knights you’ve ever seen. What girl? Can’t fucking stand the thought that your perfect, flowery knight didn’t save you, but the Hound did?”

Sansa’s hand rose of her own accord and she slapped him.

Silence reigned, the Hound’s burnt face was now turned away, showing his shocked, human profile. Sansa gasped and covered her mouth.

She rushed to touch the red mark she had left but the Hound jerked and fell away from her. “I didn’t mean to… you, Gods! You’re all so stupid! Of course I want you to escort me. I’m not offended we’re in your room, and I don’t care that you’re not a knight! I moved so you could stand in front of the fire, not to get away from you! Are you that self deprecating?!”

After her explosion, the Hound stared at her like a dog stared at an master with a raised hand, and she looked away. Sansa rubbed the palm of her hand. It stung since slapping him, but a small part of Sansa felt undeniably proud. Proud that she’d finally managed to scold the fiercest fighter in the Seven Kingdoms, and he hadn’t been able to form a response.

He cleared his throat awkwardly and got to his feet. Sansa’s felt a wave of irritation after she realized he still would not stand next to her, near the fire. In a fit of anger, she reached out and grabbed the corner of his brown tunic and yanked him closer. It hardly budged his tall frame, but he shuffled a few steps to stand near the warmth. Satisfied that her point had been taken, Sansa lapsed into silence.

The last time the Hound had spoken to her had been after the Tourney for her father. Ser Gregor had been unhorsed by Loras Tryrell, and brutally attacked the Knight of Flowers. Sansa remembered crying out, and her father called for someone to stop the swordfight. Only the Hound had the courage the block his brother’s blows and the tournament victory was handed to him. Later that night, Sansa had been escorted by the fearsome Hound, and learned the story behind his gruesome burns.

“What were you doing out there?” the Hound’s gruff voice asked.

Sansa turned to peer up at him, the good side of his face was looking down at her curiously. She turned back to the fire.

“I…” Sansa hesitated. The Hound was honest with her, why not be honest with him? Return the favor. “…wanted to get away.”

“During the storm of the century?” she could hear his derisive snort. “You fell in a drain. You’re lucky to be alive.”

“I’m lucky you were there,” Sansa nodded. “I can’t swim.”

“You can’t?” the Hound sounded surprised. He knelt next to her. Maybe to get closer to the fire, but also maybe to get closer to her. The Hound enjoyed staring at her… until he found the fear and weakness he was always looking for. Sansa could see his knee out of the corner of her eye. The fabric of his trousers were worn and ripped on the left pant leg, and Sansa felt her heart warm. The sight reminded her of her brother’s breeches when they got too used. It was endearing to see the
familiar sight again. Everyone and everything in King’s Landing seemed so shiny and perfect. A sharp contrast to the humble Northern kingdom she came from, where practicality reigned supreme.

Shaking her head, Sansa looked up and into the Hound’s grey eyes. It wasn’t so bad, really, if she focused on keeping eye contact. “No, I never learned. It wasn’t ladylike, and the pools and hot springs were either too shallow, or the rivers were half frozen. And I’m… I’ve always been a little afraid of the water.”

He huffed, his gaze flickered back and forth between her eyes. “You should learn, or it might get you killed one day.”

Sansa shook her head. “No.”

Ka-boom. Sansa jumped a little, and before she knew it, her chin was being gripped tightly.

The Hound sneered and she could feel his breath on her face. “You need to learn, or you could die drowning one day. What if your ship capsizes? What if you fall in another storm drain? What if you’re stuck in a flood?”

Sansa gripped the wrist of the hand that held her face and gently pulled the Hound away. “Then you will save me again.”

“What if I’m not there?”

Sansa looked away. Hating the way the conversation was turning against her. She couldn’t learn to swim, she hated swimming, she hated the water and she was deadly afraid of it.

“You’ll drown, Little Bird.”

“Would you jump into a lake of fire?” Sansa shot back.

The Hound stopped his assault then and returned to warming his hands on the fire. Though Sansa could see the distance he kept between himself and the blazing grate. Sansa sighed and relaxed her shoulders, not realizing how tense she’d gotten. Why did a Lannister soldier care at all whether she lived or died? The Lannisters barely cared she existed these days. Originally, Joffrey had been enamored with her, now he was disgusted looking at her, and the Queen mocked Sansa at every turn.

“I could teach you, make sure you wouldn’t drown…” the Hound trailed off as if regretting the words as they left his mouth.

“Thank you, but…” Sansa paused, lost for words at his generous offer. “...my father, the Queen... they’d think it was inappropriate. You’d get in trouble.”

The Hound nodded and stood, offering her his hand again. “Best get moving then. It is already inappropriate for you to be here alone, in a dog’s bedroom no less.”

The walk back through the Red Keep was significantly longer than Sansa’s run to the Lower Bailey. The Hound described what route they were taking, behind the Gold Cloaks quarters, under the Serpentine Steps, past the pig yard and the kennels, around the outside of the stables and finally Sansa saw corridors that she recognized led to the Tower of the Hand. In the small Hall, her father, Ser Jory, and a furious Arya shouted for joy when they saw her. Well, Arya didn’t look enthused, but her father looked extremely relieved.

Sansa was enveloped in a warm embrace. “I was so afraid when I came back and you were gone!”
“It’s alright, father,” Sansa sighed and squeezed his ribcage.

“You’re wet!” Arya pointed out, tugging at her dress. “I thought you cared about this stupid dress. Why did you get it wet? And why are you with him?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose, Arya!” Sansa turned to her father. “I accidentally wandered outside and got caught in the wind and rain. I fell in the storm drain. The Hound saved me from drowning.”

The King’s Hand looked the Hound up and down, taking in his drenched appearance, eyes lingering on the horrific scar on his face. “I owe you a debt, for saving my daughter’s life.”

The Hound shifted side to side and shrugged. “Wasn’t any trouble.”

Lord Stark’s eyebrows rose, before throwing his cloak around Sansa and pushing her toward the stairs. “You need rest and a warm bath. Jeyne, will you?”

The familiar hands of her friend, Jeyne Poole, steer her away. The last thing Sansa sees before ascending the stairs of the Tower of the Hand is the Hound’s grey eyes watching her.
Encounter Beyond the Godswood

Chapter Summary

An unpleasant outing with Joffrey drives Sansa to act against her better judgement.
Sansa meets with the Hound for the first time.

Sansa could hear the singing in the Sept drift through the rafters of the library’s expansive ceiling. The windows were tall, but thin, dimming what sunlight remained in the late afternoon. An aged maester sat at a large circular desk in the center of the hall, pouring over a leather bound tome. His desk was littered with tall candles that, judging from the large amount of wax at their base, had been burning for the last thirty years.

Tall shelves surrounded the circular desk. The shelves created their own maze of pathways throughout the library. Books were piled atop the ledges, and on the window sills, until they almost toppled. Some were written in Westerosi, Valryian, Braavosi, whilst other were written in languages whose scripts were entirely unfamiliar to Sansa. Several books seemed to be written in pictures alone.

On every spare surface there was, another candle was lit. It was suffocating in this heat. Half bitten quills could be found thrown on the floor, and the library’s find carpets were dotted with ink stains. Every once and while, a sign on a column or shelf was meant to direct the public toward a collection of books. Unfortunately, categories like “Future Philosophical Inquiries into Pig Husbandry” and “Fortune Telling Using Mosaic Patterns of the Pox” seemed entirely nonsensical.

Beyond the rafters, a grand mural was painted on the ceiling. A mural of the Targaryen conquest of Westeros. It was fortunate that King Robert never bothered to visit the library, or the King would have ordered it set fire and all its knowledge lost.


Prince Joffrey was close enough to smell. His scent was perfumed and reminded Sansa of lilacs and rosewater. She preferred to turn her nose and smell the dust and parchment. A scent that reminded her of the library at Winterfell, and lessons with Maester Luwin. As she turned to the side, Sansa caught sight of the Hound, prowling the shelves with disinterest.

“Yes, rather dull,” Sansa did not greatly like or dislike reading. However, there had been several books she had loved as a child. Most of them were fanciful tales of knights rescuing ladies from burning towers, magical frogs, Princes and Princesses, tourneys, dances, magic…

“Come, let me show you something,” the Prince grabbed her arm and pulled her into the maze of bookshelves. Sansa half jogged to keep up. Joffrey pulled at her arm harshly at every turn and she almost yelped in pain as he twisted her elbow sharply to the right.

They came to a sudden stop. Sansa almost ran into the Prince but the Hound reached to steady her before she did. His large hand recoiled quickly, and Sansa was relieved.

Sansa looked upon a bizarre painting. Cast in hues of red and black, the dominating figure of King Maegor stood before her. The Targaryen king leaned ominously forward, as if to frighten whosoever
looked upon him. His doublet was black and silver, with the Targaryen crest emblazoned in bright red upon his chest. In his hands, he held a bloody book. A cruel smile lit his features.

“Maegor the Cruel,” Sansa breathed.

“A mad man, no doubt.” Joffrey said, and traced the bottom of the frame reverently. A sick feeling settled in her stomach. “Cruel, they called him. Though his cruelty may have been a small genius. King Maegor successfully suppressed the Faith’s Militant uprising to keep the Iron Throne from falling into the hands of religious fanatics. Nonetheless, all Targaryen’s are mad. My father put a stop to their insanity when he took the throne.”

“King Robert was very brave,” Sansa nodded once.

“I heard he kept multiple wives,” Joffrey snorted, as if he had not heard her. He ignored her when he didn’t like what she said. “Wives he beheaded when they did not produce heirs.”

“How terrible,” Sansa’s eyes flickered to the bloody book. Maester Luwin had told her that Maegor was most likely infertile himself, so he could not conceive with any woman. Those ladies died for no reason.

“Not really,” Joffrey put his hands on his hips, “it was his right. It’s the Queen’s duty to produce sons.”

Joffrey grabbed her by the elbow and pushed her closer so she could read the gold inscription beneath the portrait. Joffrey continued speaking as she read.

“One of his wives, Janisa, was killed in this very library. Maegor found she had been lying with another man, apparently attempting to conceive a boy for him. What a stupid whore. He beheaded her where she lay, on top of The Magister’s Compendium of Fertility Magic. Maegor found it terribly ironic and took the book from the library. He kept it until his death and it was never found again…”

Joffrey trailed off and Sansa shivered.

“Nine wives, all of them worthless,” Joffrey smirked and grabbed her elbow to drag her away. “For your sake, Sansa... pray you don’t have the same problem.”

Sansa certainly prayed that night.

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Sansa stared at the mild current lapping gently against the red stones of the Keep. Her toes hung ever so slightly over the edge. A six inch drop separated her feet from the water. Sansa tentatively reached a toe to the lapping surface. The Blackwater Bay was surprisingly warm. Who would have known this small dock existed past the Godswood? Who would have known she would follow the Hound here? What in the name of the Seven… drove Sansa to trust the Hound?

Sansa thought back to the events that spawned this small rebellion. Earlier that day, she had argued with Arya… their arguments were growing increasingly more intense. Seldom did they exchange pleasant words. Sansa felt neither Arya nor her father understood how undesirable her situation had become. A deep resentment for her family was growing in her soul. Sansa couldn’t bear anyone’s company anymore. Not even her Septa’s.

Robb had written her a small letter, with barely enough words to fit the parchment. He had taken over household duties in Winterfell, and was extremely busy. The letter contained no interesting
information, and Sansa had a sneaking suspicion Robb wasn’t telling her something. Theon did not and would never write. Bran was still in the endless sleep and Rickon was practically a baby. Jon and Sansa had never been close, following in her mother’s footsteps, Sansa had quietly alienated her half brother from the family. Alone now, herself, Sansa began to have feelings of regret.

What hurt the most was her mother’s silence. Sansa and Catelyn had always had an intimate relationship. Until now. Until the King’s Road lay between them.

Sansa was becoming more and more estranged from the family. Thrown headfirst into the lion’s den, she had little sympathy for her free spirited sister and downtrodden, distant father. Arya got to do what she wanted. Every day. Arya would never sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of the family.

Father… oh father. Sansa cringed, thinking back to their earlier encounter. A young lady does not slam doors. A young lady doesn’t ignore her lord father… and she had. Bitterly. Sansa recalled the hurt look on his face, but the hardening in her heart made it difficult to explore feelings of remorse. She was hurting, and a part of her wanted him to hurt too… to feel helpless and afraid… Father cared nothing for the agreement he made between himself and Robert Baratheon. He didn't care enough to question the growing divide between his daughter and the prince. The Hand of the King was too busy with his duty to notice her growing unhappiness. Sansa would become queen, but at what cost?

At what cost? The thought consumed her. Every encounter with Joffrey spent more and more of her patience. Slowly, ever so slowly, Sansa came to dread the sight of blonde hair. The excitement she felt when the Prince gifted her a necklace several months ago had faded. Now, the necklace lay useless in her drawers.

Sansa did not like all these changes. King’s Landing was her life’s dream. The Queen had appeared flawless. Her prince had been golden and beautiful and perfect… but it wasn’t like the dreams of her childhood. The Prince was not her white knight and the Red Keep was not Sansa’s home. Home felt warm and welcoming. The Red Keep felt… cold and empty. Halls and halls of… emptiness, eyes, and angry words.

Her whole life, Sansa had been instilled with a sense of value and importance. The people of Winterfell treated her as their little lady, and her siblings treated her with respect. As a child, Sansa greatly desired to become a woman like her mother. Beautiful, kind and fair. Leaving her home and entering the Red Keep, her purpose had been to become Westeros’ most beloved Queen, to please Joffrey… and when that proved impossible…

The Hound came to give her purpose by shoving a note in her hands and expecting her to follow.

“How do I…?”

She turned to the large figure behind her. The Hound was dressed modestly, in the same clothes he wore the night of her rescue. Looking closely, Sansa could see salt stains on his tunic and breeches. The breeches with the worn out knees that reminded her of home. Again, she felt that queer warmth in her heart. Her non-knight stepped forward and Sansa instinctively stepped back… and found no stone behind her. She screamed and was plunged headfirst into the water.

Sansa flailed. Water surged into her mouth and nose. It was blue and black and brown and she kicked her feet furiously. Two hands gripped her elbows roughly and suddenly her head was above water. Gasping, Sansa scrambled for a hold on something solid. The sound of the bay came back to her.
Laughter. The Hound was laughing at her soaked frame. Blood rushed to her cheeks and Sansa jerked her hands out of the Hound’s reach before panicking and reaching again for his outstretched arms. The Hound laughed harder. His mirth stretched the scarred side of his face into a horrible twist of red flesh. A bit of bone was poking out of his cheek. Sansa shuddered and sought his cold grey eyes. They sparkled with unsuppressed mirth.

“The Little Bird has her feathers wet and ruffled,” he chortled. “What a sight!”

Sansa clutched at the fabric of his tunic. “Don’t let go.”

“I didn’t let go,” the Hound pointed out “you let go, Little Bird.”

Sansa fisted the fabric of his sleeves. The Hound looked downward into the water, and Sansa panicked for a moment. Was he seeing something in the bay? She was clinging to his arms, was she supposed to kick? What if something grabbed her legs?

“What do I do? Don’t let go. Is there a bottom to this? Are there fish in this water? Don’t let go!”

“Aye, there’s fish in this bay,” he furrowed his brow. His one brow, Sansa couldn’t help but linger on the area of his face where the other was supposed to be. It was a good distraction from the sudden horror that gripped her. What if she fell into the darkness? What if a fish tried to eat her?

“I want out,” she declared, her panic growing. It was dark, dark water all around her, only the Hound was keeping her from slipping into that bottomless darkness. Sansa mind’s eye imagined a sea monster claws reaching up and grabbing her with razor sharp claws, fish nibbling at her feet, falling into darkness… her breathing was labored. Sansa was growing dizzier with each second that passed and soon she was gasping for air audibly.

“Calm yourself.”

The Hound physically lifted her out of the water. Sansa shuddered in relief and gratitude. Her skin felt like it was crawling, crawling with bugs and fish and dark. She shivered again and again, despite the warmth of the Southern wind. Water dripped from her hair, into her eyes and mouth and Sansa desperately tried to get the offending liquid off of her body. Her limbs shook with unrestrained emotion.

“How do you feel?”

“Frightened, even now that I’m out of the water” she whispered, ashamed as tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. At least she managed to tell the truth. The Hound always boasted that he could smell a lie. Beside, the truth pleased him and placated his anger. He was never satisfied with the Little Bird’s polite words. He was going to mock her mercilessly for her confession now. To her relief, he only rubbed his neck and nodded.

The Hound suddenly averted his eyes. Sansa looked down. Her dress was clinging to her skin, as she suspected. The Hound proffered the large swatch of rough fabric he brought with him, to dry her off. Rushing to grab it, Sansa wrapped the makeshift towel around her upper body and cleared her throat. It felt sticky from the bay water.

“Aye... it takes a while for the feeling to wear off,” he reached for the skin on his hip and offered it to her. It was Sansa’s turn to furrow her brow.

“Wine,” he explained. “It will take the shaking out of your hands.”

Tentatively, she took the skin, wet from the Blackwater but tightly sealed, opened it and sipped at it’s
contents. She gagged at the sour taste, causing the Hound to chuckle darkly again. Sansa glared at the air in front of her and took another sip with more confidence. It gave her some some joy to defy his preconceptions of her.

“Thank you,” Sansa handed back the wine.

“Don’t thank me,” the Hound scowled and screwed the skin shut. “You're Joffrey’s betrothed. This skill could save your life some day.”

Sansa felt her heart turn into lead. Of course, the Hound only saw Joffrey’s betrothed. He was teaching her to save herself the trouble of having to dive into a lake or river later. An anger swelled within her and Sansa clenched her fists tightly, the fear replaced with adrenaline.

“Joffrey cares not for my safety and you know it, so I should thank you.”

“He doesn't,” the Hound crossed his arms, “but the rest of Westeros cares for the well being of the only Stark maiden’s cunt.”

Sansa inhaled sharply. She stared at his mutilated face with newfound anger. Did he just.. did he just call her that word? The Hound was nothing but a crude bully.

“You would do this for political reasons?” Sansa asked incredulously.

“Obviously,” the Hound grinned, “I’m very political.”

“You… you… how dare you.” Sansa shook with anger. Her fists were so clenched she felt her nails digging into the skin of her palms.

“How dare I!!” the Hound mimicked, still taking pleasure in her obvious distress.

Sansa took a step forward and raised her hand to hit him for a second time, but the Hound caught her wrist and grinned even wider. His smile stretched his scar, bringing it to her attention. The Hound towered over her. He took several steps forward, pushing her against the stone wall. His smile turned to a nasty sneer. Her hand was crushed underneath his grip and Sansa’s courage rapidly left her. Dropping her gaze, she winced as his grasp tightened. A bruise would form soon.

A tense moment passed between the two. Tenser than before. Fear colored all her senses. What was she thinking? Coming here alone with the Hound. Sansa realizing just how close he was. She could see the holes in his tunic, smell the overpowering scent of him. He smelled of sweat, smoke, leather and wine. Her whole body trembled underneath his gaze. Her heart was thudding painfully in her chest. Sansa was certain he could see her distress.

“Do not hit me,” the Hound growled. His teeth clenched as he worked out the words.

Sansa nodded plaintively and shrunk away once he released her wrist. The Hound walked away from her and she was immediately struck by his sudden absence. Pulling her towel closer to her body, Sansa stared balefully at the current. This would never work. Cooperation was nonexistent between herself and the Hound. Silence fell awkwardly between them, as if words remained unsaid, but Sansa could think of nothing to say. She longed for the more comfortable silence they had shared in his room after the storm. The air was too tense. What had caused this sudden change. His insult? Her threatening to strike?

Eventually, after a long silence, Sansa’s dress began to dry. It didn’t take too long in the southern heat. Sansa picked at her dress for stains but found none that were too horribly noticeable. The Hound moved to hand her the bag he had brought. Sansa looked inside to discover it contained a fine
comb and light red cloak. Smoothing out her red tresses, Sansa threw the cloak around her to hide any evidence of their rendezvous with the Blackwater.

The Hound gestured for her to follow him. She was led to the same ladder they had descended to reach this small dock. He lifted her from the waist so she could reach the rungs. Sansa was momentarily astounded by his sheer strength. How many times had he lifted her without so much as a grunt? The Hound was the embodiment of male brawn, and a surge of jealousy ran through her. What would her life be like with such physical power?

He waited until she reached the top to ascend after her. The sun was setting, and it cast an orange glow about the world. Sansa followed the Hound’s footsteps. He was so tall, he had to duck under the branches of some trees. They reached the familiar clearing of the Godswood after a few minutes. The lady paused for a moment to touch the great oak that served as the Red Keep’s heart tree. It was covered in lush smokeberry vines, and Sansa felt sad. It reminded her of the great weirwood at home, only this heart tree was less striking. Turning, she saw the Hound observing her.

A thousand eyes of the Old Gods watched Sansa and Hound as they departed the Godswood. Once they reached the grand corridors of the Keep, the Hound fell into step behind her. Sansa passed only a few people, servants mostly. None who would have any interest in the Hand’s daughter and her evening with the Hound. When they reached the Tower of the Hand, the Hound bowed to her.

“My lady,” Sansa almost winced, it sounded worse than Little Bird.

With a turn of the heel, the Hound lumbered off. No doubt to find some new target to torment. For a brief moment though, Sansa thought he had a look of… longing, regret, sadness? Something in his grey eyes as they turned away from her.

Sansa sighed and resigned herself to another day with the Prince tomorrow. Would the opportunity to conquer her fear ever present itself again?

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Sansa stood stone still, allowing the Queen’s gaze to penetrate her soul. Sansa smiled graciously and tried not to let her unease show. She could almost hear the sound of Lady’s sweet whines and playful barks. Memories of Lady came unbidden to her. Sansa recalled feeding her direwolf pup with a bottle, the way Jon Snow showed her how. Sansa and Lady playing in the snow. Walking with her direwolf through Winterfell. Brushing her soft fur. Falling asleep on the King’s Road to the sound of Lady’s soft breathing. The feeling of safety wherever she went.

On their first night together, in Sansa’s private quarters, Sansa and Lady had pledged their loyalty to one another… the best of friends. Sansa could feel Lady’s soft fur underneath her fingertips as she whispered, “you and I. Forever…”

The memory faded, and Sansa was left facing the Queen. A soft wind caused the sheer curtains to dance noiselessly.

“Sansa, come,” the Queen gestured to the seat next to hers, facing the bay window, “...sit. I’ve called for lemoncakes. I know they’re your favorite.”

Sansa immediately obeyed, and sat silently next to the Queen as her favorite treat was served to her. Her wooden seat was ornately carved, but undeniably uncomfortable. A seat meant for rigid and straight backs. A feast of sweets and snacks lay on silver plates before her. Over half of these sweets would remain untouched by the end of the night. Would they be given to the servants to eat, or would the food be thrown out? Father never let food go to waste in Winterfell, when it could feed the
people. Nibbling on her favorite confection, Sansa reflected that it did not taste as delectable as she remembered. Perhaps her love of sweets was fading.

“How do you fare Sansa?” the Queen’s golden hair glowed in the setting sun, “I have not spoken with you in so long, and I have longed to do so. The responsibilities of the Queen are quite demanding. I hope you can forgive my absence. I do so want us to be friends.”

The Queen reached forward and grasped Sansa’s hands. Sansa smiled in return. For the first time, Sansa noticed the corner of Lady Baratheon’s eyes did not crinkle… not like her mother’s eyes. Was it a true smile?

“Yes, Your Grace,” Sansa returned the gesture and squeezed the Queen’s hands, “I have also longed for your great company. I have been well.”

The Queen’s quiet laugh was like the sound of bells. Sansa despaired. How could she ever be so beautiful? Sansa was tall and awkward, still unused to her body after her last growth spurt. The Queen was elegant and moved like liquid gold.

“How splendid is the Red Keep? The court? Tell me everything, little dove.”

Little bird. Sansa could hear the Hound’s rasping voice and his endearment reverberated in her ears. Little bird. The Queen’s hold on her hands was not as harsh and true as the Hound’s. Joffrey’s bodyguard was honest, even as he held her in his clutches. The Queen held Sansa in her hands so gently, she would not have known if she did not have eyes. She holds me, and wouldn’t have me know it.

“It is more beautiful than I imagined. The capital of the Seven Kingdoms reflects the splendor of the royal family that rules it.”

The Queen seemed displeased, even by Sansa’s most polite response. Cersei released Sansa’s hands. The talk turned to court, the latest fashions, Sansa’s opinion on the Queen’s new dresses, the lemoncakes… each answer was received with increasing agitation. Nothing Sansa said could completely satisfy the royal lady. Soon, the Queen’s legs were crossed, and she was drinking generously from a goblet that appeared out of her handmaiden’s skirts.

“And your father, how has he been handling his responsibilities as Hand of the King? It must be such a terribly difficult transition,” the Queen’s nostrils flared, “he has governed the wild north for so many years… to return to the splendor of civilization and be thrust into such heavy duties… a lesser man would have crumbled.”

Sansa noted the slight on her homeland. It stung, and it festered in her heart. Sansa’s hands smoothed her skirts nervously.

“My father takes all his responsibilities very seriously, he will try very hard to do his job to the best of his ability and make King Robert proud. They are very good friends, and I know my father does not wish to disappoint him.”

The Queen’s smile disappeared at the mention of her husband, and then she lifted her hand to draw heavily from her golden goblet. Red rubies glowed in the dying light, making the carved lions appear demonic.

“Yes,” Cersei’s charm returned, “yes, Lord Stark would never fail in his duties… tell me Sansa. Your father left on an errand in the city the other day. I believe he visited the Steet of Steel?”

Sansa hadn’t heard of this. Father rarely left the Red Keep. Why would he not mention his departure
to Sansa and Arya? Then again, Father never spoke of his responsibilities as Hand and his two daughters had been distant lately. A pair of cold green eyes bore into her.

“I do not know why he would leave the Keep, your Grace,” Sansa admitted. “It is possible he needed his armor repaired, or sought business with the merchants there. I cannot say.”

“Ah,” the Queen nodded, and stood. Sansa stood with her and curtseyed. “I was only concerned, Sansa, because the Hand is such a prominent figure. The peasants… common folk… they often mistake such important characters as the cause of their misfortune.”

“I will tell him to be more careful in the future.”

“You do that.”

Sansa took the Queen’s offered arm and was led out of the solar. Two handmaidens followed at a distance. Handmaidens Sansa had seen changing her linens, opening her windows, emptying her chamber pots. How had the Queen known that her father left the city… unless she was watching? Sansa shook her head. A lady is not suspicious.

“Until next time, Sansa Stark,” the Queen gripped her hands when they reached the courtyard. “Hound!”

Sansa’s breath hitched, audibly. The Queen turned a gaze toward her and Sansa noticed an almost imperceptible lift in her mouth. The Queen enjoyed the fact that the Hound frightened her. Heavy footsteps signaled the warrior’s arrival.

“I do hope our next meeting will take place soon,” Cersei rubbed her arm, a motherly gesture. A shiver ran up Sansa’s spine.

“As do I, Your Grace.”

Sansa curtseyed again and the Queen was gone in a flurry of gold and red fabric. Sansa remained with her gaze lowered, hesitant to raise herself.

“Are your curtseyng to me?” the Hound rasped incredulously.

Sansa rose and met his gaze. A flicker of doubt crossed his face before he settled into his usual scowl.

The unusual pair walked in silence. Night had fallen over the Red Keep. A flock of gulls took flight when they turned into the large courtyard that led to the Tower of the Hand, causing Sansa to jump and the Hound to sneer. The Hound pushed the pace faster than Sansa could walk. Sansa was forced to skip several steps to keep up. His inconsiderate nature irritated her. They reached the door to the Stark quarters quickly.

Sansa paused. Her hands wavered over the door’s handle. The Hound looked agitated, his foot was tapping at the stone and his gaze was on everything but her. It shocked Sansa. The Hound, who had physically forced her to look on his scars, wouldn’t meet her eye? Where was the beast who reveled in her terrified stare?

“Who can’t look at who?”

Sansa clapped a hand to her mouth and gasped. Sansa rarely uttered her thoughts aloud. The Hound’s eyes widened in surprise and snapped to meet hers. They stared at one another. The Hound’s irritated fidgeting stopped and he scowled.
“Little bird finally speaks for herself and regrets it already. Difficult to say what you haven’t been taught to parrot?”

Sansa’s mouth snapped shut. The air was growing palpably tense. Sansa realized she preferred the Hound’s distracted nature to his anger. A fire was burning behind his grey eyes. Sansa fought her own cowardice, she fought to maintain eye contact. Then the man stepped closer. Faced with his gruesome burns, and the hatred in his stare, Sansa’s gaze inevitably drifted toward the floor. Her face burned with shame.

“What a perfect little lady,” the Hound spat.

Sansa felt her body buzz with humiliation and anger. No one had even spoken to her with such disdain, even Arya’s tone was less serious.

“Who can’t look at who?” the Hound said. His high pitched voice was meant to scorn her.

Sansa glared at the tips of his boot. He did this to her. Made her feel unworthy, teased, ridiculed...She balled her fists and winced when he grew closer and his breath fell across her face.

“Do you enjoy taunting me?” she asked in a small voice.

The Hound growled and stepped back. Sansa looked up and he rolled his eyes. Without another word, he shoved a piece of paper in her hands and took off down the hall, at a faster pace than she had even seen him walk. Sansa clutched the parchment and entered her family’s quarters.

The common area was surprisingly quiet. Sansa took a moment to compose herself in the doorway. Arya sat at the table. Using a small knife, Arya carved some strange design on the wooden surface. Lord Ned Stark was slumped in his seat, still reading that fat giant book he had been pouring over the past several weeks. Sansa’s Septa was gone, most likely to bed at this hour. Father looked up and smiled cautiously at her.

“Sansa,” he acknowledged, then hesitated to say more. Sansa’s heart clenched, and she buried the note in her skirts.

“Father.”


Sansa glared and moved to go toward her room. Father’s reprimand to Arya followed but Sansa didn’t pay it any mind. It was too little, too late. Arya could say anything she wanted, and Sansa couldn’t.

The lady flung herself on her feather bed in exhaustion. Using her feet to kick off her shoes, Sansa listened to her beating heart. The Hound’s presence was wholly unsettling. Remembered the note she held, Sansa unfurled the paper and held it up to her bedside candle.

A sennight from today, same place and time. Remember the cloak.

Sansa sighed and turned on her side. Should she return?
Floating in Water, Drowning in Air

Chapter Summary

Sansa relishes in a sweet victory but a misunderstanding with the Hound strains their fragile friendship. Her night is ruined when she returns to the Tower of the Hand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two months had passed since the Storm. A reconstruction effort was in full swing. The Hand of the King worked tirelessly to restore parts of the city that had been destroyed. Flea bottom had been flooded, and the Mud Gate was covered in wreckage and debris. The wind had ripped the roofs off many houses and lightning caused half the lower east to catch fire. With no money in the Capital’s vault, the future was looking grim, especially for the impoverished people. Sansa tried to support her father to the best of her ability, she brought him breakfast and dinner, but beyond those things… Sansa felt useless.

Feeling unwanted, Sansa spent her days in the Sept or Godswood. Joffrey was unbearable company, and the silence brought her some semblance of peace. Sansa could barely stand to face the Prince after all that had passed between them. And… Joffrey’s shadow would be present. The Hound. Following the Prince and his lady, wherever they go. No matter what cruel words passed the Prince’s lips, the Hound would stand silent. He watched and did nothing. It grated Sansa’s nerves. No matter Joffrey’s sharp mood swings or iron grips, the non-knight stood only in observation. Well, Sansa sighed, that wasn’t entirely true… he had saved her from stupid mistakes. The Hound’s small deeds undoubtedly prevented further trouble. But that was all they were… small deeds.

“... Sansa, dear? Sansa… oh Seven!”

Sansa jumped as she pricked another one of her fingers. Sewing thimbles were truly pointless. Blood welled into a fine red dot, contrasting marvelously with her porcelain skin. Sighing - Sansa found herself sighing so often these days - she wrapped a small bit of fabric around the cut and turned her uninterested gaze to Septa Mordane.

“Yes, Septa?”

“You are completely unfocused on your stitching. You have gotten blood on the fabric, it will have to be washed,” the older woman chided and shook her head. “I do not understand why you have indulged in so many day fantasies lately, Sansa. It is entirely unlike you.”

“Yes, Septa.” Sansa turned her gaze back to the balcony, and quietly took in the view of the sea. A fair breeze blew from the tropic south today, caressing Sansa’s fase gently. Ships and trading vessels floated freely in the bay. From this distance, they looked like the bobbing toy ships Rickon used to take to his bath. Sansa stifled a chuckle. Rickon hated baths.

“What amuses you, dear?” the Septa brought her a cloth soaked in wine to clean the cut.

“Oh,” Sansa’s mind wandered back to Winterfell. The capital wasn’t nearly as lovely as she’d imagined it would be. Sansa missed the crisp cold winds, strolling the glass gardens, sewing with the
ladies, the colors of silver and grey... “nothing.”

“Sansa,” Septa Mordane placed the cloth down gently. “If you refuse to speak to me about what has been preoccupying your mind. Perhaps we should visit the Sept and pray.”

“The Sept?” Sansa had been to the Sept this morning… she had prayed diligently.

“Clearly, your conscious is not clear. Something has been distracting you lately. And we can always tell the Gods things we cannot admit to others.”

Oh, something, or someone had been distracting her lately. Consuming her thoughts and confusing her. Was the Hound a senseless beast? Was he a dog, or a man? Would he hurt her with more than words? Was he the only one in the Red Keep who would risk his life, who would jump into a storm drain to save a silly little girl? There had been moments when his anger faded and Sansa had caught glimpses of the quieter, more solemn demeanor of another man entirely and it confused her greatly.

Besides her morbid fascination with the Hound, tensions between herself, her father and Arya had culminated into a no talking treaty. If one did not speak, one could not argue. It was uncomfortable, awkward, and Sansa suddenly wished deeply that Jon Arryn had lived to the ripe old age of two hundred.

However, Sansa could never tell the strict and prudish Septa about such things. She stifled another sigh and dropped her needle. There was no point in continuing the facade.

“You’re right, Septa…” Sansa conceded and slumped her shoulders. It would not do to deny it, and Sansa did not want to lose the quiet company of Septa Mordane. Arya may not have liked the good woman, but Sansa appreciated her for what she offered: a kind smile and good advice when one asked nicely. Not that Arya knew how to ask nicely for anything.

“Child…” the Septa reached out to take Sansa’s hand. The older woman hesitated, before plowing forward. “I’ve known you for very long, since you were a little babe, and I’ve loved you as I would a daughter. I’ve never seen you act so strangely. Please, tell me what troubles you…”

Sansa bit her lip and looked away. “No, no.”

“Really?” the Septa released her hand and smiled fondly, her eyes grew distant, “might I guess?”

“I was young and in love one too, you know. I can… I can understand if you’re having feelings you’ve never had before. The Prince is very handsome and young, and you two have been… alone together… quite a bit--”

“Oh Seven! No Septa! Nothing - not like - it is not that…” Sansa could feel the heat rising in her cheeks and knew she must be beet red. Two pairs of sewing needles and fabric lay forgotten on the table in front of them.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of, Sansa. I’m also sure you must think of him when you’re alone. But you must remember to keep your innocence about you, and refrain from any such intimacies before you are wedded--”

“No, no!” Sansa protested. “You do not understand! I do not pine for him.”

The Septa paused. Sansa exhaled heavily and fear seized her heart, her throat. Her brain buzzed. She couldn’t possibly have said that. Sansa couldn’t possibly be so stupid to make that implication to her Septa of all people. What was she saying, anyway? That she held affections for another? Sansa couldn’t even wrap her head around such a thought, let alone associate it with… with… It was
revolting.

“What I mean to say is… I am not rushing things that way, Septa. I would like to focus on my sewing and singing. Let us go and pray, as you suggest.”

“Hmm,” Septa Mordane stood slowly and folded her hands in front of her. Peering down her nose at Sansa, her Septa gave her a quelling look. “Perhaps not the Prince then? You still keep that rose from the Knight of Flowers by your bed, do you not?”

Sansa’s mouth fell open. Did she? It had withered long ago. Sansa was using it as a bookmark in Florian and Jonquil. Flower petals kept falling from the stem and Sansa used them to mark her favorite phrases.

“Get rid of it, it does you no good to have unhealthy obsessions when you are betrothed to another… and the Prince no less.”

“Yes! Yes, you are right Septa.” Sansa couldn't help the relief that washed over her. The Knight of Flowers. Of course! It was true Sansa was attracted to his lithe frame and pretty face, but her thoughts had been so distracted lately, she hardly spared a thought for Loras Tyrell.

As they walked the wide corridors of Red Keep, Sansa’s thoughts returned to the dangerous man she had been keeping secret company with. She imagined happening upon him in a narrow side passage or behind a large column. A thrill shot through her whenever she thought she might catch a glimpse of him. Not a pleasant thrill, but not a painful one. It was filled with anticipation. The Knight of Flowers indeed, Sansa almost burst into laughter.

She remember his cramped room, the bed pushed against the darkest corner, the rickety stool, the musky smell… and his scar. A terrifying jumble of skin, muscle, bone and anger. Sansa remembered the strength she felt when she silenced his cruel words with a well placed slap. She remembered his weathered trousers, his quiet breathing. The promise he had kept.

One more day, and they would meet for the second time. When they reached the Sept, Sansa decided to pray to the Stranger because she was traveling into the unknown.

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Sansa knelt in front of the heart tree. Bowing her head, her red hair created a curtain around her. She reached a hand forward to touch the smooth red bark of a root nearby. It was cooler in the Godswood, the shade of the great trees protected the air from the sun’s heat. It was quiet too. No one in King’s Landing but herself and her father kept to the Old Gods. Except Lord Stark refused to go near this Godswood. The heart tree was not a weirwood, so in her father’s opinion, the Old Gods would not hear him here.

Sansa tried anyway. If her father noticed her sudden conversion from the Faith of the Seven to the Faith of the First Men, he did not comment on it. Lord Stark noticed many things lately about Sansa, but never commented on those things either. A line had been drawn in the sand between them. Whoever drew the line, Sansa couldn’t say. Perhaps it had been both of them. Sansa’s mother Catelyn would have taken note immediately. Lady Stark would have tried to draw her back into the arms of the Seven. As a very religious woman, her mother would have protested vehemently. But Catelyn Stark was not here and Catelyn Stark had not written.

Sansa hadn’t abandoned the Faith. Not really. Sansa’s world was changing, so she supposed her faith was changing too. Sansa always took after her mother, in appearance, personality, and habits. Yet, here in the Red Keep, the serious side of her was blossoming. A quieter, more reflective self had
emerged from her experiences and Sansa was loathe to fight the change. Taking after her father, Sansa was beginning to appreciate the silence of the Old Gods. The quiet, private reverence of the Godswode was intoxicating when compared to the never ending stimulation of King’s Landing.

Sansa heard him before she saw him. The Hound approached silently and hesitated to interrupt her prayer. Sansa gave the tree one last, affectionate stroke, before turning to face him.

The light was scattered by the canopy of the trees, casting the Hound in half shadow. As before, he had dressed in simple clothing. Sansa immediately noticed the absence of his broadsword at his hip, replaced by a flask and coin purse. The Hound looked naked without a sword and armor. She wondered if this was how he spent his free evenings. Drinking and swimming in the bay and drinking some more. Sticks cracked and broke underneath his feet when he took several steps forward to help her up.

A large hand appeared in her vision. Scars decorated the Hound’s digits and knuckles and it looked as if the tip of his pinky finger had been cleaved off. Sansa stared at it, fascinated, before taking it gently. She had seen such hands in Winterfell. Mikken had scars from tempering blades and burning himself in the process and Lew, one of her father’s guards, had his left ring finger torn off in a fight with one of Farlen’s dogs. Lew always joked it was a blessing in disguise. He’d never have to marry.

The Hound’s hands were calloused and rough, sending a shiver up her arm. He gently lifted her to her feet and they set off toward their secret dock.

Walking in silence, Sansa observed the quiet figure in front of her. He was tall and broad, with black hair that reached his shoulders. Sansa spent so many hours avoiding looking at him, it was a relief to finally be able to stare. Knowing he could not stare back while he led them through the woods. The Hound remained mute as he forged ahead, and for her part, Sansa could think of nothing to say.

At one point, they passed a familiar rock formation that someone had left in the deep part of the Godswode. Three rocks were stacked in a pyramid atop one another, and a curvy figure had been painted into the smallest rock’s surface. Sansa had a sneaking suspicion that it was an unmarked grave. She thought the symbol might have been a tiny dragon but they did not get close enough for her to tell. A child who died in the womb? The Hound must have felt similarly about the grave because he gave the rocks a wide berth. Perhaps the warrior was a little superstitious after all.

They reached the ladder downward, and the Hound gestured for her to wait. The warrior swung himself down effortlessly and landed with a thump onto the dock. Sansa peered over the edge and felt sick. Swallowing her fear, she tossed her bag down to the Hound. He caught it effortlessly. Sansa knelt, turned and put one foot over the edge, her toes gripped the first rung of the ladder and she closed her eyes. It was difficult last time, and it was difficult this time.

The Hound was running out of patience. “Hurry up, girl, we haven’t got all day. The sun will set within the hour.”

Sansa swung her other leg over the edge and placed it next to her first foot. Her face burned as she thought about the Hound looking up her skirts. She didn’t think he would, but how could she know? Her hands shakily gripped the first rung and she climbed downward. It was awkward and finally the Hound reached forward and grasped her around the hips, lowering her down. Sansa resisted the urge to steady herself on his arm. Instead, she reached for the smooth surface of the wall.

The Hound paced toward the edge of the deck, and started to unlace his leather boots.

“What are you doing?” Sansa asked.
“Climbing in with you,” the Hound continued to unlace his boots, never looking back at her.

“What? Why?”

The Hound laughed without joy, “don’t want to be in the water with a wet dog, Little Bird? Are you more afraid of the Hound than the sea monsters of your nightmares?”

“No,” Sansa gritted her teeth and shoved her dry cloak and slippers into her pouch. The Hound took everything as a personal slight.

Straightening, the Hound gestured for Sansa to approach the edge. It was another calm day for the bay. Sheltered in the embrace of the Blackwater, their little dock was a serene scene. Rays from the setting sun illuminated the Keep in shades of red and orange, and those colors were reflected in the tiny waves of the water.

Sansa reached the dock’s edge and peered downward. Darkness. She gulped visibly and closed her eyes tightly. Sansa lifted her right foot to go under but the Hound grabbed her elbow.

“I’ll go first,” he grumbled.

Sansa watched him crouch and slide gracefully into the water. The Hound’s scarred head disappeared underneath the water.

Sansa watched and waited for him to reappear, after a minute, she started to panic. What if he’d hit his head underneath the water? Had his body floated further into the bay? What would they do if they found him dead on the shore? What if the Hound was battling some sea creature right now and lost? She would be next! A sitting duck on the dock, waiting to be eaten or ravaged? Sansa paced and tapped her feet.

“Ser?”

There was no movement under the water. Sansa dared to peer into the darkness.

“Hound?”

Splash. Sansa shrieked and reeled backward as a green hand grabbed onto the dock. It reached toward her head. A muddy sea monster crawled toward her. Long swaths of seaweed were draped around the monster’s large figure. It’s face was caked in mud and ocean grime.

The creature crawled closer and closer, it’s feet smacking against the stone floor. All thoughts fled from Sansa’s mind. She scrambled backwards toward the ladder, desperate to put as much space between herself and the thing. Sansa saw her bag out of the corner of her eye and went for it. Reaching into the bag, Sansa felt around for something to defend herself with. She brandished the Hound’s comb against the approaching beast.

A rumbling laughter came from the monster’s chest, and it’s hand reached up to wipe the mud from it’s face.

“You?” Sansa gasped and fell to her feet, “WHY did you DO that?”

The Hound shook off the seaweed attached to his frame and shook his hair, quite like a dog would shake off water.

“Not on purpose, daft girl,” he spit salt water from his mouth, “wanted to see the depth of this place.”
The Hound eyed the comb.

“*You were going to stab me,*” he paused, “...with a hair comb?!”

Sansa lowered her shaking arm.

“You surprised me,” she breathed.

“I scared you,” the Hound snarled, shaking out his arms and feet, “that’s no surprise.”

“You surprised me because you were covered in...” she picked up one of the nasty green ribbons, “whatever this foul substance is.”

“Seaweed,” the Hound answered, and then swept his hands out toward the bay, “but not around here. Further out, there’s a forest of seaweed. It’s a sharp decline from this port outward. But here,” he stomped his foot on the stone, “it’s only ten feet to the sea floor.”

“And no sea weeds?” Sansa asked.

“No seaweed,” the Hound nodded, then knelt at the edge of the dock.

The Hound slipped into the water again except this time, his head immediately bobbed back up and one hand grasped the edge of the dock. His right hand extended toward Sansa. The same hand with the cleaved pinky.

Sansa hesitated before kneeling. She looked into the current again, a thousand fears came to the surface of her mind. Panicking, her gaze fell onto the grey eyes watching her. Despite his horrible scar, his despicable demeanor, his confusing actions... Sansa looked to him for assurance.

“I’ll keep you safe, Little Bird,” the Hound gripped her hand tightly.

First, her right foot slipped into the water, then her left. The Hound grasped her elbow and she slipped into the sea. Submerged in water, Sansa fought to remain calm and rational. The irrational part of her mind was screaming at her to leave, get out now, scramble back onto the dock. It wasn’t safe in the water. It was dark and only the Gods knew what lay in the darkness, watching her. The Hound bobbed at her side and she clutched his right arm.

“Kick your feet,” he told her, “gently. It will help you keep afloat.”

Sansa kicked, but had no instinct to do so. It felt awkward and unnatural, she pedaled and pedaled.

“Will the kicking attract attention?” Sansa pondered aloud. Her mind was whirling. Remain calm. Sansa refused to think about where she was or what she was doing. Instead, she tried to focus on swimming figure next to her. How did he swim so naturally?

“No fish this close to harbor,” the Hound shook his head, “too many fishing boats, and too many men. Nothing to fear but the dog next to you.”

“I’m not afraid,” Sansa protested, speaking quickly to avoid swallowing water. She spit when she inevitably did. “It feels like my skin is crawling.”

“Aye,” the Hound nodded, “I know.”

Sansa looked at him sharply. The Hound’s scar was wet and shiny, but his eyes were what drew Sansa’s gaze. There was a sad and distant look in those grey orbs, as if he was reliving a memory from the past. His face was close, very close. Sansa drifted closer and then farther. Closer and
farther. Back and forth with the waves, trying not to let her gaze linger for too long on his scar. Sansa tried instead to trace the outline of his nose. It was bent in two places. Robb once told her that meant a man had had his nose broken. Theon told her it meant a man had lost a fight in a tavern.

“How do you know?” she whispered. His scar. Every time he looks into the fire.

“I know,” was all he said, “keep kicking.”

Sansa kicked, but the Hound gave her no more direction. She was getting frustrated. Wasn’t there anything else she needed to know? The Hound retracted his arm slightly.

“No!” Sansa shrieked and grabbed for him. “Are you mad?! Do not leave me.”

“Quiet!” the Hound snapped, “we don’t want anyone to hear us. Sound travels, Little Bird.”

“Do not let go,” Sansa pleaded. She was getting desperate. Sansa hated depending on the Hound for anything but he was the only one present.

“Allright, just,” the Hound sighed. They kicked there for a few more minutes. Well, the Hound kicked, Sansa hung on and tried to stay afloat. Suddenly, his eyes lit up. He had an idea. “Stop kicking, hold onto my arm, I shall not let go. Just… float.”

“Float? Won't I drown? Won't I sink?” Sansa was confused.

“No, haven’t you ever seen a body in the water?”

“A body?!” Sansa gagged on salt water again and spluttered. “Are you mad?”

The Hound sighed, looked at her, and shook his head. “Bodies float, Little Bird.”

“Oh,” Sansa thought for a moment, and slowly stopped kicking as much. She was hesitant to go any further. Her head bobbed a little under and she panicked, reaching for the Hound. Her right hand gripped the collar of his shirt and he scowled. Too close.

“Don’t let me drown,” her voice sounded weak, even to her own ears.

“I said I wouldn’t,” the Hound scoffed.

“Promise?” Sansa looked him in the eye.

“Aye,” the Hound nodded, “a Hound will die for you, but never lie to you.”

His favorite words to say. Sansa nodded and stopped kicking entirely. She couldn’t deny that her heart was racing. She was afraid but oddly, it was not because of the Hound. Sansa was afraid of the darkness beneath her feet. The current came again and lifted her body up and over the waves. Again and again, she was lifted and dropped. The Hound remained steady, with one hand on the dock and the other on her arm, drifting and watching her. Sansa had an iron grip on his body, and was pulling against it to lift herself up.

Sansa felt her legs and arm begin to float. It was a funny sensation. A small smile broke out on her face when another tiny current made her body bob up and down.

“There’s no fish? Nothing around us?” Sansa had to ask again, still not convinced something wasn’t stalking her in the depths of the water.

The Hound gave her a significant look she could not interpret and squeezed her elbow.
“Nothing that would dare provoke the Hound,” he said. His answer made her swell with confidence. The Hound was ferocious. No wonder Joffrey always walked around like a puffed up peacock when the Hound was his shadow. He was daring and would probably relish the opportunity to battle with a ocean monster. Sansa started to feel a little safer. “Kick your feet toward the surface. Try floating on your back.”

Sansa did as he instructed, and the Hound’s hand came to rest on her back. She looked at him but he refused to look at her. Maybe he meant to spare her the indecency of his stare. It was a strange to think of the Hound acting honorably. He pushed her up and she gently floated on the waves. Sansa’s eyes focused on the stars just starting to appear in the half darkness of dusk. It would be a beautiful clear summer night in another half hour.

“Spread your other arm, the one not in a death grip on my collar,” the Hound instructed. Though he had a teasing tone, Sansa didn’t detect the same amount cruelty in his voice that he normally had.

Sansa would have failed to float the first time if the Hound’s large hand hadn’t been supporting her back. Soon, however, her body adjusted to the change and she was gently being lifted by the water. Sansa stared at the stars, trying not to think about the water all around her and the fearsome Hound at her side.

The Hound’s hand left her back.

“What? What are you doing?” Sansa’s right hand gripped his shirt and tugged at him. “Don’t let go, I told you not to.”

“I don’t take my orders from you, Little Bird,” the Hound grinned, still refusing to look at her floating body. He gazed far in the distance, “and you’re doing just fine on your own.”

The Hound made no move to remove her fist and so she contented herself with his presence at her side. Another wave came and lifted her up and down, and she floated closer to the Hound, bumping into his chest. It was as solid as a rock. Sansa pushed off of him a little, startled that they had collided. She slowly released her grip until only two fingers were entwined in the Hound’s shirt.

Sansa was floating. She smiled and laughed out loud. Sansa was floating by herself. Well, almost by herself.

“Enough for today.”

The Hound helped her to the edge of the dock and Sansa was flooded with relief to be back on land. A giddiness overtook her and she giggled madly. She splayed her hands out, stretching above her head, and soaked in the victory. Sansa had never been able to float in water before. She picked up the forgotten comb and joyfully worked the tangles out of her hair, humming at the pleasant feeling of the comb against her scalp. The Hound lifted himself out of the water as soon as she was on her feet again.

“If you’re even in trouble on the water, Little Bird,” the Hound said as he shoved his large feet into his long brown socks and laced his boots up over them, “remember you can always float.”

Sansa nodded, still smiling, and watched him brush the water from his face. The Hound caught sight of her form the corner of his eye and Sansa could have sworn he was smirking. His hands stretched behind and above him in the long stretch. Sansa stared in fascination. His shirt stuck to his chest without leaving his figure to the imagination. The Hound was built like a statue of the Warrior, broad and muscled. The only men she had ever seen in a state of casual dress were her brothers and her father. It was interesting to look at another man, even if it was the Hound. He flicked his black hair out of his face and turned to her.
“How do you feel?”

“Better, than last time,” Sansa admitted and blushed, ashamed to have been staring. She looked away before he could notice. “Thank you for swimming with me this time.”

As soon as she looked away, Sansa could have cursed. The Hound hated when she avoided his face. Sansa felt the change in the air. A tension was building in the silence after her thanks. Sansa shifted her feet nervously. Too afraid now to lift her gaze and at the same time, knowing she was digging herself deeper into a hole.

“Don’t thank me,” the Hound growled, roughly grabbing her the fabric he had brought to dry off with and rubbing his arms and legs. “I told you not to.”

“I will anyway,” Sansa replied softly, damning herself for not looking up. “You’re doing me a service.”

“Always polite and pretty, hmm Little Bird,” the Hound sneered. She could hear the rage and hatred in his voice. Minutes ago, the Hound had a raspy baritone. Now his voice had turned into an angry bark. “Maybe I just like to see you wet. Maybe I just like to get the Little Bird alone and defenseless.”

Sansa’s mouth dropped open as he advanced upon her, his gaze traveling up and down. He reached his arms up and placed them on both side of her head. She was surrounded. He towered over her and Sansa stopped breathing. She was looking at her feet again, too afraid to look up. Why did he have to do this? Why did it have to be like last time? Sansa cursed herself for curling inward. Why couldn’t she just look up? Couldn’t he just accept her thanks like a true knight?

But the Hound was not a knight, Sansa scolded herself. He swore no oath to protect the weak or defend the helpless.

The Hound gripped her chin and forced her to look up. His eyes were a smoldering pit of steel. Sansa gasped and fought to stay calm. He purposefully turned the burned side of his face toward her. The Hound was trying to shock and scare her. With the scar facing her, only his grey eyes looked human. Everything else was just melted flesh.

“Can’t look me in the eye when you’re thanking me,” the Hound spat, “doesn’t feel like a true thanks.”

Sansa had no response. It was true, she hadn’t looked at him.

“I’m looking at you now,” Sansa whispered. “I looked at you in the water.”

The Hound’s grip faltered and he released her chin, his anger fading. His eyes drifted to the left and toward the sea. Sansa’s hands rubbed her neck and chin, where the Hound’s grip had been. It felt like her skin was scorching. How could he burn her with a simple touch? Sansa would have to fight every one of her instincts in his presence if she wanted to survive. How could he make her feel safe, and then so threatened? All in the turn of a head?

“Come,” he grabbed her bag and threw the cloak and her shoes at her, “the walk will dry you off. It’s getting late and I need a drink.”

Sansa and the Hound returned to the Keep. Passing the unmarked grave, Sansa bowed her head in respect. It was dark by the time they reached the edge of the Godswood. Torches were being lit at this time. In the distance, Sansa could see the Tower of the Hand. One window was lit brightly. Her father was still up and working. Perhaps even waiting for her to return.
Not a single soul passed them on their way to the Tower. The Hound was glaring ahead of himself. Perhaps some servants did see the unusual pair, and scuttled away. Sansa would have. The Hound was a terrifying sight in the torchlight. Sansa couldn’t stop herself from glancing at him every several minutes. Wondering if he might explode in a bout of anger. Tension rolled off his shoulders.

How had things changed so drastically, so fast? It was obvious. Sansa came to the full realization that looking away from the Hound incited his anger. Above all else, he desired her gaze. Sansa silently swore to herself that she would look upon his face at all costs, no matter how unpleasant it might be. His scarred face was not as horrible as his rage. It might take time, but if she schooled herself, she might be able to avoid his wrath.

“My lady,” the Hound bowed to her when they reached Middle Bailey entrance to the Tower of the Hand. Sansa waited for him to straighten, so she could look him in the eye.

Steeling her nerves, Sansa gazed unblinkingly at the Hound. She both enjoyed and hated the experience. Sansa was still angry about earlier, but a pity was welling within her. The more she understood the Hound, Joffrey’s loyal dog, the safer she would be.

“Thank you.”

Sansa saw the Hound’s jaw working. His eyes widened and he reached up to grip her chin, not as roughly as before. His eyes flickered back and forth between hers. Sansa maintained eye contact for as long as she could. Finally, she reached a hand to grasp the handle of the door nearby.

Sansa left the Hound speechless in the courtyard. She closed the door behind her and exhaled heavily. It was over. It was done. She had floated. If the Hound left her another note, she would decline. He had gotten too close and too dangerous this time for it to ever happen again. She was a lady, she had to think about her future and her safety. They would maintain their tiny friendship from a greater distance.

After composing herself, Sansa quickly climbed the spiraling staircase to their common area. It was empty. The Hour was not terribly late, but it had been a long and trying week. Tomorrow was the Seven’s holy day of rest and repentance. Perhaps the other Starks had decided to start resting a day early.

Across the way, Sansa saw a light flickering in her father’s study. The door creaked as she pushed it open.

Lord Eddard Stark was not waiting for her, as she thought he might have been. Sansa found her father asleep at his desk, a candle burning wax in front of him. He was hunched over that nasty old book. Blowing out the candle, she shook her father awake gently. His arm was heavy with sleep.

“Cat…?” her father mumbled. He blinking blearily. His head raised slowly and Sansa could see the now familiar swollen bags under his eyes.

“No,” Sansa’s heart sunk, “Sansa.”

“Oh,” the Hand of the King looked around in confusion before it dawned on him where he was. “I fell asleep.”

“Yes, father,” Sansa retreated to poured him a glass of water. She handed it to him after he had straightened his doublet and pushed the hair out of his eyes. He thanked her and tossed back the glass.

“I should get back to work,” he said, making to relight the candle. Exasperated and tired, Sansa
grabbed the match box from his hands before he could protest.

“You should get to sleep,” Sansa held the matches out of his hands when he made to grab it.

“Sansa,” her father sighed and looked at her with mild irritation. “I am your father. I well know my limits. I work for the safety of this Kingdom.”

The same excuse. What was it her mother said? Man always say they have no choice when duty calls. Sansa was inclined to agree with her mother on this point. He did have a choice. There is always a choice, and he was choosing death. Sansa was getting tired of this game. Her eyes narrowed in anger. What about his family? Weren’t they important to him anymore?

“You clearly do not know your limits,” Sansa replied coldly, “or you would not treat your health so carelessly when you have five children and a wife to provide for.”

Ned Stark looked stunned. Sansa had not spoken to him so boldly her entire life. His mouth dropped to form a small “o”. Wrinkles creased across his forehead and he made to reach for the matches again. Sansa did not blink or back down. If she could face the Hound, her father was a mere puppy in comparison. Unexpectedly, a cloud of frustration passed over his face.

“Do not speak to me such!” her father threw down the book and stood from his desk. His fists were balled at his side. Sansa jumped but refused to step backwards. Her father’s anger had never been directed at her before.

Sansa remembered the last time her father grew irate with his children. Three years ago Robb and Theon had ridden into the Wolfswood to hunt for wolf pelts. Alone. No one told them of the coming snow and perhaps they hadn’t cared to listen. When they returned in half a day, half starved and soaked to the bone, Father intercepted them at the gates. Ned Stark said nothing to his first born son and his ward. He led to them to the rooms reserved for the lord’s family, and behind closed doors, Ned Stark’s reprimands could be heard from across Winterfell’s castle. Robb was not permitted anywhere near the stables for over two months and Theon had been giving kitchen duty for a year.

Robb tip toed around father for a year after that event. Sansa imagined she was about to witness why. Father did not lose his temper often, but when he succumbed to his emotions, it was a terrifying sight.

“I am the father, and you are the daughter,” his voice was clipped and raised. He pointed between himself and her. “I raised you from a babe and provided more than a comfortable living. You will not speak to me with such disrespect.”

“By your own order I will be Queen one day,” Sansa retorted, her grip on the matchbox was crushing it, “and I will speak to you however I want, for the price that I am paying.”

Her father opened his mouth to respond, but stopped, his hand falling to his side. He furrowed his brow. His mouth opened and closed like a fish. The vein in his forehead lessened in it’s pronunciation, as anger faded to confusion. The mood changed.

“The price you are paying?” he asked weakly.

Then, as if seeing her for the first time, he reached for her arms. To hold her, embrace her, or strangle her, Sansa would never know. She stepped backwards and toward the window. Her father looked deeply pained. It was so awful to look at him that Sansa almost crumbled. There was a time when she would have run to him. His eyes clearly focused on her. Sansa could not recall a time in her life when she had had her father’s undivided attention. Perhaps long ago, but not in recent years. It made
The price you are paying?” he asked again, “Sansa what do you mean? And… why is the hem of your dress wet? It didn’t rain today…”

Sansa fumed. What did she mean? Of course he would never understand. How could he ever understand her? He never tried! What did it bloody matter if her dress was wet? Sansa flung the matches through the open window and turned on her heel, slamming the door to his study behind her. Sansa could hear her father’s footsteps following, but she was in the throes of an emotion she could not explain. She felt exploited, used, misunderstood.

“SANSA?!”

How dare he? How dare he pretend not to know? Sansa fisted her hands in her skirts and cried out in frustration as she ran through their common room. Sansa swept past the small dining area, scattering bits of paper that had been left on the table.

When she reached her private chambers, she slammed the door behind her. “Sansa!” her father boomed. “Open the door!” a fist pounded against the door and the handle jiggled as he tried to open it. Sansa pushed the latch into place. When her father pushed against the door it could only open an inch. She recoiled from the door and her father, and rushed to the other side of the room.

“SANSA! I am your father. Open the door,” he demanded.

Sansa shook her head wordlessly and climbed into the bed, not bothering to change into her sleeping shift. Her father stopped hitting the door with his fist. A method that was not working. Sansa couldn’t stop the tears from spilling onto her cheeks when the noise stopped. Soon, she didn’t try to stifle her sobs. He should hear how unhappy she was.

“Sansa, please,” her father’s voice sounded strained and cracked, from stress and exhaustion. “You have never run from me.”

Sansa’s heart was shattering. She buried her face into her pillow and cried tears of mixed emotions.

“Tell your father how to fix this,” he spoke from the crack in the door. “How do I make it right between us?”

“Leave her alone,” a voice from beyond the door answered. It was small, but insistent. There was a quality of understanding in her voice that Sansa never heard from her sister before.

“Arya, this is between your sister and I, go back to your bed.”

“Leave her alone,” Arya insisted, “if she’s got the balls to shut the door in your face, I don’t think she wants to talk right now… father.” she added as an afterthought.

Silence. Her father’s shadow left the door and she could hear slow footsteps retreat back into his study. He had given up. Sansa clenched her pillow to her face, trying to muffle the sound. Was that all it took? Arya? And he just gave up on her? Didn’t want to try anymore? Are daughters too much trouble for Lord Stark?

“Damn San,” Arya’s small eyes glittered in small gap in the doorway.

Sansa didn’t respond. She was too tired to care anymore. Their small family was always arguing these days. Sansa never fought with anyone like that before. The adrenaline that ran through her body faded and left her exhausted in it’s wake. What had possessed her to act so wildly? Sansa
wasn’t Arya, she was the good one. The quiet one, the obedient one.

A year ago Sansa would have run to him. A year ago they arrived at the Red Keep. A year had changed everything. Her world had been destroyed and Sansa blamed the only person she could think was responsible. Why hadn’t he warned her about Joffrey’s nature? Why hadn’t he betrothed her to someone kinder? Gentler? Had he known? Could her father ever refuse the King? At least for his daughter’s sake?

Sansa tossed and turned. Eventually, even Arya left. Though to her credit, Arya tried to engage in conversation about stupid things like cats and water dancing. Sansa lay on the soft feather mattress of her room with racing thoughts. She stared at the ceiling and thought about how wonderful it had felt to float on the waves of the Blackwater with the Hound. Sansa drifted to sleep, remembering those waves and the gentle press of a hand upon her back. Lifting her skyward.

Chapter End Notes

Leave a comment!
Sansa's father decides to take his girls home, but Sansa catches a spy in her rooms. A chase ensues.

“How did you get my dragon?” Arya whined. “When did you take it?”

“You should pay more attention if you want to get better,” Sansa scolded. The comment was not nearly as aggressive as it might have been a few weeks ago. Arya stuck her tongue out. Sansa rolled her eyes. They both turned their heads when a clattering could be heard from outside the door.

Ned Stark burst into the Tower of the Hand. The Hand of the King limped awfully from a wound in his leg. He stopped and ran a hand through his unkempt hair while he surveyed the scene before him. Sansa and Arya were sitting a respectable distance away from each other, engaged in a game of cyvasse. Sansa was winning. Arya never had the patience for strategy. Both girls looked up and exclaimed in surprise.

“Father!”

After Sansa and her father fought, the two sisters had grown closer. The last month had been blissful. An unspoken bond had formed between them. Arya was treating Sansa with more respect and Sansa was less inclined to argue. The older sister felt indebted to Arya for driving their father away from her door. A respectful Arya was even a little playful, and Sansa found herself laughing at her little sister’s crude jokes more often than not. It was a surprising change. A change that did not include Ned Stark. After all, he had been infirm for more than six days.

The Hand of the King sustained an injury in the leg for reasons unknown to his two daughters. Kept in the dark, Sansa and Arya could only pray and wait. Sansa kept a vigil every day over his body until her Septa pulled her away.

“’tis folly to pray over sleeping men, Sansa,” Septa Mordane told her, “when you have not slept yourself.”

Joffrey had not been to see her lately. That morning, The King left for a hunt, amidst a great amount of fanfare and revel. Sansa suspected they may not return for several days. As for the Queen, she had distanced herself as of late. The Hound hadn’t left Sansa any more mysterious notes, to Sansa’s slight disappointment. The sight of his broad figure gave her both excitement and dread.

Sansa invited Jeyne Poole to lunch with her, but Jeyne quickly absconded in the evening with a handsome soldier. Dalen, a Lannister man. Sansa had known of his existence for quite some time, Jeyne had often gossiped about his handsome face and gentlemanly ways. Sansa wanted to share some of her own feelings with Jeyne, about her family and the Hound, but Jeyne immediately steered the conversation toward her romantic entanglements with Dalen. Sansa hadn’t wanted to come between the couple, so she declined the invitation to picnic with them. Ultimately, Sansa was left with her Septa and Arya as company.

“Enough of this,” the Hand walked over and took the cyvasse board from between them. A few
pieces toppled over the edge in his haste. He wobbled to place the board out of their reach. Sansa and Arya each held looks of offense.

“Father! Your leg! You should be sitting!”

“When did you wake?”

“Enough,” he said again, and cut his hand through the air. “I must speak urgently with you, my daughters. We are leaving this place.”

“What?” Arya stood abruptly, Sansa gaped at her father. Perhaps the milk of the poppy had addled his brain?

Leaving, so suddenly? When? How was it possible? Lord Stark was hand of the King. Sansa was betrothed to Joffrey. They could not leave without severing ties to the Crown. King Robert would not allow it. Her father must have found some way around the engagement and his duties as Hand. Against her better judgement, Sansa began to hope for home again. Winterfell, snow, no more Joffrey. She could be just Sansa again. No more court. No more Hound. A twinge of sadness and pity struck her heart at that thought but she shoved it aside. No more Joffrey.

“We can’t leave!” Arya stomped her foot, a petulant act, “I’ve just gotten good enough to catch the cats in the kitchens and they’re the fastest ones! And Syrio, Syrio says--”

“I will get you a new dancing master,” their father interrupted, “one who will come to Winterfell and teach you many, many more dances there. Go, Arya, pack your things. I must speak with your sister.”

Arya gaped at him and made to put up a fight. Father silenced her with a look. No arguments. Arya looked betrayed. With a huff, she turned and ran into her room. Sansa could see clothes and objects flying across the room. Arya always had a unique way of packing her things.

Eddard Stark turned to his oldest daughter. Sansa inhaled deeply and drew herself to her full height. A habit she had picked up from her father, he did so whenever he was preparing to face an unpleasant conversation. The Lord Hand fixed her with a curious look, before grimacing in pain. His leg. Sansa reached out a hand to help him into the seat Arya had previously occupied.

So many things had changed between them, Sansa reflected. Her father looked drawn and tired. He was still very sick and only recently was released from the infirmary. His face was pale and waxy and a sweat had broken upon his brow from his earlier exertion. His hands felt clammy as they grasped hers. Sansa moved to retract them, but his grip prevented her.

“No, Sansa,” they made eye contact. Ned Stark grey eyes, the color of a cloud filled with snow. “We will get to the bottom of this. I do not know how things have soured between us, but sour and bitter they are. I will break your engagement to Joffrey. I will break it and we will be done with him.”

Sansa closed her eyes. She could not stop the immense relief that flooded her senses. Her neck and shoulder relaxed in a way they hadn’t for six months. Sansa inhaled and opened her eyes.

“... why?” she could not stop herself from asking. What prompted this change of heart? Why now?

“I cannot tell you until we have left the city. When we reach the North, I promise you, I promise you, Sansa, I will make you a match with a Northman. A good man, strong and gentle.”

Sansa nodded, her throat was too constricted to speak. Fine and good. They were going home, all of them. Winterfell was waiting. Sansa had a feeling that everything would get better as soon as they
departed from the Red Keep. This feeling of despair and loneliness would leave her. The color would come back to her cheeks and she’d be able to enjoy the taste of food again. Sansa and her father would repair their relationship. Two sisters would be closer than ever. Mother would welcome them back with open arms. Robb, she would see Bran awake, Rickon, and all the other characters from her previous life.

Her father had fixed it. Sansa nodded, nodded again, and leapt into his arms. Ha gave a shout of surprise and pain as she jostled his leg but patted her back in return. Sansa inhaled his scent. Pine wood and parchment, leather and sword oil. Ned Stark had returned.

Sansa released him and sat back in her seat, sniffling. When she looked up, her father looked a little less weary, a little younger than his age. He smiled and cupped her cheek.

“Go pack your things,” he whispered.

Sansa did not need to be told twice. She left her father to his business and grabbed some books and the cyvasse game from the common area. With full hands, Sansa made for her room after accepting a one armed hug from her father. He rubbed her shoulder affectionately and disappeared around the arch of the stairway, to do what must be done.

Sansa flung open the door to her chambers and quickly took stock of her belongings. The southern dresses could be left behind, her warm stockings needed to be packed, her sable lined gloves. She would need a sturdy comb, the one the Hound had lent her, and her riding boots. Would she take the pack the Hound had given her? It seemed wrong to take what wasn’t hers. The light cloak she would need when they traveled the King’s Road. Sansa would pay him in gold the value of whatever she took. She was certain he wouldn’t mind. Sansa opened the far drawers and started shuffling through her sleeping shifts.

A squeak caught her attention and she turned to see pale pink fabric disappear around the door corner.

Sansa’s heart stopped and she quietly put down the music box she had been holding. Was that? That handmaiden. From Cersei’s chambers. What was she doing in Sansa’s rooms? How had she gotten in the Tower of the Hand? Sansa knew she would have to get past her father’s guards at the base of the stairs… but then again, who would question the tiny lady who changed Lady Sansa’s sheets and beat the rugs?

Sansa and Arya were so consumed in the cyvasse game. Neither of the ladies would have noticed a tiny handmaiden slipping into their quarters to tidy up.

If the lady had been hidden in Sansa’s chambers, she must have heard the Hand of the King stating his intention to leave. Sansa had said something… a secret he couldn’t tell her until they were beyond the city gates.

What if the King and Queen didn’t know? What if they were in danger?

“STOP!”

Sansa ran out the door after her. Her feet were a flutter down the stairs. The guards at the bottom of the steps were gone, her father must have took them. Sansa rushed into the Middle Bailey. Swiveling her head back and forth, she caught sight of a pink figure headed in the direction of the small council.

Sansa sprinted after the lady, knowing she had little time. Her mind raced. What would she say? Could she bribe her with money? Sansa had never run so fast and she wished she had taken a greater
interest in exercise like Arya had. Her legs were burning, her chest was heaving, and her face was flushed and buzzing from the activity.

Sansa could barely see her target. At every corner, she witnessed the pink lady disappear behind another column, or into another corridor. The handmaiden was running now too, having caught on to the chase. Sansa raised a feeble hand to stop her as she barreled through the Red Keep. At the hall of the small council, Sansa passed the tall figure of Petyr Baelish who raised a hand to grab her. Sansa ducked and evaded his grasp, offering her apologies. Lord Baelish called after her, concerned, before his shouts faded.

Sansa had to catch the lady. Sansa needed to leave the Red Keep. For her joy, for her happiness, she needed to leave and nothing was going to stop her. Where was the handmaiden going? She passed around the building of the small council and saw the maiden heading toward the Iron Throne, and beyond the throne...

Sansa knew exactly why the maiden was snooping in her belongings. It was the same reason Robb and Mother never wrote. The Starks were being watched. If the handmaiden got past the throne room. If she made it to the corridors where the royal family was housed… the Queen who killed Lady.

Sansa grabbed a bannister to spin herself around a corner she had seen the lady pass through. She was close, only a little further and Sansa would--

“Oomph!”

Sansa hit a wall. A groan. Not a wall then, a man. A tall man. The Hound stretched up before her and her head spin from the collision. Sansa had been thrown on the floor, her skirts were in a mess. Her arse and wrist hurt from the fall and she moaned in pain. Ears ringing, Sansa glimpsed around the legs of the Hound to catch sight of the pink maiden. Cersei’s spy had vanished.

“No,” Sansa moaned and gripped the Hound’s hand as he lifted her up. The Hound was fitted in armor and his longsword hung on his hip again. The Hound took one look at her, gently lifted her into a shadowy alcove, and placed her on a stone bench. He looked her up and down, eyes checking for injury. Sansa could see his mouth moving, asking question after question, but the ringing hadn’t stopped and she could not hear him. The Hound’s hand hovered over his sword hilt and his eyes looked askance of her. Sansa knew the question without him needed to voice it. Why was she running?

She met his eyes, trying to convey her need. “I need to catch her.”

Somehow, he understood. A moment of hesitation and doubt passed before the Hound took off after the maiden. He was a much faster runner than she was. He sprinted down the corridor and past her line of vision. The Hound’s cloak billowed after him, yet Sansa knew the lady was lost to them. The Hound was her last hope, but no man could travel through space and time. Sansa despaired. The fall would have given the pink lady just enough time to pass through the gardens and reach the servants entrance to the Royal Quarters. It was too late. It was too late.

Sansa rested in the alcove. She rubbed her bruised wrist and sore bum, and allowed herself a few tears.

If the maiden told the Queen. The Queen would try and stop Sansa from leaving. Maybe it wouldn’t matter. Lord Stark was the Hand of the King and there was power in that position. Still, Joffrey and the Queen were vicious and unrelenting. Would Sansa ever escape?
The Hound returned. Sansa could hear his armored footsteps from a league away. His pace was slow and foreboding. He had returned too soon. When he reached the alcove, Sansa looked at him hopefully. He placed a heavy hand on his sword and shook his head. He could not catch the pink lady.

Sansa hung her head. She lost the spy, and perhaps lost what hope the Starks had in secrecy. There was still a chance that Father could send them away quietly. But the Queen would know and try to stop it.

A scarred hand, with a cleaved pinky, reached to help her up. Sansa took it gratefully, not feeling so well after her tumble. She would have bruises on the morrow. The Hound’s eyes flickered to her wrist and his grip grew so gentle it was barely a whisper across her skin. He released her after her swaying stopped. Sansa's head pounded.

Sansa met his eyes, remembering her vow never to look away. At all costs, maintain eye contact. Sansa kept this mantra in her head. Sansa didn’t know why the Hound ran after the maiden in her stead, but that small action spoke volumes about his loyalty. Sansa couldn't shake the feeling that she would need him in the times to come.

“Would the Hound Escort me back to the Tower of the Hand?” Sansa asked, her head pounding. She needed to get back to her quarters and lie down, before resuming to pack, and Sansa doubted her ability to navigate the passages feeling so light headed and winded.

The Hound hesitated, “I’ve been summoned by the Queen. I’ve wasted too much time with the Little Bird already.”

Sansa tried not to let her aggravation show, but she huffed slightly. Of course. Where else would the Hound be headed? She supposed she could survive the walk on her own.

“Then you should not keep Her Grace waiting,” Sansa picked up her skirts and curtseyed, not daring to lower her gaze. She felt dizzy, and stumbled on her descent. The Hound caught her arm and she groaned.

Gooong. Gooong.

Sansa lifted herself, with the held of the Hound, and looked around in confusion. What was that awful noise? It rung throughout the Red Keep, loud and long. Gooong. Gooong.

“Bells,” she breathed. Then, turning to her companion. “What do the bells mean?”

The Hound looked apprehensive. He turned his head toward the Tower of the Hand and then the hall of the Iron Throne. The Hound looked uncertain. Sansa felt fearful. If Westeros’ greatest warrior was afraid, what could the bells mean?

Gooong. Gooong.

“Hound?”

“Come, Little Bird,” the Hound snarled. He began to lead her down the hall. “I will take you to your room. Bar the door, and don’t answer for anyone. ANYONE! Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Sansa nodded, looking at him fearfully, “what do the bells mean?”

“Death.”
Sansa's has been kept under Guard in the Red Keep. The Hound takes her to the dock so she can breathe, but things don't go as planned. Sansa learns the Hound's real name.


Sansa wept at the little dock. Alone and in the darkness, she cried into her hands. The Hound stood guard behind her, silent as he faced the Red Keep. He had neither protested nor said a word as they descended onto the bay, only lending her a hand when she needed to climb down the ladder. Sansa would never know why he followed her that day. She doubted he would have let her walk to her freedom, but it was comforting to know he hadn’t stopped her from seeking solace elsewhere.

Joffrey, or the Queen, or both, had moved Sansa into a small set of rooms closer to the Royal Quarters. Sansa woke the morning after her father’s imprisonment to find Ser Boros Blount outside her door, demanding her removal from the Tower of the Hand. Sansa had no choice but to comply. That evening, the Queen sent lemoncakes for Sansa’s dessert, it was like a slap in the face. Sansa remembered gagging at the smell of her own favorite treat. Every day and every night a Kingsguard was stationed at her door, so she could not leave without being monitored. It was suffocating, but she had no choice but to endure the suffering. A new handmaiden appeared at her door every morning, and none of the girls ever told Sansa their names. Sansa felt like she was in a prison of her own.

Fifteen days passed before the Hound was finally assigned to her guard. It was a relief to open her door and see his hulking frame. Sansa had smiled, genuinely smiled to see him. The Hound was starting to feel like an old friend. Sansa knew she shouldn’t feel familiar with him, but she couldn’t denied their unorthodox friendship any longer. It was the only friendship Sansa had left. Seeing her smile, the Hound only sniffed and tossed his head in the direction of the stairs and the Godswood. Outside? Sansa happily fled toward the dock. Yet, now that she was finally allowed to grieve, thoughts of her family consumed her mind.

Eddard Stark, her father, was being held in the Black Cells, and Sansa knew he was still suffering from a wound in his leg. They might be starving him, beating him or torturing him, while Sansa was given every comfort, warm food, water and wine, her favorite sweets… it made her sick to think of Father or Arya starving to death. It made every meal difficult to swallow and she felt drained of all energy.

Sansa cried for all that had come to pass.

Joffrey was King, despite the rumors of his illegitimacy. Joffrey now held an awesome power that he was determined to abuse. The first session of his court was a mummer’s farce. How could a boy rule all seven kingdoms? Still, lord after lord bent the knee to King Joffrey Baratheon, the first of his name. Sansa could easily recall the look of disdain on Joffrey’s face, when she came to beg for her father’s life. The disdainful arch of his brow burned in her memory. Kneeling before the Iron Throne never felt so wrong. Joffrey thin limbs looked unnatural in his father’s seat, where once a fat man sat. The golden teenager was too small to fill such a large role. Sansa thought he might break their engagement, but Joffrey was bent on keeping his word, especially after the Queen’s insistence.
When she came to stand again, Sansa’s legs felt numb. She chanced a glance at the man standing next to the King. The Hound looked down upon her, past his broken nose, and Sansa wanted to shout at him. Sansa wanted to demand his help. It angered her that he could stand so silent, always watching but never intervening. Unfortunately, Sansa had no such claim on the King’s loyal dog. It would be foolish to think that the Hound was more loyal to her than the boy he had served since infancy.

*Mercy for my father. Mercy.*

Sansa cried out and ripped at her dress sleeves, tearing the fabric. It felt good to destroy something.

“Quiet!” the Hound whispered sharply, “the Keep is asleep, every noise travels at night.”

Sansa stilled and glared at him. Or she glared in his direction. Her vision was blurry from tears and it was too dark to see clearly. The moonlight reflecting off the Blackwater did little to aid her vision. The Hound’s large figure was a black shadow, somewhere to her right, guarding the ladder. Against who? Against what? Perhaps the Hound didn’t know what to do with crying women. So the Hound guarded as he always guarded.

Sansa turned her gaze to the water, as black as her mood. How black were the Black Cells? As black as the Blackwater? Sansa stood and stepped forward. She wanted to connect with her father again. Even in the littlest ways. Sansa kicked off her slippers and took a step, and another step.

The Hound started forward. “Fuck,” she heard him curse before she took the last step into the rush.

If the night was quiet, the Blackwater was quieter. An eerie stillness hung about the water. Sansa floated downward, letting the weight of her body draw her further into the sea. It wasn’t as dark as she thought. Under the water surface, Sansa could see how the light was refracted. All around her, the bay dropped off into darkness, but she could see through the first ten feet of water. It was murky and held little floating particles. A little distance away, the seaweed forest the Hound mentioned was swaying in the light current.

A long fish darted in and out of the tall green plants. It’s large flat eyes shone in the darkness. Sansa watched it, transfixed, before it frightened itself and swam back into its seaweed home. Her feet touched bottom. It was soft and loamy, her foot sunk into the ground and her big toe touched something rough and scratchy, a shell perhaps.

The Hound dove in behind her. Sansa felt her lungs crying for air, so she kicked off the ground just in time for him to grab her round the waist and they reached the surface together.

Gasping for air, the Hound practically threw her onto the stone dock. Her hip bounced painfully on the stone, waking Sansa from her dream.

Sansa rolled over onto her back and faced the sky. She gasped for air, lying on the stone dock. It wasn’t so bad. Down there in the water. Almost peaceful. Maybe Father’s cell wasn’t so bad, just dark and wet and cold. If that was all, perhaps he would survive.

“Are you mad, Bird?” the Hound growled and pulled himself onto the dock. Sansa wasn’t afraid. They’d been alone three times before, and all three times he’d been angry. The Hound never hurt her, not really. Though he would make sure to scare her. Scare her badly.

“Did you see it?” Sansa asked. Thinking about the long fish in the seaweed forest. Fish had always scared her since she was a little girl, despite her Tully heritage. As a child, she found their scales and eyes to be unnatural. But the fish she saw only scared itself. Sansa was afraid of monsters in the sea,
but maybe the monsters were more afraid of Sansa. It was a thought she clung to, as the Hound advanced upon her. He shook with a fury she had not seen in him before.

“See you almost kill yourself! Aye!” the Hound grabbed her shoulder and forcibly yanked her to her feet. His eyes were molten steel, angry and alive.

“What in Seven hells were you thinking, you daft, stupid bird? What the fuck were you thinking?! You thought you’d go meet your Gods down in the sea?! Huh, Little Bird?!”

The Hound pushed her, really pushed her. Sansa’s back hit the red walls of the Keep and she flattened against it. Sansa pushed back but she had a kitten’s strength compared to the awe inspiring muscle of the Hound. She clutched at his leather jerkin to pull herself up and met his gaze, head on. His nostrils flared as he inhaled her scent. The smell of roses mixed with the stink of Blackwater. His large hands fell from the wall to rest on her shoulders.

“Would that be so terrible?” Sansa asked.

“How could be so STUPID?” the Hound shook her shoulders and her head rattled back and forth.

“I’M TRYING!” Sansa shouted back, the yell hurt her throat.

“So am I!” The Hound retorted.

The Hound’s eyes widened and he dropped his hands. Sansa exhaled after he put several feet between them.

The Hound’s yell echoed in her mind. So am I?

Sansa looked at his turned back. Since Joffrey had been crowned, the Hound drank every night. Sansa rarely saw him without flask of wine in his hands. He looked angry and tired. Overworked, Sansa realized. The Hound was overworked. Awake all day and night, running to the call of his new master. A boy who used to be held in check by the presence of his domineering father. Without King Robert, Joffrey had no checks placed on his demands.

Sansa tried to imagine what the Hound’s life might be like. Bound to the malicious Lannister family, the Hound would have very little freedoms. An angry man who lived every day with the constant reminder of his terrible childhood burned on his face. To be thrust from the Mountain’s hands into Tywin Lannister’s service. It must have been less than ideal.

The Hound was kneeling at the edge of the dock, watching the waves strike the stone. Sansa crept closer and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. His shoulders tensed before he relaxed and accepted her presence, her silent support. Sansa’s palm could feel the rough boiled leather of his light armor move up and down with his heavy breaths.

“He wasn’t like this,” the Hound mumbled. “Not as a child. Just a simple boy, really. Wanted to hold my sword and ride horses with me. As Joff got older… the Queen, his father, the Keep. It did something to him. Or maybe his true nature came out. Used to be a harmless little lad, turned into a… monster.”

Sansa rested her other hand on his left shoulder and squeezed. It was silent for a while, both listening to the other breathe and shuffle, before the Hound rose. Sansa’s hands fell to her sides.

“Polite, Little Bird,” he took one of her hands and made a show of inspecting it. “Petting the dog make you feel better?”
Sansa sighed. She did feel better, but his words had a tone of self loathing she could not encourage. The Hound was still inspecting her hand. What was he looking for? Dirt? Sansa thought about pulling her arm out of his grasp but did not. It felt good, after all. His calloused thumb pressed into her palm, his long fingers wrapped around her wrist. A warm, fluttering feeling grew in her stomach.

“I feel better I’m not alone,” Sansa whispered. The Hound chuckled darkly.

“No,” he rasped, and looked downward toward her, “you’re alone with the Hound.”

Sansa was riveted to the floor with his gaze. The way he was looking at her... with a light in his eyes that was very different from his angry stare. It was animalistic. Sansa was immobilized, she did not think she could move if she wanted to. She felt like a moth who caught sight of the flame. His eyes glimmered. With each breath, the Hound grew imperceptibly closer and closer, until his body invaded all of her senses. Sansa could see, hear and feel the presence of the Hound all around her, and she could not look away.

The Hound stayed close, but never touched her. The grip on her wrist lightened, his thumb ran over her palm and Sansa shivered.

The Hound’s words finally sunk into her skull. Alone with the Hound. The Hound spoke as if... his presence was a bad thing, a dangerous thing, a dark thing. But it wasn’t dangerous to her, not now, not this time. With a small tug, she could be free of him. And if she chose to flee, Sansa had a feeling he would not move to stop her. Sansa did not feel threatened, she felt drawn. The air crackled with a different sensation. A sensation just as thrilling as danger. But the Hound... Sansa wasn’t alone with the Hound... she was alone with another man entirely.

“What’s your name?” Sansa blurted out.

The man in front of her blinked. Sansa noticed his chest stopped moving. The Hound had stilled his breath. Sansa saw his eyes boring into her.

“Why would you want to know the dog’s name?” the Hound rumbled slowly, articulating each word carefully. “To better call him?”

“I want to know a man’s name,” Sansa corrected.

A long pause stretched between them. The current lapped lightly and a small wind picked up from the bay, rustling Sansa’s hair. Sansa could no longer guess what the warrior was thinking. Would he grow angry with her? Had she asked too much? The Hound had not released her hand, and Sansa dared to curl her fingers around the thumb that still rested on her palm. A shuddering breath escaped him.

“Sandor.”

Sansa felt a thrill go through her. It was almost like her own name. Sandor. It had a pleasant sound to it.

“Sandor,” Sansa repeated. “I am not alone with the Hound. I am alone with Sandor.”

The man shuddered again. His gaze dropped to the floor in front of them. Sansa felt exhilarated. A battle had been won tonight. After losing so much, it felt incredible to have this small victory, and for a moment, Sansa forgot completely about her family and her circumstance.

“Sandor,” Sansa whispered. “Would you escort me back to my rooms?”
“Aye,” the Hound nodded. For once, he had no cruel retort.

After Sansa and the Hound ascended the ladder, he offered her his arm. It was the first time the Hound ever escorted her like a lord would escort a lady. The Godswood had no path for them to follow, so they wove in and around branches, accidentally brushing against one another every once and a while. It thrilled Sansa. She had never played a game like this. It made her forget about the King, the Queen, and her father. For a half hour, it was just her and Sandor Clegane, walking awkwardly arm in arm, trading glances with one another.

The comfort Sansa felt faded when they came within sight of the stairs exiting the Godswood. Their entwined arms dropped away. Sansa could feel the eyes of the Keep all around her. The Hound took her through dark hallways, staying out of sight. The journey to her room took a little longer than usual, but Sansa felt comfortable with the silence that enveloped the pair.

The Hound hesitated when their walk ended, and Sansa reached for his hand.

“Thank you,” she pressed a kiss onto his palm, her lips brushed over one of the rough calluses that had become familiar.

“No need to thank me,” her non-knight took her hand and returned the favor. Sansa’s skin felt alive underneath his kiss. One part of his mouth was roughened from his scar, and brushed strangely against her skin.

“Goodnight,” Sansa placed a hand on the door. “Sandor.”

Lying down to bed, she felt guilty and confused. She should not be indulging in fantasies while her father was imprisoned, her brother was at war, and her family was in ruins. Sansa tossed and turned, replaying the night over and over again in her mind. So much had happened in the past few years… and the Hound, Sandor, was remaining constant.
Ned Stark has died, and Sansa joins the Hound for another swimming lesson. It does not go according to plan.

Sansa swished her feet back and forth in the water. It was a cool day, a cooler day than average. Winter is coming, Sansa thought wistfully. Winter would be coming to King’s Landing soon, indeed, if the reports were true. Robb had marshalled the bannerman and was coming to rescue her and exact revenge for their father’s death.

Father’s death...His head, Seven Gods, his head.

Sansa swallowed heavily, the urge to vomit threatened to return whenever she thought of her father’s fate. She shuddered whenever the image of Eddard Stark’s spiked head reappeared in her mind’s eye. It barely looked like a face, all covered in tar and flies, but the very thought of his body… desecrated like that. Sansa knew his soul had left King’s Landing the moment of his decapitation, and a body was just a body… but she had screamed all the same. Screamed twice when she caught sight of Septa Mordane’s clothed visage.

Sansa wished she hadn’t screamed. It was her screams that Joffrey wanted, and she played right into his hands.

“I hear you Northerners have ice in your veins,” Sansa could hear the Hound - Sandor - taking off his brown leather boots behind her, “if it’s true, you may do better in these waters than I. It’s buggering cold in the Bay today.”

Cold for Southerners, Sansa thought. Sansa had to crane her head to look up at him. Sandor Clegane raised his good eyebrow and offered her a hand. Sansa smiled at the familiar gesture, and their clasped hands lingered for a second too long after he helped her stand.

“I still need to learn how to swim,” she said with a finality to her voice. One day, she planned to swim away from this place.

Mustering all her courage, Sansa clumsily slipped off the dock before her companion could object. It was a shock to her body to be submerged in water again after so long. She clung to the stone of the Red Keep, trying not to think about the water surrounding her, she waited for Sandor Clegane to follow. He slid into the water gracefully and dunked his head under the current.

Laughing and grinning, the Hound reemerged, shaking his head like a wet dog. Sansa spluttered and giggled when the water sprayed her face. When they were alone, Sansa caught rare glimpses of Sandor Clegane’s humorous, playful side. The unburnt side of the Hound. Sansa imagined it was the part of his soul kept hidden from the rest of the world. In another universe, a world without his brother, would the Hound even exist? Or would he be replaced by the Sandor Clegane she saw in these carefree moments?

“Good,” he grinned. “This dog needed a bath, no matter the cold.”
“You’re not a dog, Sandor,” Sansa said, as the current lifted her.

Storm grey eyes met Tully blue and a battle of the wills ensued. Sansa refused to look away. It was routine now to butt heads over the Hound’s beliefs. Sandor needed to know, he needed to see that Sansa believed he was more than a dog. Sansa didn’t need the Hound, she needed the man who had become her friend. The man who made her laugh, and rubbed his thumb in her palm when she was upset.

“As it please you, Little Bird,” he looked away. Sansa quietly rejoiced in her triumph. “You swim well enough if you holding onto the dock, but how about we make the game a little harder?”

Sansa could not have relinquished her grip on the stone dock if she had tried. Sensing her trepidation, the Hound - no, Sandor - gently grasped one of her hands and peeled it away from the stone. Sansa instantly went to grip his sleeve. He snorted and went for the other hand.

“So do you remember how to float, Little Bird?” Sandor asked her.

Sansa nodded, slightly paralyzed from fear, she found it difficult to speak.

Sandor Clegane allowed her to grip his sleeve as he guided her body toward the Bay. Sansa tried to tread water by kicking her feet, as she had done in the past. It still felt somewhat unnatural for her to do so. Sandor nudged her back with his other hand and Sansa kicked up her feet, trying to replicate the last time she had floated. Her legs and arms started to feel weightless, and Sansa dipped her head back in anticipation. Sansa moved further into the Blackwater.

A sudden current simultaneously picked her up and sent her feet back down and Sansa’s head went under the water.

Sansa opened her mouth to scream but only inhaled water. Icy liquid flooded her senses. Her hand was ripped off of Sandor Clegane’s tunic and she spiraled downward. An evil force had grabbed onto her body and was dragging her downward. Sansa panicked.

She couldn’t breathe. Sansa closed her eyes and tried to spit back out the water she had already swallowed but her actions only caused her to gag. Darkness was creeping into the corner of her vision.

What happened? Where is the Hound? Where was her savior?

The Hound’s arm came to encircle her top half and she was lifted back to the surface. The man behind her applied pressure to her lower ribs and stomach. Sansa spewed water from her mouth. It was embarrassing, but she was relieved to be breathing air again. Sansa choked on air for a few moments before she could speak.

“Out, I want out!” Sansa gasped and clutched the Hound’s arm, she spun in the water and moved to grab onto the dock.

Frantically, she tried to climb over her non-knight and to reach the solid surface of land. Hands circled her waist and pulled her down from where she was trying to climb over his shoulders.

“Hold on, Little Bird.”

“Out! Please, Sandor,” Sansa pleaded, using his given name.

Her non-knight lifted her easily onto the dock and Sansa scooted away from the edge. Free, she was free. Sansa’s heart thumped painfully in her chest and she grabbed at it in an attempt to still it’s
beating.

When she reached the far side of the dock, the farthest point from the water, she collapsed against the wall. She snaked her arms around her knees and curled into herself, shutting her eyes. It was over. *The Hound - Sandor saved me.*

“What was that?” Sansa’s voice was high pitched with fright.

Sandor Clegane followed her out of the water, his muscled forearms easily lifted him onto the dock. He grumbled and sat down heavily next to her. A heavy cloak came to rest around her shoulders and Sansa wrapped herself in it tightly, grateful for the warmth. Sandor’s wet clothing created a squelching sound as he shifted in his seat, obviously uncertain. She looked at her companion and he shrugged, looking unconcerned.

“I’m not a sailor,” he shook his head, “the tide might have changed. The current exists both in the waves and under the water. We needn’t go in again, if it scared you that bad.”

“Yes, not today,” Sansa shivered again. The dress she used for swimming lessons was soaked now. The wind picked up, causing the air to spin around her small frame, chilling her bones. Sansa caught her breath while the Hound brushed the water off his arms and legs.

“This is unusual weather,” Sansa couldn’t help but remark. The freak tide might have been caused by the changing seasons. It made Sansa wary to approach the dock again. How could she ever enter the water after that?

“Aye,” Sandor Clegane cast a suspicious gaze upward toward the clouds.

The pair sat in silence. Sansa took the time to regain control of her heartbeat. *I almost drowned, she thought. I almost drowned a second time and the Hound... Sandor Clegane saved me from death. That is the third time he's saved my life.* The first time, during the storm, the second time when he stopped her from pushing Joffrey off the Red Keep, and the third time he saved Sansa from the Blackwater. Her non-knight will not even be expecting a reward. Sansa shifted so she could observe his profile.

Sandor was looking at the sky still, watching the clouds pass by. His knees were drawn up to mimic her position. Large hands rested on his knees, only he was twiddling his thumbs the way Sansa’s brother Bran used to do when he felt impatient or nervous. Sansa’s eyes traveled the unburnt side of his face slowly.

Her eyes flickered to his, but the Hound was distracted. Sansa was glad he had not noticed her scrutiny yet.

Sansa couldn’t help but note that the unburnt side of his face was almost comely. Simple, but pleasant. Sandor was a rough man, but his silent profile was decidedly less threatening to look at. Especially since he seemed unaware of her observation.

If he had not been burnt, and could refrain from becoming violent, Sansa would never shy away from looking at him. The Hound refused to take knightly vows, even though King Robert offered him knighthood. Would Sandor Clegane have been a handsome knight? Despite being a Southerner, Sansa thought he shared some common features with the descendants of the First Men, the Northerners. He had black hair, grey eyes, a strong jaw.. all traits she associated with her homeland.

It was evening, so a stubble was starting to form on his jaws and cheeks. Sansa used to think clean faces were most handsome, a belief her mother held. Before the King’s arrival in Winterfell, Sansa
remembered seeing Robb, Theon, and Jon all forced under the shaving knife by Catelyn. Sansa thought her brothers looked more handsome with less scruff, but her father had refused, keeping his beard. *The mark of a man grown*, her father had said. Truthfully, there was something very masculine about the Hound’s dusting beard and Sansa could see he had a mild cleft to his chin, underneath the growing hair.

Sansa’s eyes traveled to his neck. It was thick, like many warrior’s were, from years of strenuous exercise. Connected to his neck were a pair of broad shoulders. Sandor’s torso was undoubtedly his most defining feature, being so wide. Very few men carried such a characteristic. It made him look fierce and powerful. While Sansa preferred the lithe look of men like Loras Tyrell, it suited her non-knight well. Sandor Clegane could block a door just by standing in it, which made him an effective guard. Sansa’s eyes followed the path of his shoulders to his arms. Sandor has always had strong arms, Sansa thought. Ever since she first saw him. She remembered thinking so during the Hand’s tourney, when she first saw him hold a lance.

*Arms that have saved me from death*, Sansa thought. It made the muscle much less threatening to look at, knowing he had only used his strength to save her, not hurt her.

Sandor Clegane stopped twiddling his thumbs. He was looking at her now. Sansa blushed and averted her gaze. Hopefully he had not seen her staring.

If he saw her blush, he did not comment. *Hopefully, he thinks I am red from the cold*. Sansa was relieved she was wrapped in his cloak. She pulled it tighter around her and buried her head in the thick fabric. It smelled warm and safe. It smelled like Sandor Clegane. Sansa snuck a glance back over at him, he was looking away again. She took the chance to inhale the scent clinging to the fabric.

It smelled like sweat. Another breath. Leather too. One more smell, he won’t notice. Wine and oil and smoke. Sansa was enjoying herself immensely. Sandor Clegane smelled intoxicating. When she was younger, Sansa never enjoyed the smell of men. It was too crude and harsh for her tastes. She preferred the flowery scents of a maiden’s perfume. For some reason, though, Sansa could not resist the Hound’s smell. It gave her a pleasant, queer feeling.

“All right, Little Bird?” he finally noticed her strange behavior. “Cold?”

Sansa’s face turned several shades of red before she stammered.

“Y-yes, the wind is making me quite cold.”

“Hmm,” Sandor hummed. “Can do nothing but wait for us to dry, Little Bird. I cannot change the weather.”

Sansa had no reply. His voice... had it always sounded like that? A deep and rumbling baritone that made her toes want to curl. A mere inch separated them from each other. Sansa wondered, if they touched sides, could she feel the vibrations of him speaking?

Forbidden curiosity overtook her. The same curiosity that drove her to smell the Hound’s cloak. Sansa made a show of shivering and clacking her teeth, and then huddled closer to him. She scooted until their sides brushed. Sandor Clegane did not move. If anything, he had frozen in place. Sansa peeked up at him, to see that his eyes were glued to the Bay. He was unaffected by her proximity.

A warm feeling suffused out from where their bodies touched. Sansa remembered how her skin had tingled after the Hound had held her hand, and how her skin always burned when he held her chin, and forced her to look him in the eye. It wasn't a true heat, but a hyperawareness of every inch, every
bit of skin that connected with his. The Hound had not needed to force her gaze in some time, and while Sansa did not miss his anger, she missed feeling the rough calluses of his hands. Those same calluses reminded her of his skill with the sword.

Those hands were now white fisted around his knees. Sansa could see veins running over his knuckles, and black hair that disappeared underneath his shirt sleeve. The Hound had been close before, but he had never been still enough to allow her to study him. She reached a hand out to trace the uneven skin of a pink scar. Sandor Clegane jumped.

“How did that happen?” Sansa asked, wanting to hear his voice again.

“How?,” Sandor’s hands tensed and relaxed underneath her fingertips. Sansa could almost feel the rumble of his voice, emanating from his chest.

“And this one?” Sansa traced a longer discoloration that led past his wrist.

“Another lovely token of my brother,” he growled, obviously displeased where the conversation had turned.

“And this?” Sansa’s hand hovered in the air over his right foot, where a diamond shaped scar distorted the skin near his ankle. The Hound had large feet. Sansa had avoided looking at them before, because she thought men’s feet were ugly. Looking at them now, Sansa realized she had been acting silly. They were just feet.

“A tourney in honor of Tommen’s birth,” Sandor brushed a hand over the scar. “I tilted once against Beric Dondarrion in a practice match and he lowered his lance at the last second. Bloody fool nearly dropped the damn thing. The wood shattered against my leg. I was armored and distracted, so I barely noticed. When I dismounted, I saw a piece of wood sticking out of my foot.”

Sansa gasped and stroked the scar gently. The skin on his foot was unexpectedly soft. Sandor shuffled uncomfortably, but looked pleased by her impressed reaction. “No worries, Little Bird. I limped for a week but I won all my tilts.”

“You’re so brave,” Sansa remarked.

“Brave?” he snorted and pushed her hand away. Gently, of course, he had been treating her with more gentleness in the past several weeks. “I’m not brave like your knights. I’m not brave like your brothers. I do what I’m told, Little Bird. A soldier isn’t brave because he follows orders, and a dog isn’t brave because it bites.”

“That’s not what I meant, Sandor,” Sansa tried to explain but the Hound turned away, angry and flustered by her close presence. “I meant to say… I admire your strength and your discipline.”

Sandor Clegane scoffed in disbelief and shook his head. Sansa laid a hand on his forearm and tugged at his sleeve. The non-knight looked like he wanted to speak, to say something, but he didn’t. The Hound opted instead to glare balefully at the water.

“Three times, you’ve saved me from certain death,” Sansa pushed forward. “I know you won’t accept my thanks, and you feel you do not deserve it, but I want to give it to you anyways.”

Sandor tensed and slowly turned to give her a guarded look. Sansa swallowed her fear and let go of the cloak around her. With one hand on his burnt cheek and the other on his shoulder she leaned in to kiss his cheek. Sansa’s lips grazed the stubble softly and she lingered for a moment, with eyes closed. She heard a sharp inhale, and then nothing.
Sansa backed away quickly, expecting Sandor to push her away. He didn’t, his arms were hanging limply at his sides and his eyes had closed for a moment.

“Thank you for saving my life,” Sansa repeated, waiting for some sort of reaction.

Sandor Clegane opened his eyes. At first, he looked apathetic, pretending to be neutral, but Sansa knew it could not be so. His grip on his knees tightened perceptably. Then his eyes darkened with an unidentifiable emotion, an emotion that made Sansa feel flushed. She was pinned to the ground with his intense stare. No one had ever looked at her so… so interested before. Sandor was looking at her like she was the only person in the world.

His eyes lingered on her face, then trailed her neck and around her bodice and hips. Sansa shifted and started to feel affronted. She fought within herself. Should she correct him, or let his gaze go where it will? It thrilled her that he was looking but frightened her as well. Sandor obviously wanted her to see his stare, but shouldn’t she be offended?

“I’ll be certain to save the Little Bird in the future,” Sandor drawled slowly, “if she promises to reward her hound with a similar boon.”

Sansa blushed from his comment and his gaze. Her hound. Must he say it like that? She looked down toward her hands, twiddling her thumbs as he had done earlier, but Sandor decided to catch her chin, and for the first time in a long time he forced her gaze upwards. Sansa’s breath caught in her throat, her heart was starting to pound again.

“I promise,” Sansa whispered, seeing no alternative. She had set the precedent, after all. Rejecting him would sour his mood and Sansa wanted to prove she was not afraid. “A kiss for every heroic rescue.”

Sandor’s mouth stretched into a wide grin. Sansa could not recall a time when he looked so animated. The fingers gripping her chin changed position, he held her face gently now, with more reverence. Sansa felt the rough skin of his sword hand, and his thumb brushed lightly over her cheek. The Hound leaned in closer, and closer. Sansa fought the urge to move backwards. I am not afraid of you, I am not afraid… until their noses were almost touching. Sansa could clearly see his infamous scar. Every crack and crevass was illuminated in the sun's dying light. Sansa's heart leapt to her throat.

“Then it seems to me, Little Bird,” Sandor deliberated, “you owe me two more such prizes.”

Sansa’s eyes widened. Their noses brushed once, twice. Sansa could smell the intoxicating scent of man on his skin.

Moments ago ,the Hound had looked playful, but his tone had taken on a much more serious tone. He was looking at her intently, measuring her reaction and waiting for her to recoil from his monstrous face. Sansa didn’t know what to do. She wanted to thank him, but she couldn’t... did he want...? What did she want?

Sandor hovered in front of her face, waiting. Sansa couldn’t… she just couldn’t kiss him like he wanted. How could he ask her too? His close proximity was grating on her nerves. The only man - no, boy - that she had ever kissed was Joffrey. Sansa remembered their passionless kisses, fueled by adolescent insecurity. She was certain that Sandor Clegane was asking much more of her than that. He wanted the kiss a woman gave to a man, the kiss Jonquil gave to Florian, and she couldn’t… Sansa just couldn’t...

Sansa had hesitated too long, Sandor’s face dropped.
“You don’t want to?”

Sandor Clegane leaned back against the stone of the Red Keep and sneered. The Hound had returned. Sansa released a shuddering breath he no doubt interpreted as relief. And why shouldn’t he? She was relieved he gave up his pursuit. Sansa’s hands smoothed over the front of her drying dress and she nervously picked at the cloak around her feet. Sansa looked down and away, her mouth felt dry.

When she finally looked up, the Hound turned away from her and the moment was over. Sansa’s heart leapt up to her throat. Her mind was in a jumble of thoughts. What happened?

“I--” Sansa started.

“Save your pretty words, Little Bird, for someone who wants to hear you chirp.”

Sansa’s mouth shut with a click and she flushed with embarrassment. Are we back to this banter already? The lady rocked back to sit on her heels, shocked and mortified. Sansa touched a hand to her lips. She had kissed his cheek, she only meant to… How could she be so foolish? How could he expect so much of her?

Did she act too familiar? Sansa was the one who reached out to touch him first. She trailed his scars, touched his hands and feet, moved against his side and… Sansa kissed his cheek because she grew too curious, too daring and too comfortable with a killer. Sansa gave him a taste and the Hound wanted more than she could give. Was it a test of her courage? Was the Hound challenging her to take it further? Did he do it to shake her, to shock her, or to torment her?

Obviously, Sansa couldn’t give him what he wanted and he grew angry with her refusal. Sansa fought against the tears welling behind her eyes. Why was it so difficult to be around him? Must he fluctuate between such extremes so often?

“We should get going,” the Hound stood. Sansa thought he might offer her his hand, but he did not, so she stood on her own and made for the ladder. Large hands pinched her waist and lifted her with barely any care. Sansa could have screamed in frustration, but only climbed the ladder silently. Where is the man who treats me with care?

The walk back to the keep was the most suspenseful and tense walk Sansa ever took with the Hound. It was so different from their last return, when they walked arm in arm, brushing against one another accidentally. Sansa’s mind was a flurry of activity, and she bounced between emotions. Anger, guilt, sadness, self righteousness, fear and back to anger. Sansa grew irritated with the sound of his very footsteps. I’ve lost the last ally I have left… Sansa thought. We weren’t even friends really.

Without so much as glancing in her direction, the Hound quickened the pace so she was forced to jog to keep up. Sansa could not believe his cold nature. When they reached the corridor that housed her rooms, Sansa paused at the door.

She was angry, she was confused, and she was hurt but she did not want to leave things so broken between them. Not when she had felt what it was like when… when Sansa and Sandor were together. It could be salvaged if he wasn’t so stubborn.

“That was not what you think,” Sansa whispered. She moved to grab his sleeve but he jerked his arm out of her reach.

“I’m not falling for your pretty pets any longer, Little Bird,” the Hound snarled and glared at her.
“No good comes from it.”

A cold, simmering rage was present in his words. Sansa was certain the entirety of the Red Keep could feel the anger of the Hound, radiating from his being. He looked truly fearsome.

“You think you know everything about me,” Sansa whispered with tears in her eyes. She felt betrayed. “You can’t begin to understand what I’ve gone through. What I am going through.”

The Hound’s countenance darkened. Sansa shrunk away from him as he moved to grab her. Her evasive actions only fueled his rage. The Hound closed his eyes, gritted his teeth and pushed her through her doorway. Sansa stumbled forward before a hand closer around her upper arm in a vice grip. Sansa spun in the air until her back was flat against the door, and she faced the Hound. His arms fell on both sides of her body, trapping her where she stood.

“I don’t understand? I don’t understand?” the Hound threw his head back and laughed a bitter, mad laugh. The sound echoed in her small room.

“I don’t understand how it feels to have your dreams crushed? How it feels to have your family taken from you by a raving mad man? How does that story sound familiar? Who warned you about those men? Who, woman? Holy and crowned are the knights and kings, but all of them are killers. Who warned you about those killers?”

He punctuated each question with a shake. Sansa was crying in earnest now. She’d lost control over her tears, and she knew she could not stop crying until he left.

“Don’t call me woman,” Sansa choked through her tears. “My name is Sansa.”

Laughter, the Hound was becoming more unhinged. Sansa knew her tears would do nothing to sway him. She had reached her breaking point. Sansa had to try something… anything to stop him from going further down this path.

“All of that? I said all of that, and all you have to say is,” he mimicked her serious voice, “don’t call me woman.”

“I know knight and kings are killers,” Sansa placed her hand on his burnt cheek.

The feel of her skin shocked him enough to stop his mocking laughter. When the laughter stopped, his eyes grew wide. He stared at her like a dog waiting for his master to strike him.

“Tis a good thing I’m not alone with a knight or a king…”

Sansa stepped closer, invading his personal space the way he had done to her so many times in the past. It was time she gained control over the Hound’s ferocious nature. A woman’s weapon, the Queen told her the other day, though Sansa had no intentions of manipulating her femininity in such a way. Sansa’s hand trailed down his cheek. She lingered for a moment around his neck before she rested both hands on his leather jerkin.

Sansa pressed both of her hands into his chest and reached up on her tip toes to place her lips on his cheek. Sandor Clegane froze, uncertainty plain in his eyes.

“I owe you two kisses,” Sansa reminded him.

Sansa kissed his unburnt side, and then his burnt flesh. The Hound relaxed ever so slightly at her administrations and breathed a heavy exhale. Finally, Sansa thought. His shoulders slumped, and his arms lowered. Sansa was no longer trapped against the door. Sandor Clegane was slowly returning.
“Sansa,” he whispered, like a prayer, and hung his head. In that one word, Sansa could hear a lifetime of pain and she felt overwhelmed with compassion for his plight. Sansa could count on one hand the number of times he called her by name. Sansa waited for the large man to say something, anything, but he looked too distraught to continue.

“I’m not a good man, Little Bird,” he rasped and pinched his nose painfully, “I am not worthy—”

“I believe I determine who receives my affection, and how much of it,” Sansa interrupted him, thrusting a finger at his chest. “It is time you accept what I give you…. without asking for more, and without asking for less.”

The man before her shuddered and raised a hand to grasp her wrist. His hand trailed lightly up her arm, like a faint tickle, before resting on her shoulder. Sandor raised his head from his chest, he looked up at her and she recognized the self loathing in his eyes.

“Did I hurt you, Little Bird?”

“No more than I hurt you.”

He nodded once, jerkily, taking in the tear streaks on her cheek. “I should leave you.”

Sansa nodded, and he moved around her to grasp the handle. Sandor paused at the door, caught between saying something and fleeing from her presence. Sansa almost spoke again before the door opened and he was gone, leaving her stunned. After he left, Sansa felt the weight of his absence heavily. When her handmaiden for that day came, Sansa dismissed her in favor of crying into her pillow.

What, in the name of the Seven, was going on between her and the Hound? Was he a man, or a monster?
Chapter Summary

Sansa and the Hound take a midnight stroll through the castle.

Months later...

Knock.

Sansa jumped in surprise, closing her book with a snap. She was expecting a knock sometime soon but it still took her off guard. Nursing a sore back and bruises from yesterday, she got up slowly.

Sansa quietly blew out the candle at her bedside table and dispensed the smoke with a quick wave of her hand. She grabbed the red robe Shae left hanging on the four poster bed. Shae had been gone for hours and Sansa was meant to be asleep. Sansa could only hope it was the man she expected, otherwise… She placed the book of knight’s tales under her pillow.

Knock.

Only one more knock. One more knock and she’d be certain of the visitor. It was too late for it to be anyone else, but Sansa still feared a cruel joke by Joffrey and his knights of the Kingsguard. Three slow knocks was the signal she waited for.

Moonlight drifted in through the window and illuminated her hand as it wavered over the door handle. There was no sound except for the crickets of the night.

Knock.

Sansa opened the door a crack and squinted into the darkness. One grey eye, surrounded by sagging flesh, stared back at her.

“Little Bird.”

Sansa quickly shut her chamber door and undid the numerous latches in place. Her hands shook with the now familiar nerves that always seemed to surface whenever Sandor Clegane was present. His presence alone seemed to crumble all the well planned defenses around Sansa's moods. Emotion bubbled to the surface, and threatened to spill over.

Sansa stepped back and allowed him to enter. His white Kingsguard cloak billowed behind him as he stalked past, kissing the shins of her legs gently.

She was anxious to see him. Tonight would be the first time they could speak privately since… her public beating.

What does the Hound think about Joffrey now? What does he think about me?

Sandor placed a hand gently on her shoulder, shaking Sansa out of her reverie. The heavy weight reminded her of recent events.
Of the time he prevented her from pushing Joffrey off the Red Keep’s battlements.

Sansa would not soon forget all of his small deeds. As sweet as Joffrey’s death might have been, it would have brought Sansa indescribable torture and pain. She would never have escaped the Queen’s wrath with three Kingsguard as witnesses, and Joffrey would become a martyr for the Lannister cause. Sandor Clegane had prevented her from making foolish, and now lethal mistakes. With each action he took, Sandor started to claim a larger and larger part of her life.

Though, she begged for more. Sansa wanted a man who could ride away from here.

Could he be that man? Or would the Hound reign over his mind forever?

Sansa smiled tremulously at him, and he offered her his characteristic half-smile after a moment’s hesitation. He always tried not to stretch the scarred half of his face, knowing it made him look grotesque. Sansa wished he wouldn’t, she wanted to tell him she didn’t mind his scars, not anymore, but she could never find the words. Half a smile was better than no smile at all.

Sandor’s hand left her shoulder, but not fast enough to prevent his fingertips from lingering on a small bit of exposed skin near her neck. Sansa shivered, as she always did when their skin touched.

The lingering gazes and prolonged touches began after the night on the dock, and had escalated with time. Every touch was growing in certainty, every gaze was gaining intensity. It all began when Sansa asked for the Hound’s true name. In the months that followed, Sansa’s relationship with Sandor changed into something new, something frightening and exciting. A relationship filled with of pregnant pauses and… tension in the air.

Sansa was certain she was living in a backwards fairy tale. The knight was supposed to be handsome, not monstrous. He was also meant to be a knight, not a dog. The lady was supposed to be beautiful, not a bruised and beaten traitor. Sansa was losing control over her own emotions. How could she be so infatuated with a half beast?

Sansa closed the door behind her, but not before searching the hall left and right for any unwanted visitors. It was empty, only a dimly lit torch flickered at the hall’s end. Seeing nothing, she relaxed slightly.

“No one would dare question me, Little Bird,” the large man rasped and held out a small object. It was a long, thin vial, like the ones Maester Luwin used to keep in his offices. Sansa went to grab it, careful not to brush her fingers over his palm. If she lingered for too long, the longing stare would return, and she would be lost to him.

“What is it?”

“To help with the bruising,”

Sansa sighed in relief, and quickly opened the vial to see. Inside was a milky white mixture Sansa knew she was to rub on her cuts and bruises. Sansa swept past him to hide the vial underneath her pillow, with her book. Shae could apply it tomorrow.

Shae the handmaiden was a foreign beauty who rarely asked questions. Shae had even tried to hide her moonblood from the Queen, but it had been a fruitless endeavor. They had been discovered by two other servants, attempting to cut the stain out of the mattress. The Hound later mocked her fruitless endeavor. Obviously, the Queen would know if she cut a hole in the mattress.

Sandor inhaled deeply when she passed, and Sansa hid a small smile. The not-so-fearsome Hound had a weakness for the smell of rose water, so she had taken to dabbing it on her neck and wrists.
Sansa didn’t recognize herself anymore. Did she want to endear him to her?

Yes. She would not dare say it aloud, but Sansa was starting to revel in the attention Sandor Clegane gave her. At court, his eyes would travel her frame up and down, sending a warm rush into her blood. And when she was summoned before Joffrey, Sandor had taken to holding her arm gently as they walked. His thumb would run over her knuckles and press into her palm, as he did that night at the dock. Lastly, Sandor would ghost his hand over her upper back before sending her to Joffrey’s side. It comforted her in ways she could not describe. Was she so starved for affection?

And his eyes. Before she would leave his side. His eyes would saying something he could not. During court, before escorting her to Joffrey. Would the Hound come running if she screamed? Would he burst in with his sword drawn, read to defend her?

The non-knight never touched when others lords or ladies were present, and he was always quick to pull himself away. Sandor never sought her eyes when he did so either, and Sansa wondered if he was afraid she would ask him to stop. Sometimes, Sansa was certain Sandor believed that she was unaware of his affection.

That was his folly though. Sansa was always paying attention. The presence of Joffrey’s dog sent a shiver from the tip of her head to her toes. Whenever they passed one another, he fixed her with a smoldering gaze that flipped her stomach. It was getting harder and harder to resist looking at him when the King held court. Some secret glances left Sansa’s in a nervous flutter for hours. Some secret touches left her skin burning.

Why the Hound? Sansa would question at night. Why Sandor Clegane? Why did her heart beat madly whenever he drew near?

Sandor Clegane was fixing her with another heated gaze right now in her room. His eyes took their familiar path over her face, down her neck, lingering on her breasts and hips before returning to her eyes again. Sansa could feel him looking, and though she wanted to acknowledge the intense stare, the words always stuck in her throat. Did he think she was blind to his attention?

“Thank you for the salve, it will help me sleep,” she said instead. Sandor hated when she thanked him, but it was difficult to resist when she was very grateful for this one thing. Joffrey would never allow her to see a Maester, and she needed some relief.

“No need-”

“-to thank you, I know.”

Sandor gave her a wiry grin. It was a true smile, so it twisted the flesh of his face. Sansa enjoyed seeing it immensely. She felt accomplished whenever she could make him smile.

“I had planned to take you to the dock tonight,” he offered, “but seeing how you are, and I can’t go anywhere without this buggering armor...”

Sansa nodded silently in understanding. Her head dropped in sadness. Their midnight visits to the dock were often the only reason she would wake in the morning. Sandor looked disappointed and a little concerned by her reaction. He took a few even breaths before stepping forward until he stopped in front of her. He grabbed her chin, gently, and lifted it. Sandor looked at her with soft grey eyes.

“Do you know what I would do, if things were different?” Sandor’s voice dropped to a low tone.

“I think I know,” she reached up to run her fingertips over his wrist. He closed his eyes and inhaled through his nostrils. Sansa thought he might have groaned if he had less inhibitions. Sansa was both
delighted and intrigued by the power she held over this man. With a few touches, Sansa could turn
the ferocious Hound into a lovesick dog. Two years ago, Sansa would never have believed it herself.

Seven hells, what would her mother think of this behavior? At that thought, Sansa dropped his hand.

A silence settled between them. Sandor left it unsaid. Perhaps he was afraid to voice it himself.

What would the Hound do to Joffrey? Would he have run him through? Any other man, and would the Hound have cut him in half?

When they first left for the Kingsroad, she had heard about the Hound’s reputation. A dangerous
man, Ned Stark had labeled him. In Winterfell, the soldiers spoke of the Hound’s prowess in battle,
and his uncontrollable temper. What would the Hound do to Joffrey? Sansa didn’t need to know…
would he do such terrible things for her sake? The thought made her a little queasy and undeniably
flattered.

“You need to lie better, Little Bird,” Sandor’s eyes fell to the bruise on her cheek, where Ser
Meryn’s gloved hand had struck.

“I will try,” Sansa vowed, then swallowed before confessing a small truth, “I cannot help if your
presence gives me courage.”

Sandor huffed. His hand fell from her cheek and he went to her small dining table, to pour himself a
glass of wine. Sansa turned away and placed a hand over her heart. A heavy silence permeated the
room, interrupted only by the sounds of Sandor’s glass hitting the table.

“Might we still leave the rooms?” Sansa asked.

“And go where?” Sandor took a heavy sip.

“Anywhere,” Sansa gestured around her, “anywhere but here. I am getting sick of the sight of this
room. The Godswood?”

Sandor nodded. It was all the confirmation Sansa needed. She grabbed a larger, bulkier traveling
cloak that would hide her figure, and Sansa met the Hound at her door.

“Would you be adverse to seeing the sights, Little Bird?” Sandor asked, before opening the door and
glancing left and right down the hall.

“What do you mean?” she whispered.

“I’ve an idea, something to entertain my lady.”

Sansa’s cheeks flushed. My lady. It sounded so foreign coming from his mouth. Surely, he was
jesting with her, as he liked to do every so often, when the mood struck him. The Hound had never
called her my lady before. Sansa rejoiced at her new titled, and decided, then and there, she would
have a hard time refusing him anything when he asked her in such a manner.

Taking her silence as approval, Sandor took her arm gently and wrapped it around his. Sansa
clutched at his wristguard and they took off down the labyrinthine passages of the Red Keep.

Sandor led her down the causeway and toward the outer yard. They passed the Iron Throne in a
deadly silence. Sansa let out the breath she had been holding after they cleared the grand throne
room. She feared Joffrey at all times of day and night, never knowing when he would strike. The
unusual pair stuck to the shadows despite Sansa’s large cloak. If they were recognized it would raise
too many questions. Sansa rarely had the opportunity to walk about, let alone at night and in the singular presence of the Hound.

Sandor gripped Sansa’s arm as they approached a large doorway, it was embedded into a tower of the Red Keep. A crude carving of dragons danced around the edges of the stone frame, inspired by Aegon’s conquest of the Seven Kingdoms. As Sansa passed beneath it, she glanced a particularly violent carving of Balerion the Black Dread roasting men alive. The men were kneeling in subservience, yet Aegon roasted them the same.

Sansa raised her second hand to Sandor’s arm. It was dark in these tunnels, and Sansa was not confident in the dark. They approached a stairwell. Sandor looked at her curiously when Sansa edged closer to his body. In the flickering light of the torches, Sansa could see his unguarded concern.

She squeezed his arm in reassurance and they proceeded down the stairs. At one point it became too narrow for them to walk side by side. Sandor grabbed a torch off the walls, and opted to go first. He reached a hand out to her, to guide her, and Sansa gladly grabbed it.

Sansa could have easily dropped the hand. There was no need for his guidance. Yet… he had left his armored gloves in her room, and the feel of his skin was warm and comforting. It invited her to hold on. Sansa held Sandor’s hand as they descended, casually running her thumb over his knuckles, as he had done to her several times. There were moments when he faltered in his steps, and Sansa was certain he would say something, tell her to stop… but he didn’t, and they continued to climb lower.

The stairs ended eventually, and they traveled a long dark hall. Sansa had no idea where they where, she only knew they were deep beneath the Red Keep, close to the dungeons perhaps. They would descend another set of stairs, and then another.

The way got shorter and steeper. It was so steep, Sandor had to stoop to avoid brushing his head against the ceiling. Sansa was suddenly glad for her thin frame. She imagined the Hound felt very contained in small passages like this one. She wondered, not for the first time, where he was taking her?

Suddenly, the stairs ended and the path opened. The ceiling opened above her and Sansa breathed a sigh of relief, she really did not like confined spaces.

“Where-?” Sansa was cut off when she caught sight of a large object to her left. She turned and almost screamed.

Large, empty sockets stared back at her. It had long, black teeth the size of small children. Curled horns jutted out of a skull that Sansa could only have imagined in her darkest nightmares. The flickering light from Sandor’s torch cast shadows dancing on the stone walls around them. Sansa gasped and her eyes widened, taking in the sight before her. It was magnificent and terrifying.

“Skulls of the Targaryen dragons,” Sandor whispered to her, his head bent down so it was close to her ear. “Polished and preserved, and kept in the hall of the Iron Throne until the death of the Mad King Aerys. Robert had them removed within a week of his coronation. The King wanted them destroyed but the pyromancers convinced him otherwise, or maybe he couldn’t be bothered with it. Devilishly hard to break down. Somehow they were magicked down here, and here… they will rot with time.”

The bones glowed ominously. Sansa sighed in wonder and reached a hand out to touch the dark surface of a nostril. For some reason, she expected it to be hot, but it was cool to the touch. Sansa wrapped a shaking hand around the tip of the closest horn. It sharpened to an edge that could have
pierced Sansa’s skin if she pressed any harder.

“Pleased, Little Bird?” Sandor tugged her hand, to gain her attention. Sansa looked back and at their clasped hands. Neither had broken the physical bridge between them and Sansa was loath to be the one to sever the connection. Sandor was gazing at her expectantly.

“Yes!” Sansa smiled exuberantly. “I am very pleased. I’ve never seen anything like this before… I can’t imagine, I can’t imagine the living beast.”

“You won’t have to,” Sandor tugged her arm again, bringing her closer and away from the dragon, “those foul beasts have been gone from the world for a hundred years.”

Sansa flushed and nodded. He pulled her closer, even though there was no need. Months ago, Sansa would not have been endeared by such a physical action. She would have been offended and frightened. It took her a long time to understand that the Hound spoke mostly with his actions, and not his words. Sandor moved the torch away from them and gestured down the hall.

“There are nineteen skulls in the dungeons,” Sandor’s voice rumbled in his chest, it sent a shiver down Sansa’s spine, “further that way, if you want to see.”

Sansa nodded, and Sandor looked a little disappointed. Was she supposed to say no? They walked slowly, casually and silently. It was quiet in the dungeons. The only sound was a faint drip. Hands still entwined, Sansa could not resist brushing against his side as they walked past each magnificent skull.

“Balerion, you saw. Meraxes… Vhagar… Vermithrax… Ghiscar…” the list went on and on. Sansa gazed in wonderment. Arya would love to walk this hall.

“Why are the bones black and not white?” Sansa touched the last skull, the size of a small dog’s head.

“I do not know,” Sandor furrowed his brow, “but here is what I do know. Dragon bone is fireproof. Dragon bone swords are invaluable, and highly priced. Light and sharp, cutting through the best of man made steel. Arrows of dragon bone fly straighter and truer, and cut better. It is a valuable material…”

“I wonder what will be done with them now that they are stored here, it seems such an awful waste to let it rot…”

“Better than seeing the damned beasts every day in the throne room,” Sandor huffed. “It was right to put them away.”

“As exotic and interesting as they are, I must agree,” Sansa’s hand left the smooth jawbone of the small skull. “It would make the Iron Throne even more unpleasant. If that is possible.”

Sandor snorted in amusement and smirked down at her.

“Little Bird,” his voice rumbled with humor, “what an opinionated chirp you have. Chirp for me again. Hmm?”

Sansa blushed and nudged his side. Sandor had a strange sense of humor once Sansa could look past his rough tongue, and his strange euphemisms.

“I’ve thought of a good chirp,” the Hound cleared his throat, “one I should like to hear from the Little Bird, if she feels herself so inclined.”
“What chirp would that be?” Sansa caught onto the game.

While they talked, the two circled back around the passage again. The skulls watched mutely as Sansa and Sandor played “the walking game”. A sport of gentle brushes and clasped hands.

In this instance, Sandor’s burn was closest to her. Sansa looked up every once and a while, focusing on his eyes as best she could. It made the task easier. Many months had passed, but it could sometimes be difficult to meet his gaze.

“Fuck Joffrey.”

Sansa gasped and shook her head. The words echoed in the hall and the Hound looked rudely happy. “A lady never speaks such vulgarities.”

“A lady does not hold company with dogs.”

“What a good thing I am not with a dog,” Sansa rebutted and gripped his arm. A few fingers slipped beneath his wrist greave and she rubbed the arm there. It silenced the Hound’s response.

Tension built between the two. They reached the smallest skull once again, and Sandor turned her about the second time. He looked unhappy, but Sansa couldn’t exactly pinpoint the reason for this sudden change. At night, Sandor was prone to falling into sullen silences. Dark and moody, the Hound preferred to drink and watch the stars than engage in conversation. Sansa sighed. In the darkness, she rolled her eyes, he would not see.

“Is the entertainment over?” Sandor rumbled, still in a quiet temper.

“Oh, have it your way, Sandor. But if I start cussing in court, I will know exactly who to blame.” Sansa pulled him toward the stairway.

“Well?” the light in his eyes returned.

Sansa swallowed and licked her lips. “Fuck Joffrey... there I said it.”

Sandor threw his head back, his rasping laughter echoed in the dungeons. Sansa blushed and started to laugh lightly. It was exhilarating to curse Joffrey, even if the King could not hear it, and Sansa felt some of the heaviness on her heart dissipate. Sandor could make her smile even in the darkest places.

Suddenly, a hand gripped her waist and pulled her close. Sansa gasped in surprise and found herself pressed firmly against a metal chest. The Kingsguard armor was less than comfortable, and it still shook as Sandor’s laughter died down. The cold metal contrasted sharply with the warmth of Sandor's large hand on her waist. He looked down at her and grinned, his burned flesh twitched. With only one arm, he held her trapped against him. Sansa was beginning to think he liked the power he had over her small frame.

“Is the Little Bird scared? Alone in the dark with the Hound?” his whispered words held a note of desperation.

“No,” Sansa wiggled in his arms until her hands were free. She cupped both sides of his face. Sandor stiffened, and then sighed, closing his eyes. Sansa watched in wonderment as he leaned into her palm, his nose brushed her wrist. It sent a tingle down her arm. “You won’t hurt me.”

Sandor’s gloved hand, which had been digging into her waist, relaxed and his thumb stroked the curve of her hip. Sansa felt herself growing warmer and a thrum was growing in her stomach. She shivered and turned her head to rest a cheek against his armor. It was as cold as the dungeon air, but
somewhere beyond the engraved steel, Sandor’s heart was beating wildly.

“I won’t hurt you, Little Bird,” Sandor’s hand left her hip and placed itself on her lower back, eliciting a yelp from Sansa. Sandor jumped and looked down at her wildly, the apology on the tip of his tongue.

“Gods be damned,” Sandor breathed, “I make one oath in my life, and I break it within seconds. I am sorry, Little Bird, I forgot about your…”

“It’s alright,” Sansa forced a smile, but it came out as a grimace, “perhaps we should return, I feel a little ill.”

It was true, the gentle touch turned her back to fire. Sansa wobbled to the stairway, leaning on Sandor heavily. Turning to her companion, Sandor’s brow was furrowed and he looked ill at ease with himself.

The two ascended the stairs, careful of Sansa’s back. Sandor’s grip on the torch had turned his knuckles white, his shoulders tense with anxiety.

Walking the long hallway to the last flight of stairs, Sansa and Sandor passed a fat gaoler. The gaoler bowed in respect and moonlight reflected off of his bald head. He paused only to glance at the fearsome Hound. Sansa thought the pudgy man looked familiar, but could not figure where she has seen him before, if at all. Before Sansa could ponder it any further, the gaoler swept away. His feet made no sound upon the Earth, and it spooked her.

Sansa and Sandor made the rest of the journey in the shadows. Sandor abandoned the torch in the courtyard, snuffed the flame in the water of the fountains, and tossed the wood in a bush. They reached the passageway to her chambers and the wide hall was empty. The night had not yet ended, it was hours until dawn, and Sansa was anticipating the heavenly feel of her blankets and pillows. Her legs and back ached from the exertion of the evening, but she was very happy to have left her rooms.

Sandor opened the door for her. He looked left and right before he ducked underneath the doorway. Inside the room, the Hound watched mutely as Sansa tossed her large, swarthy cloak aside and kicked off her slippers. They had dust and dirt on them, so she flung them underneath the bed. Sandor threw back the coverlet in a rare show of gentlemanly manners, and lent Sansa a hand as she slowly eased herself onto the feather mattress.

“Until next time,” Sandor averted his gaze and bowed jerkily.

“Sandor,” Sansa stopped him with a tug on his cloak. Sandor looked down at her feminine hand, rigid as stone. She pulled steadily at his cloak until he conceded to kneel. Sansa cupped his burnt cheek, “it meant nothing. The Seven were merely reminding me of my condition, and that I must rest.”

After she spoke, Sandor shook his head in denial. He did not believe her. A mood had taken him. Sandor looked down at her bed, refusing to meet her gaze. Black hair fell around his face, obscuring her view.

“It is an ill omen,” Sandor rumbled. “Your Gods were telling you something else, something entirely different.”

“You don’t believe in the Gods,” Sansa reminded him. She pushed his black hair aside and stroked the scruff of his evening beard. It was rough and scratchy. Sansa had never indulged in this fantasy
before, and it thrilled her. It was an intimate act, that Sansa had always dreamt of doing one day. Sandor remained stony still, and allowed her to explore his unburnt face. Sansa could not say if it comforted him or not, because the Hound remained closed to her.

"Since when do you abide by their will?"

"The Gods abandoned me long ago, but they’ll put up a fight to keep your soul, Little Bird, believe that."

Sandor finally raised his head, an expression of sadness painted on his face. Sansa pushed a few more stray tendrils of black hair away from his eyes.

“IT meant nothing,” she reiterated. “You won’t hurt me.”

Sandor had had enough. He shook his head heavily, his patience run out. Her non-knight pushed her hand away and stood. His cape billowed as he stalked toward the door. Sansa’s hand was left handing over the bedside.

“Not on purpose,” Sandor grumbled, and the door shut with a click.
Sansa leaves the Red Keep with the royal procession to bid farewell to Princess Myrcella. Returning to the Red Keep, Joffrey incites an angry mob. Sansa is almost dragged away by rioters but the Hound comes to her aid.

Some days, it was difficult to rise in the morning. Some days were worse than others. Today was a bad day.

Sansa stared at the red canopy of her bed, counting the wrinkles in the fabric. Blue eyes fluttered open and closed. She wondered if she was alive, or only dreaming. When she was awake, her neck hurt where the flat of Ser Boros’ blade struck true and stinging pain rippled across her back whenever she shifted. When she was dreaming, she was floating on a painless cloud. At half past eight, Sansa stared balefully at the clock, wondering what to do. Movement proved to be painful and there was no reason to rise today. Succumbing to hopelessness, Sansa’s right arm curled around her pillow and she closed her eyes. *Let the darkness take me today...*

“Up!” Shae barked. The door closed with a snap and Sansa groaned.

“Up, up, the sun has risen and so must you. Enough moping and moaning.”

Shae came to her side and shook her arm delicately. With her assistance, Sansa sat up. The movement created a series of sharp stings between the blades of her shoulders. Sansa winced.

“There’s no reason to wake today,” Sansa muttered drowsily, sitting at the edge of her bed. “The King is not holding court.”

“It is still a day,” Shae protested, quickly braiding Sansa’s hair and throwing it over her shoulder, “and we must wake for the day.”

Shae said these things so matter of fact, Sansa did not have the heart to disagree. How could Shae understand? She was a free woman. Beautiful and vibrant. Shae chose when to wake in the morning, and what to wear. Sansa’s life was confined to this tiny room, and she feared the world outside of her chambers. Sansa's was told when to wake, what to eat, her dresses were by the Queen, and nothing Sansa said would make any difference in the matter. Sansa's world was a gilded cage, and beyond the cage... A world of bruises and beatings and cruel games.

Shae picked at the fabric of her shift and Sansa tensed.
“That hurts,” Sansa warned.

“It will, the skin broke during the night, we must get this off you.”

“The skin broke?” Sansa felt tears coming on. That did not sound good. “What does that mean? Will it leave a scar?”

Shae did not answer and Sansa felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. The thought made her feel physically ill. *I will carry signs of Joffrey’s cruelty now, wherever I go.* Unbidden, an image of the Hound’s scarred face appeared. Thinking of the Hound reminded her of the medicine he had brought her the night before.

“There is a salve,” Sansa pointed a shaky finger toward the one undisturbed pillow on her bed, “underneath.”

Shae grabbed the vial, uncorked it, and smelled the contents.

“How did you get this?”

Sansa remained silent. Shae smacked her arm lightly but still, Sansa did not speak.

“Fine, keep your secrets, you will tell me eventually.”

Shae was, by far, the most outspoken and disobedient handmaiden Sansa ever met. It was a wonder she was allowed to work within the Red Keep.

As Shae rubbed the salve onto her back, the pain came in waves. Sensations of numbness alternated with unbearable stinging. It was torture. Sansa gritted her teeth and hunched her shoulders to endure the agony. Shae continued to apply the salve despite Sansa’s occasional whimpers.

Shae used all the contents of the flask. “Tell your manufacturer to make more, we will need it.”

*We?* Sansa almost scoffed. Shae was either very bold, or very foolish. Sansa washed in her small basin, careful to avoid her back, and was helped into her gown. Thankfully, Shae chose a summer gown, wide and loose in fabric, with only a few laces. Sansa winced when the ties were made. At least the fabric covered any signs of injury.

“You are growing thin, my lady,” Shae commented delicately, sensing her charge was in a taciturn mood. “Is that your desire?”

Sansa scrutinized her image in the mirror. No, no it wasn’t. Sansa was a petite lady already, she didn’t need to look any smaller. Taking a closer look, she could not believe Shae had not said more. Purple swollen bags hung underneath Sansa’s eyes. Eyes which showed signs of being bloodshot. Sansa touched her cheeks gently, they had become hollow. Signs of weariness a young maiden should not carry.

Sansa had grown in the last year. Not very much, but a few inches in height. It would be the last growth spurt of her life. Already a tall maiden, Sansa despairs over her weight. Ladies should have curves to mark their womanhood. Sansa was a thin stick compared to the voluptuous maidens of the South.

Sansa reached down to feel her hips. Bones jutted out harshly where she touched, and her right hip felt tender from falling on it. Sansa raised her hands to below her breasts and ran her fingers along her rib cage.
One, two, three, four ribs she could count. Too many.

“My lady?”

“Bring more food, though I do not know if I shall eat it.”

The food she ate was tainted by the hunger of the people King’s Landing. With every bite, Sansa saw a child starving. Every sweet given to her, reminded her of the Queen’s sugar coated words. Bread turned to ash in her mouth. Food held very little appeal to her, and eating in Joffrey’s presence made her vomit afterwards. Surprisingly, Sansa was beginning to appreciate the taste of wine. It was the only nourishment she could stomach.

Sandor let her drink from his skin once or twice. Alone, on an abandoned parapet, Sansa remembered passing the flask back and forth in silence. Brushing fingertips every once and a while. Sansa had only been able to take slow sips because the alcohol burned her throat and nose. Sandor found it funny when she gagged on the sour liquid, to Sansa’s embarrassment.

It wasn’t the taste of wine that she liked. Sansa craved the numb feeling in her toes and fingers. The drink made her courageous, and she’d laugh at all of Sandor’s crude jokes, even the ones about wenches. Wine even brought back her hunger. Sandor could not stop grinning at she devoured chocolate sweet after chocolate sweet between hiccups that shook her body. The Hound put her to bed that evening, after her third glass, despite Sansa’s protests that she was fine. Sansa remembered a rough hand smoothing down her red hair before he departed with a gruff goodnight. If Sansa had not blacked out from the drink, she might have asked him to stay. She might have asked him to stand guard and protect her while she slept. She might have told him how safe he made her feel.

Sansa sighed, shook her head to dispel her swirling thoughts, and moved to tear a curtain from the window. Shae yelped as Sansa brought it down, along with the golden rings that anchored it to the window pane. Sansa quickly flung it over the mirror.

“There, much better,” Sansa stated.

The morning was dull. Sansa continued to sew a handkerchief for Sandor, since she had lost his old one during one of their swimming lessons. It fell out of his sleeve and into the current. Sansa settled on a border pattern of hounds running with birds overheard. It would make him smile to see it, she was certain. Or at least, his eyes would take on that reverent quality that took her breath away. A look that kept her awake at night.

Shae, for her part, entertained herself by reading A Pyromancer’s Guide to Brewing Firebreath. Except... Shae was turning the pages backwards instead of forwards, a mistake Sansa instantly noticed. In Lorath, books were written from right to left, not left to right. The handmaiden had obviously not been in Westeros very long, and was still adjusting to it’s culture and costumes.

As she sewed, Sansa watched Shae, trying to figure out her true motives for being here. Shae turned each page with a delicate, polished finger. She looked poised and calm. It was obvious the Lorathi woman was not a spy for the Queen. But if not, who was she working for? Certainly not Sansa. Why was she here?

“Why are you looking at me?”

Sansa was almost surprised to be caught, Shae had not looked up once. The woman had a true sixth sense.

“You were reading that book backwards.”
Shae’s hands went limp and the book flopped in her hands. The handmaiden looked comically frustrated. Sansa reached over, and pushed the pages until the first chapter came into view.

“Thank you, I will remember that the next time I read a book,” Shae’s eyes fell to the ink and her brow furrowed in anger. “No one told me.”

“Do you not know how to read?” Sansa asked.

She’s nostrils flared with indignance. “No,” she said sharply.

Of course she doesn’t know how to read Westerosi. Do you know how to read in Lorath? Gods no. It would have taken years for Shae to master the spoken language of Westeros alone. Placing herself in Shae's shoes, Sansa couldn’t imagine traveling to a foreign country, and not being able to read a sign, a letter, a map. Sansa sighed and placed down her sewing needles.

“Well, I’m tired of pretending to be interested in sewing,” Sansa stood and found her small writing desk across the room. Returning to Shae, she dipped a quill in the ink and tore a blank page from the back of Shae’s book.

“Here, let’s start with letters and numbers,” Sansa placed the desk between the two of them. Shae leaned over curiously, watching her hand move.

Sansa sketched the alphabet as clearly as she possibly could. “There are twenty letters in the Westerosi alphabet. Some of them are vowels... Ah, Eh, Ay, Ee, Oh, Uh, Oo, Yoo… the sounds you make from your throat and mouth. Other are consonants, sounds you make with your lips, tongue, and teeth… for example Bay, See, May, Tay, Day, Chay, Kay, Kway…”

Sansa sat with Shae until midday. The lesson brought back many memories of Winterfell. Snowy afternoons where she would sit with Maester Luwin and later recite her lessons with Mother. Catelyn would comb Sansa’s hair and Sansa would repeat her letters and numbers, and then together, they would sing a hymn for the Mother and Father, to watch over them while they slept. It was a ritual that Sansa greatly enjoyed and deeply missed. Such simple tasks, for a simpler time.

“Numbers, of course, you might already know some of these, Oni, Dov, Tee, Foi, Fiv…”

One or two hours passed before they were interrupted by a knock. Instantly, Sansa’s hands stilled. Fear turned her veins to ice. Who could be knocking? Why are they here?

Shae met Sansa’s wide eyes and gave her a comforting pat on the knee. The handmaiden took the writing desk from Sansa and they stood together. Sansa smoothed her skirts and threw her braid behind her head. Her heart beat erratically. How long could she endure this daily torture before breaking? A single knock could mean a thousand things, a few of those things were pleasant. Joffrey, Stannis, the Kingsguard, the war, death...

The King does not have court today, Sansa repeated to herself. The King does not have court.

“Who knocks on my lady’s door?” Shae called. Sansa was suddenly very glad for her Lorathi handmaiden’s presence. Shae was fierce and strong. Shae would get the Hound or Lord Tyrion if...

“Ser Arys Oakheart of the Kingsguard.”

Sansa almost sighed in relief. Arys Oakheart was not half so cruel as the other knights, and his eyes always shone with regret when he was forced to manhandle her. Ser Arys was ordered to strike her only once. His blows were so weak, with no force behind them, that Joffrey soon became displeased and ordered Ser Arys away. The knight looked relieved to be sent from the room and had constantly
looked apologetic in her presence ever since. After that day, Ser Arys became Princess Myrcella's shadow, and could rarely be dissuaded to leave the little Princess' side. Perhaps he preferred Mycella's game of dolls, over Joffrey's game of thrones.

Sansa nodded and Shae opened the door. Ser Arys stood alone.

"Princess Myrcella has requested your presence, Lady Sansa," Ser Arys said pleasantly.

Many ladies of the court found Ser Arys to be devilishly handsome, but Sansa was not easily impressed. Although he was kind, Sansa was not attracted to Arys' light brown hair and comely face. Besides, Ser Arys' voice was a light and lilting, like a heavy honey. Not like the Hound's voice, which could be rocky and deep, or light and rasping when he whispered, which remindedSansa of the sound of metal on metal. Arys was short while Sandor was tall. Arys was thin and lithe, where the Hound was broad and muscular. All in all, Ser Arys simply fell short in comparison.

"...in her chambers, as she prepares to depart. I have been sent to escort you."

Sansa nodded with a smile. Another choice had been taken from her. If Sansa had been anywhere else, she might have shut the door on Ser Arys Oakheart's comely face and fell back into bed, but here in the Red Keep, it was her duty to obey. Sansa hurriedly put on her slippers. She did not know why Myrcella was leaving, or where the Princess was going, and Sansa supposed she wasn't supposed to know.

"Lead on, Ser Aerys," Sansa took his proffered arm.

The halls of the Red Keep were deathly quiet. The bright Southern sun shone in the sky, but it brought no happiness and joy. Beyond the protected walls of the Keep, as everyone knew, the people starved. Renly's blockade was swift and effective. Within weeks, the city had turned form a thriving metropolis to a dead man's market. At night, Sansa would look down onto the harbor, and Flea Bottom's dim lights, taking comfort in the fact that Sansa Stark was not the only soul suffering.

The air was humid again today, making the corridors stuffy and oppressive. As always, Sansa silently dreaded each turn of the corner. She lived with the constant fear of crossing paths Joffrey, or a member of the Kingsguard, who might strike her for fun. The only knight who made her feel safe, was busy guarding the King.

Fortunately for Sansa, they only encountered the Master of Whispers. Lord Varys inclined his head toward Sansa and then slunk down a stairwell soundlessly. It unnerved Sansa how he could walk without so much as rustling his robes. An eerie skill.

"Where might Princess Myrcella be traveling, during these times, Ser?" Sansa dared to ask.

"To Braavos, and then to Dorne, the Kingdom of the Sun, with me as her escort," Ser Arys sounded pleased with his new assignment. "Lord Tyrion, the Hand of the King, has arranged for her marriage to Trystane Martell, Prince Doran's youngest son."

The news came as a shock to Sansa. Myrcella was so young! Sansa did not envy her. Married off at such a ripe age, Myrcella would be leaving the only home and family she had ever known, in the middle of a war. At least Sansa had had her father and sister when she left for King's Landing. In Dorne, Myrcella would have no one but Ser Arys. A knight sworn to Joffrey. Myrcella would be far away from her mother, brothers, and the rest of the Lannisters. Would she ever see them again? In how many years?

Myrcella was a sweet girl. The Princess was kind, polished in manners, and dutiful. Most
importantly, Myrcella was not the least bit afraid of Joffrey, and Joffrey left his sister alone, for the most part. Sansa spent time with Myrcella whenever the Queen allowed it. In Myrcella’s presence, Sansa felt safe from Joffrey’s hate.

Sansa’s heart beat faster as they climbed the stairs closer to Myrcella’s small tower, the Tower of the Tiny Princess, they called it fondly. A despair was building in Sansa’s throat. If they were sending away Myrcella… was it safe in King’s Landing? Was there news about Stannis? Did Lord Tyrion know about an upcoming attack on the Red Keep? Sansa would not be safe if the city fell under siege. The other ladies might be spared from death and destruction, but Joffrey and the Queen cared nothing for Sansa's wellbeing. Myrcella’s departure meant there was doubt. Enough doubt to send away Cersei’s beloved daughter to ensure an alliance with House Martell.

“Sansa!” Myrcella’s small arms suddenly wrapped around her waist when she reached the top of a spiral staircase. The Princess’ curls bounced merrily. Wide green eyes peered up from behind golden locks. The same color eyes as the Queen, but lacking all hatred.

“Princess!” Sansa cried, stooping down to receive the hug. Ser Arys stepped backwards and resumed his position outside the Princess’ doorway. Sansa was pulled inside. It was a disaster. Clothing, scrolls, boots, a harp, a flute, hats, gloves, quills, books, and other odds and ends were strewn about the bed. Several crates and cases lay open with dresses and other belongings tumbling out of them.

“I suppose Ser Arys has already told you,” Myrcella sighed softly. It sounded so unnatural coming from the Princess, a young girl who was usually so lively and happy.

“I’d rather hear it from you,” Sansa said softly.

“Mother and Uncle Tyrion have decided that I should marry Trystane from Dorne. We’ve only met once and I don’t really recall what he is like, but mother tells me he is a nice boy and I am a nice girl, so I suppose it will have to do. Dorne is very different, so I don’t know what I shall pack! Oh, Lady Sansa,” Myrcella gasped, “do not cry!”

“Am I crying?” Sansa reached up to touch her cheek. it was wet. When had she started to cry?

“I may be leaving, but we shall always be good friends. I will write to you, and when you are Queen, you can come and stay in Dorne!” Myrcella leaned close and whispered conspiratorially to her. “Especially when Joffrey is behaving like a booger.”

“Oh,” Sansa could not resist pulling the little Princess into a hug, “oh, that would be delightful.”

“You are still crying, Lady Sansa,” Myrcella pointed out from between her breasts. “I would not like you to cry when I leave, you must remain strong in the face of hardship.”

“What hardship?” Sansa cracked a smile, “I only feared for your safety on such a long journey. There is nothing to fear in King’s Landing while I am with my beloved Joffrey. The King will strike down the pretender Stannis and my brother the Usurper. All is well, my Princess.”

Myrcella patted her arm and nodded her head. “As you say, Lady Sansa. Still, I expect you to accompany me tomorrow, down to the port. My ship departs in the early morn. Mother, Joff, Uncle and Tommen will be there to see me off and I would so enjoy seeing your beautiful red hair, streaming in the sunlight before I set sail. Is it not a stunning sight, Ser Arys?”

“Tis, Princess,” Ser Arys called from the door.

“And no tears,” Myrcella ordered.
“No tears,” Sansa nodded, though she would not be certain if she could keep this promise.

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The next day came too soon for Sansa. She spent all yesterday evening assisting Princess Myrcella, and Sansa was exhausted and sore by the time she retired. At least Joffrey had not called upon her. Sansa rolled out of bed, wincing as the aching muscles and swollen welts on her back made contact with the covers. Sansa was dismayed to discover no cream was left in the vial Sandor had given her, but she was not long for waiting.

Knock.

Sansa closed her eyes in resignation. Another member of the Kingsguard come to escort her. Probably Ser Boros.

Knock.

Pause. Sansa inhaled sharply, listening to the clock tick by the seconds. She held a hand up to Shae. Sansa was on her feet, hoping beyond hope for another knock.

Knock.

Sansa reached the door before Shae and undid the locks quickly. Shae grabbed Sansa in protest, but Sansa pushed her way. Sansa flung open the door, the light from the early morning sun glanced off of his armor and into her eyes, making her blink. Sandor held out a vial to her.

Sansa smiled and took it gratefully.

“I've come to escort you to the departure party for Princess Myrcella,” Sandor informed her, as if she had not known. Sansa nodded and ushered him inside. The Hound was not dressed in the Kingsguard armor, instead opting for more practical attire, for which Sansa was grateful. The last several day's events made Sansa weary of white cloaked knights, and golden breastplates.

Shae looked unhappy with the sudden invasion. The Hound fixed her handmaiden with a sneer and sat down at the round table near the window. He helped himself to a glass of wine while Shae and Sansa ducked behind the changing screen.

“The Hound gave you this concoction?” Shae hissed in alarm, lifting Sansa’s night shift over her head and turning her around.

“Yes,” Sansa jumped as the salve came in contact with her burning back. It was cool and soothing, instantly quenching the fire in her neck and shoulders.

“That was dangerous,” Shae whispered against her ear, helping her into a peach colored dress. Peach was Myrcella's favorite color. It was also loose enough to not disturb her wounds. “The King’s Hound is dangerous. It is well known, how could you not know? The Prince could have sent him to root out some treachery from you, to hurt you. How could you know he would not cause you pain?”

Shae loosely laced the dress around Sansa's shoulders and turned the young maiden to face her. Shae's expression was kind, but condescending, igniting a spark of anger in Sansa's chest. Tired of being manhandled, and tired of hearing about "the Hound", Sansa slapped her hands away.

“He isn’t Joffrey’s Hound,” Sansa hissed, “he has a name.”

At that, Sansa exited the screen, leaving Shae to follow. The Hound stood and looked her up and
“Practical boots,” he ordered. “It’s muddy, and the peasants are in a right state. Don’t expect flowers, Little Bird. The gates have been closed for weeks and the common folk are starved.”

Sansa paused in lacing up her boots, Sandor was gazing out the window toward the dock with trepidation. The mass of scarred flesh on his face twitched agitatedly. Sansa rarely saw him look worried. Shae busied herself by airing Sansa’s sheets, pretending not to listen to their conversation.

“Is it safe?” Sansa asked, tying her second boot tightly.

“It won’t get any safer,” Sandor muttered under his breath.

The Hound extended two hands toward her, Sansa grasped them and he helped her up. Their hands remained clasped for far too long, attracting a glare from Shae. After his cryptic words, Sansa looked at him for reassurance. Grey eyes looked meaningfully into hers. A calloused thumb brushed over her knuckles and Sansa almost swooned like a fool. It had been so long since they had touched, or spoken in private. The last time had been the night of the Targaryen dragon skulls, and Sansa had longed to speak with him after that. But there was never time. Never a spare moment, and the Hound had not been assigned as her guard since then. Sansa was overcome with the desire to embrace him, but resisted. Sandor would push her away, and Shae was still in the room.

“Stay close to me,” he said under his breath.

“Yes,” Sansa agreed, “you do the same.”

Sandor and Sansa arrived last at the stables, the other lords and ladies were presently waiting for their horses to be saddled. Sandor introduced Sansa to her new horse. Sansa’s previous mare, a brown sweetheart, had been taken by one of her father’s soldiers when Lord Eddard ordered the Stark and Baratheon forces to capture the Mountain and bring him to justice. The party never returned after her father's death, and Sansa thought her old friend was lost forever. Sansa stroked the tan fur of her new mare, inspecting her for any injuries. Sansa would not put it past Joffrey to gift her a lame beast, so the mare might topple with it's rider, and Sansa might break a leg... or worse.

“Already inspected,” Sandor murmured from behind her, before opening the stall gate.

Sansa led her mare to be saddled, all the while whispering sweet things in her ear. It would be a stressful day, and she needed a calm mount, not a flighty beast. A wiry stablehand saddled her quickly, forcing Sansa to fear he had not secured the girth. She secretly checked the gear, wondering at her sudden paranoia.

Strong hands lifted her into the saddle, Sansa yelped in surprise. A few ladies turned to look at her in pity.

“I will check, Little Bird,” Sandor said as he inspected her saddle and bridle. Handing her the reins, he gave her a silent nod. Sansa breathed a sigh of relief and took the reins with shaky hands. Sandor paused, and looking around, squeezed her hand tightly.

“Stay close to me,” he rumbled. “I can smell trouble brewing.”

Sansa brushed her fingers over his knuckles quickly, whilst no one was looking. Sandor returned to his own steed, a large black warhorse with a fiery temper, much like it’s master. Sansa was led on horseback into the courtyard.

Joffrey was already mounted, and entertaining a few young lords of the court. Joffrey’s boasting reached her from across the yard. The King told a glorious tale of how he cut the tongue off a crude bard, and fed the tongue in a soup to the bard's widowed wife. A few lads dared to laugh at the
Joffrey’s wittiness. The others looked uncomfortable. One or two shared gleefully sinister looks. These ones Joffrey favored. Sansa prayed he would not notice her.

“Sansa!” Joffrey screeched, “Sansa!”

*No such luck,* Sansa sighed and gestured to the stable boy. He led her horse toward the King’s desert stallion, named Justice.

“My, but you do have a lazy head,” Joffrey scoffed. “It must be two hours past sunrise.”

Joffrey had gotten taller in the past year, and slimmer too. His hair shimmered in the rising sun, as if each strand was made of woven gold. Sansa could not deny he was the image of a Prince out of a maiden's dreams. The King was beautiful in every way except for the evil in his soul, and the hatred in his eyes. Today, Joffrey wore fine silks of black and gold, an homage to his father’s house, to help discourage the rumors circulating about his parentage.

Next to him, the Hound reared in his black charger. He was the shadow to Joffrey’s golden light. His armor did not glisten, his hair did not shine. The darkness of his horse, his armor, his hair and his countenance directly rivaled the King’s glory. Sansa had to tear her eyes away from him. Joffrey waited patiently for Sansa to explain her late arrival. She opened her mouth to spout some pleasantries, or rather, as the Hound would say, to chirp a pretty song.

A horn sounded, interrupting her reply. Joffrey smirked at her.

“Until later, Lady Sansa.” Joffrey trotted past, “I will long for a lady’s company now that my sister will be gone. I will look to you to satiate that longing.”

Thankfully, Sansa was spared from the King’s presence. The lords and ladies of the court were mounted and already trotting, when Sansa’s horse was led into the succession. Sansa was placed after the Queen and Joffrey. Myrcella and Tommen rode in a palanquin behind them, as befitting their royal status.

The gates to the Red Keep swung open and Sansa was immediately affected by the smell. It made her head spin. Sansa reached into her dress’s hidden pocket to pull out the handkerchief she had been sewing. The city reeked. The streets smelled of rotten flesh, human excrement, and sickness. Sickness everywhere. Sansa pressed the fabric to her nose and mouth, eyes wide. King’s Landing was a gruesome sight. The mare beneath her snorted it’s displeasure at having to leave the smoothed courtyard of the Red Keep, to traverse the rough cobblestone of the city.

Crowds gathered to watch the royal company. A hundred hungry eyes devoured her image, and Sansa felt suffocated under the pressure of their stares. Torn, bloodied clothing, scratched hands, bony arms, skeletal heads, and bloodshot eyes followed her toward the docks. Were they people or minions of death? Dark angels from the Seven Hells.

Sansa wished she had dressed in brown, or black. Her rich clothing was in stark contrast to the poverty of the common people. The jealous, angry stares of women were almost too much to bear. Men’s gazes lingered, and while they cried “Joffrey! Joffrey!” in empty voices, she could hear a few suggestive whistles aimed at her. Sansa made the mistake of looking over her shoulder after a young man called to her, and she saw him grab the crotch of his pants and lick his lips. Disgust welled in her throat and Sansa thought she might vomit. Sansa looked away, but soon caught sight of a moving figure trailing after her.

A ragged child ran through the crowd, following Sansa’s mare. Sansa could only see the urchin’s head, ducking in and out of legs, and when Sansa rounded the corner of the Hook to Fishmonger’s
Square, she got a good look at the orphan. She could not tell if it was a boy or girl. The body was too skinny to distinguish their sex. Their hair was matted and filled with lice. The child scratched at it’s head, and Sansa could see it’s hands come away bloody. She was horrified, and looked away.

Sansa was very grateful for the large company of Goldcloaks nearby, and the intimidating presence of the Kingsguard. She nervously gripped her reins and tried to focus on the figure of the Hound in front of her. Sansa urged her mare forward and closer to the large black beast Sandor rode. *Stay close.*

Soon, the smell of the streets mingled with the smell of the Blackwater and the fishmarket. They approached the Mud Gate, and the ship that would sail Princess Myrcella to Dorne. Sansa sighed in relief when the company finally stopped and the crowd was pushed backwards, off the dock and behind the gate again.

The gate swung shut slowly, drowning out the crowd. Sandor dismounted and helped her down but he left quickly due to Joffrey’s presence.

Sansa moved to stand near the Queen, with Tommen in between herself and the rest of the royal family. Tommen was a sweet boy, and never cruel. He preferred the company of his kittens to his brother, and Joffrey found him annoying, so he was often dismissed from court to play with his sister. Tommen’s emerald eyes were red and puffy, he had been crying. The Little Prince looked up at her and gripped her hand softly, asking for support. Sansa’s heart broke for him, and she offered a watery smile, squeezing his hand comfortingly.

“Tommen, to me,” the Queen saw their little interaction, and shot Sansa a cruel glare. Sansa’s heart fell, but she folded her hands in front of her and placed a stony expression on her face. Show no emotion.

“Seven Gods watch over your child…” the High Septon began.

The procession was a blur. Myrcella embraced her mother and Cersei gripped her like a dying woman would grab a raft. Tommen embraced his sister too, while Joffrey simply nodded, never looking at Myrcella. Sansa was awarded with a curtsey and a smile from the Princess, along with a promise to meet again some day. Myrcella even embraced her Uncle Tyrion and begged him come visit when the war was over. Lord Tyrion agreed, to Cersei’s displeasure.

The High Septon said a few more blessings and a hymn was taken up by the brothers he brought with him, a hymn to the Crone, for safe travel. The holy brothers swung a smoking lantern between them as they chanted. Sansa’s stomach felt numb the entire time on the dock. She was waiting for something, anything, and she half expected Joffrey to throw her in the Blackwater for looking unhappy.

Tommen began to cry, prompting Joffrey to harshly tease him.


“I saw you cry,” Sansa could not help herself.

Joffrey’s eyes widened. The King's jaw clenched, and his hand clenched in a fist. Sansa would pay for that comment later, she knew, but it was glorious to feel the victory, even for so brief a moment. Tommen smiled gratefully at her, before everyone was hushed by Cersei. Out of the corner of her eye, Sansa could see Joffrey stroking the hilt of his sword maliciously, it sent a shiver down her spine.
The shouts of the sailors hauling up anchor roughly contested the brother’s hymn. Myrcella’s ship was launched, and the little princess waved fiercely from the deck. The lords and ladies all responded in kind, waving with the same amount of passion that a horse’s tail swats flies. It was a pomp affair that Sansa would have loved… years ago, when she was younger.

Soon, too soon, the guards were rallying into position again. Sansa was hoisted onto her mare by the Hound. His hands squeezed her hips, not unkindly.

“Stay. Close.” He repeated, through gritted teeth. Sansa nodded to show she understood, she would not dare go too far in these streets.

The Mud Gate opened slowly. A herd of Gold Cloaks filtered in with shields raised, pushing down the crowd. Angry fists reached into the spaces between their shields, frightening Sansa.

Hateful shouts assaulted her ears.

“BREAD! BREAD! BREAD!” a chant had taken root in their absence. The Gold Cloaks silenced these men first, pushing their shields against their heads. Whether they injured the rabblers, Sansa couldn’t be certain, but the chant died out slowly and the procession pushed forward. The false cries to Joffrey continued. The noise was so loud, it created a permanent ringing in her head. Sansa saw the little urchin shouting with them.

The mare beneath her was growing nervous, snorting and pawing at the rough road. Sansa tried her best to stroke her mane, and whisper soothing words, but the crowd’s angry shouts were drowning out any comfort she had to offer.

“BREAD!”

“HAIL JOFFREY!”

“BROTHER FUCKER!” Sansa gasped and turned her head, but the man who shouted those words were gone. The Queen urged her horse and two knights forward. The Red Keep came into view and Sansa sighed in relief, but it was too soon.

Of course, the crowd knew they were headed to the castle on the hill. A riot stormed around the gate, and the Gold Cloaks tried unsuccessfully to force them back. Janos Slynt galloped forward, scattering a dozen or so men and woman, and Sansa thought it might be over. The people were frightened by the presence of so many Gold Cloaks in armor.

Then, a woman stumbled forward, carrying a wrapped bundle.

Not a bundle, Sansa realized, a baby. A dead baby. Sansa’s nose curled upward at the sight. A few patched of rotten flesh could be seen dotting the baby’s face. The woman turned to Joffrey, holding up the bundle and Joffrey recoiled.

“King Joffrey,” Sansa gasped desperately. *The woman must be mad, mad from grief to approach him. “Perhaps a few gold coins. For her suffering.”*  

Joffrey tossed out a single silver coin. It was far too little, and far too late. The coin fell hopelessly to the ground, and was quickly swept up by greedy little hands.

An enraged man with burly arms pushed forward and spat at the King’s feet. The woman's husband? Brother? Son? At the same time a handful of dung flew through the air and hit it's target, the King’s face. Joffrey’s eyes filled with rage, and he tremulously reached up to wipe the shit from his hair and cheek. His face turned red and his shout could be heard over the chanting people.
“DOG! BRING ME THEIR HEADS!”

All Seven Hells broke loose. Joffrey’s words were greeted with a roar that deafened Sansa’s ears. When the Gold Cloaks pushed back, the Crowd pushed harder. How could a few dozen stand against several hundred mad men? The cries returned with greater passion than before, filled with hatred and insatiable hunger.

“BASTARD!”

“BREAD!”

“BROTHER FUCKER!”

The shouts grew in number and fury. The Hound had his arm around Joffrey and was pushing toward the Red Keep. The Kingsguard was in a flurry, slashing and hacking. Blood sprayed in the air and dappled the skirts of her dress.

“BRING ME THEIR HEADS! I WANT TO SEE THEM DEAD” Joffrey was screaming. With every word he inflamed the crowd further.

Sansa urged her mare forward but was blocked from the Red Keep by the fighting. An old man with crooked teeth grinned widely as he stabbed a Gold Cloak in front of her. Sansa saw the point of the long blade pierce through the man's chest, and heard his ghastly scream. Sansa screamed with him. A hand grabbed at her reins. At this point, her mare reared violently, and her horse's hooves smashed the two figures that ran up to barrage her.

“I have no bread!” Sansa shouted. “I have no gold! I have no bread!”

The High Septon behind her was grabbed from his horse and Sansa saw his crown topple to the ground. The crystal shattered, bloody hands reached for the broken shards. The High Septon's hand disappeared in a large swarming crowd, and reappeared moments later. His arm… they had torn off his arm. The crowd roared in victory and a group of men tore at the fat priest viciously. Sansa's head swiveled back and forth for the King and the Queen, or other lords and ladies, but the procession was scattered.

“HOUND!” she shouted in a panic. Then, “SANDOR?!”

A dirty hand grabbed at her skirts and Sansa screamed again. A longsword cleaved the arm attached to the hand and Sansa had one moment to look gratefully at Sandor, before she was yanked backwards.

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Someone held her in the air. There were hands all over her. Two hands were on her breasts and squeezed, but most were rifling through her dress, searching for food or gold, or anything really. Sansa screamed again when her feet left the stirrups of her saddle and the mare was lost to her sight. With a strength she didn’t know she had, Sansa threw a weak fist over her shoulder.

It was not strong, but it surprised the large man who was holding her upper body. Sansa’s feet touched cobblesstone again, and taking the moment for what it was, Sansa bolted between two old women with long gnarly nails and wrinkled cracked faces. Someone, or something, snagged her skirts, and Sansa heard them tearing. She pushed onward, seeing a small alley.

Sansa fled between the stone walls. Hoping beyond hope that no one had followed.
Stay close. Stay close. Sansa saw a door to her right and ran through it. Perhaps she could hide here, close to the street but out of harm's way?

Footsteps followed. Horror filled her veins. Someone followed her. More pounding feet and shouted cries. No, not just someone. Several someones. Sansa ran through another doorway and her head swiveled. Crates, barrels, straw, a window but the window was suddenly blocked by a balding man with a roughly hewn axe in his hands.

“You’re a pretty one,” Sansa’s foot was taken from her. She landed on the hard ground, her head felt like it had split. She opened her mouth to scream but a hand clapped over her mouth.

Kick, kick him, Sansa thought. She struggled to stop the fear from paralyzing her. Then, her hands were being held down, and Sansa vomited a little in her mouth. *No, no, no. This isn't happening.*

“You ever been fucked, little girl?”

Hands pushed at her legs and Sansa lost all conscious thought. Darkness filled her body and mind. Sansa’s mind began to slip into mad desperation before a dark shadow fell over her vision. *The Stranger,* Sansa thought madly.

It was not the Stranger, it was the Hound. A sword pieced the chest of the man between her legs. His body fell, twitching, onto her left leg and Sansa jerked away. His two accomplices were dealt a similar fate, quickly and viciously butchered. Sansa scrambled backwards from the now dead bodies of her assailants. She gasped for breath. The large figure of the Hound knelt before, grey eyes filled with fury.

And suddenly, the fury was gone, replaced with softness and a familiar extended hand.

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“Alright, Little Bird, you’re alright,” Sandor pulled her toward him, at the same time Sansa rushed forward into his embrace.

“You came,” she breathed in his ear, before she was thrown over his shoulder.

The Hound fought his way back through the crowd with Sansa on his back. Even with one hand, he fought like a demon. Sansa’s head swayed back and forth, it bumped against his armor and pounded painfully. It was hell, and it was heaven because she was safe with Sandor Clegane. No one would dare touch her. The crowd screamed and bled and reeled backwards. Sansa opened her eyes long enough to see the cobblestone beneath her turn into the polished surface of the Red Keep.

A loud screech and thud indicated the shutting of the gates. The shouts died away, and were replaced by the moans and groans of the noble lords and ladies.

“Where’s Lollys!” someone was screaming, “where is Lollys?!!”

Sansa shut her eyes and was pulled over Sandor’s armor. Soft arms encircled her, and suddenly Shae was there, asking if she was hurt and holding a cloth to her head. Sansa stumbled on her feet, her ankle twinged with pain. Shae caught her gracefully and they both leaned against a large pillar. Shae whispered comfortingly to her, dabbing at her brow.

“Lady Sansa!” she heard Lord Tyrion exclaim, then, “well done! Clegane.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” Sansa heard him reply, and when his shadow passed over her, a square of fabric fluttered into her lap.
“Dropped this, Little Bird,” he swept away.

Sansa watched him leave, wishing he would stay, but knowing he could not. In the distance, she could hear Joffrey’s continued tirade. Sansa fingered the handkerchief, and smiled.

Despite all the blood shed that day, Sandor had kept it spotless.
Beautiful summer weather graced the Red Keep, in spite of the coming winter. The sun shone merrily in the sky, contradicting the growing anxiety of the city. Stannis was approaching, and approaching fast. His fleet would arrive in a week’s time. Sansa could see the fear on everyone’s faces, and hear the terror in their voices. Stannis Baratheon was reputed to be a man of steel, and little words. King’s Landing would fall, and fall hard.

Sansa spent most evenings wringing her hands and pondering what his arrival might mean for her. Would she be traded as a pawn? Would she remain a prisoner? Ned Stark was the first the support Stannis’ claim. Would he have mercy for that reason?

Shae told her it was useless to worry. “The Red Keep could crumble tomorrow, or it may stand for a thousand yet, for all we know of the future. Worry not, my sweet lady.” But Sansa could not stop grinding her teeth.

On top of all these things, Sandor had not been to visit her. It was infuriating, trying to catch his eye at all moments of the day. At times she could feel his gaze on her, but when she mustered the courage to look back, he would turn away. Joffrey knew Stannis was approaching, and ever since the riot, kept his dog close to him at all time.

They were calling it The Riot of King’s Landing. The thought of those men’s hands… everywhere… pulling at her hair and bodice and on her legs… Sansa suffered from nightmares. She woke in a sweat the first night, screaming and kicking, and had to be reminded of where she was, and that the Hound had saved her.

Shae had stayed a few nights with her since then, waking Sansa when the nightmares started, reminding her she was safe. Sansa had taken to offering her late night lessons for her trouble. It also took Sansa’s mind off the upcoming battle and her unending night terrors. Shae was a quick learner, instantly grasping the Westerosi script, though she struggled a little with the quill and ink. They used brushes for calligraphy in Lorath.

Thinking of the riot made Sansa shudder. Lollys, the maiden whose lady mother had cried for her, was found later that night, wandering the streets of King’s Landing, naked and in a shock. Lollys had been raped and brutalized, a fate Sansa would have shared if not for Sandor Clegane. And though Shae comforted her, it was his arms she longed for, the only man who made her feel truly safe.

Sandor was distant since the rescue. He avoided her gaze, and kept close watch over the King. Why so distant? Sansa wondered.

At night she’d wait, until impossible hours, waiting for the knock that would signal his arrival, but it never came. Sansa felt the ache in her heart intensify with each passing evening. She would lay on her bed, lovesick and frustrated. Sansa both hated and loved the feelings he stirred in her, but she could not deny them. If only they could speak, Sansa would feel assured. Assured he felt the same.
Then she would not feel so hopeless, and the pining feeling in her gut would fade.

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On the morning Sansa normally visited the Godswood, Shae woke her with a rough shake. Sansa had fallen asleep on her chair with a book in her hands. Florian and Jonquil, she blearily realized. Sansa had been trying to memorize the lines. Sandor had mentioned, in passing, his desire to hear her sing this song, though he always said it teasingly, as if expecting her to refuse him.

“Late night, again, I see?” Shae said, sweeping her lady’s hair into a taut braid.

Sansa decided not to respond, Shae assumed Sansa stayed awake to avoid the nightmares. She did, but there was the added factor that the Hound might suddenly appear at her door, and she would not miss his appearance for anything in the world.

Sansa helped herself into her own dress, while Shae pretended to fluff her pillows and smooth her sheets. Shae was an abysmal handmaiden, and Sansa’s room had been untidy since the Lorathi woman entered her service. Not that Sansa cared overly much. She had no visitors, except Sandor, who cared little for appearances.

Popping a slice of maple nut bread into her mouth, and grabbing a few grapes for the walk, Sansa was ready and Shae appeared eager to leave.

“I thought you didn’t like the Godswood?” Sansa asked, entwining their arms together and walking towards the door.

“Your trees are growing on me, they are quieter and less cruel than these lords and ladies.”

The door opened and Sansa gasped. Shae dropped her arm and fell into a hasty curtsey. In front of them, blocking the doorway, was the Hound. His eyes met hers and a pregnant silence passed where Sansa felt herself growing red with the intensity of his stare. He was so… he was here!

Sansa’s mouth went dry in anticipation. A wave of longing rushed over her. She wanted to fall into his arms and beg him to carry her away.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Sansa!” Sandor explained, his eyes never leaving her’s.

Shae curtseyed again, and stepped backwards. Sansa took a tentative step forward and rested a hand on his extended arm. Sansa could not help but notice the tight grip he kept on his longsword. It flexed and relaxed when she touched him. She felt a surge of pride when she noticed this. They were both dancing on a fine edge.

Sansa tried to breath calmly, but her heartbeat ran away from her. A few seconds, and his presence had her almost undone. It had been too long, and now she completely forgot the words of thanks she had prepared. Images of the Hound’s iron blade, swinging and hacking his way through the crowd toward her, his words of comfort, carrying her to the Keep, returning her handkerchief… it all flashed through her mind. Cementing her respect.

Their walk was accompanied only by the sound of Sandor’s sword jostling at his hip. The Hound looked straight ahead, and Sansa mimicked his gaze. They passed several servants and soldiers, but no lords and ladies. He was wearing a simple tunic and breeches, which was uncharacteristic of him. The Hound was normally not one to be seen without armor of some kind. Was he away from duty?

Soon, they were walking the dirt path toward the Heartwood. As they moved further into the cover
of the trees, Sandor’s grip relaxed and Sansa felt the air shift. Safe from prying eyes, Sansa slowly ran a hand down his arm to grasp his hand. He took the lead then, never looking at her, and led them off the path.

Sansa followed, excited and nervous. He was taking her away from the Keep, toward the dock. The woods got thicker around them, blocking out the sun’s harsh rays. The cool air was refreshing to Sansa, bringing to her awareness the flush in her face and the hazy fog that had settled over her mind at the thought of being alone with Sandor Clegane. She tried to stop her spiraling thoughts.

Unbidden, memories of earlier escapades returned. Leaning against his side, touching his hands and feet, kissing his check… him towering over her. The nervous flutter grew in her stomach.

Coming to a halt in a small clearing near their dock, Sandor turned to survey her. Grey eyes swept from her face, to her shoulders, breasts, midriff, hips, thighs, legs, feet and back up again to meet her gaze. Sansa’s breath hitched at his boldness.

“Little Bird,” he murmured, then, “Sansa.” And in an uncharacteristic show of affection, he drew her into his arms.

Sansa’s heart stopped beating altogether. Sandor pressed her flush against himself, and in the absence of his armor, it was an embrace she would never forget.

She could smell him, she could feel him, she could almost taste him. Sansa fit like a glove against him, like two puzzle pieces that had been lost and found each other. Sandor’s arms encircled her and the feeling of safety returned full force. Her heart exploded with joy. He buried his nose against her hair and smelled, sighing in rapture when she turned her head to burrow closer to his heart. It felt so good.

Thu-thump. Thu-thump. Thu-thump. It was a sound like no other, and Sansa committed it to memory. Her hands, which had been hanging uselessly in surprise, crept up to rest next to her head, and his heart. Sansa’s other hand traveled slowly up his bicep, her fingers barely grazing his skin, and came to rest on the muscle she had admired from afar. She could feel every inch and it was glorious. Sandor shuddered.

One of the hands traveled up her back, leaving trails of fire in it’s wake, and Sansa felt a light tug on her scalp. Sandor unfurled her hair and ran clumsy fingers through it. Nothing had ever felt so sinfully wonderful to Sansa. Elation bubbling in her chest when a few of those fingers scratched her scalp, sending shivers from her head to toe. Sansa sighed.

Sandor lifted his head. He stared down at her crown and she leaned forward, forcing his lips to touch her forehead. He obliged, kissing her there, and continued to stroke her hair.

His lips pressed against her forehead again. Sansa’s heart beat erratically, her breathing labored, and she wondered if she might faint. Her face was flushed and hot, and when Sandor’s kiss ended, she leaned back to look at him.

Grey eyes assaulted her face, devouring her every feature. He looked from her bruise to the cut above her eyebrow, then at her lips, and finally into her eyes. When they locked gazed, Sansa’s hand crept from his chest to the crook of his neck. Without his leather armor, his neck was exposed, and Sansa’s thumb brushed over the skin there, and then stroked his jaw.

“I waited for you,” Sansa whispered softly.

Sandor looked pained at that admission, and carefully took her hands in his, all the while creating a
greater distance between them. Sansa opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off.

“After the riot,” he paused, his eyes cut to the bruise on her face briefly, “I thought the Imp might suspect us. I did not want to fuel any of his suspicions.”

Sansa nodded, daring to lace their fingers. Sandor looked at her intensely before dropping his gaze to their hands. His were so large, her hand looked small and tiny in comparison. Sandor smirked, his scarred face twitching, and he opened their palms together, to observe the size difference. Sansa’s fingers were almost an inch shorter. Then again, everyone was small compared to the Hound.

“You are such a delicate thing,” he remarked softly. “Are you hurt? From your tumble with those bastards.”

His eyes returned to her temple and Sansa smiled. “It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“I killed them,” Sandor’s nostrils flared and his eyes widened in rage, “and I’d do it again, Little Bird… Sansa… I would not hesitate. Joff had ordered the men inside, he wanted to leave you behind. He ordered the gates shut. But I went in for you.”

“I know,” Sansa felt tears well in her eyes despite herself. Joffrey’s cruelty reached her in many ways. “Without you, I would be in Lolly’s state.”

Sandor’s grip became iron.

“That will never happen.”

He crushed her to him again, and Sansa felt her tears wet his shirt. Sandor’s hands came to rest on her waist, his fingers curled around her possessively. Sansa sighed and took the comfort her offered. This was nothing like their previous meetings. Both of them felt the same hunger this time. The hunger for affection, the hunger for comfort.

Sansa suddenly remembered the words she had rehearsed at night, when she was alone and wondering when he would come for her. Now that she was in his presence, she did not think she could say them. Sansa’s stomach flipped at the thought. She shyly lifted her head to look at her non-knight, just as Sandor came to look down at her.

Noses nearly touching, Sansa contented herself for a moment with looking at him. There was a time when such a close proximity to his scars would have sent her reeling. They didn’t seem to matter anymore. I no longer see the scars… I can see the man.

Sandor was honest and unflinching in his gaze. She felt a hand rub her hip, and Sansa closed her eyes, transported by the euphoric feelings he invoked. When she reopened them, Sandor’s grey orbs darkened. Sansa recognized the look. It was the same look from that day on the dock, when he asked her to kiss him properly. That day felt so long ago.

“Sandor,” she began, “you’ve saved my life more times than I can count. I want to thank you-”

“There’s no need-”

Gods, when would he listen!

Sansa lost all control at his words and was seized with the urge to just go ahead with her plan, without his consent.

So she grabbed his neck and pulled, cutting off the rest of his words, bringing him down to her level.
She reached up on her tip toes and their lips clashed. Sansa’s first thought was that they were softer and flesher than she had imagined.

Sansa pressed her lips insistently against his, her mouth slightly open, and waited. Sandor froze in shock, and Sansa slowly broke the contact, lowering down to the balls of her feet. Her lips tingled. The non-knight’s eyes were wide and unfocused, completely taken by surprise.

After a second, he finally seemed to see her. In that moment, Sansa thought she might have misjudged the situation. Sandor looked at her darkly, animalistically, with an intensity she had rarely ever seen. In any man.

“I.” Sansa backed away two steps, “I…”

Sandor’s stormy gaze penetrated her very soul, and she felt tears welling in her eyes again. Why wasn’t he…? It was a bad idea. Why didn’t he say anything-

Her thoughts were silenced when the Hound advanced on her. Sansa took another surprised step backwards before being swept up and pressed against the nearest tree.

Her back rubbed against rough bark. Large hands grabbed and hoisted her arms above her head, trapping her where she stood. Sandor pressed his body against hers. His chest pushed against her breasts and the contact made her head dizzy and a jolt of sensation struck her between the legs. Sandor descended on her with passion and force and Sansa gasped against his mouth. His lips moved quickly, insistently, and Sansa wasn’t certain what to do. His mouth opened and closed against hers, and his teeth grazed her lower lip.

Sansa felt lightheaded and overwhelmed, not knowing if she should ask for him to stop or slow down. Sandor seemed to sense her hesitation, because his lips slowed their assault. Sansa brushed back against him, gaining courage. Sandor groaned and nodded against her lips, gripping the hands that he still held above them. Sansa moved her lips again, mimicking his pressure and movements.

A warm surge was building inside her and threatened to spill over.Sansa gasped when he broke the contact between them and rested his forehead against hers. Sandor was panting. They were both breathless. Slowly, with agony, he released her hands and backed his body away. Foreheads still touching, he leaned over her, noses side by side.

Sansa’s chest heaved. They had kissed. Kissed like man and woman. Sandor cracked open his eyes and she smiled at him. He grinned back heedlessly. Sansa bit her lip in anticipation, expecting him to kiss her again, but he didn’t. Instead, he extracted himself from her. Sansa was grateful for the small reprieve so she could collect herself, but also disappointed. Nothing had ever felt so right, so rapturous, so dangerous, so… so….

“There was no need for that…” Sandor rasped, unable to stop himself from reaching up and brushing away a few strands of red hair. Sansa caught his hand and turned it so the palm faced her, she kissed the skin there softly. Once, twice, thrice.

“I didn’t need to,” another kiss, this time to his wrist, “I wanted to.”

Sandor screwed his eyes shut. A heavy silence followed her words. Sansa could see him thinking, and she could see his other hand clenching and unclenching into a fist.

“You don’t know what you do to me… what you’ve been doing to me…”

Sansa didn’t know what to say to that.
“I have a thousand questions,” he finally rumbled, “but I won’t ask them of you now. Perhaps there will be a day for them. There were other reasons I wanted to see you today, other things I wanted to discuss before we... became distracted.”

Sansa flushed, thinking about the act of kissing. It was unexpected, and she realized Sandor probably hadn’t taken her out to the Godswood to simply kiss her senseless. She wished they had no cares in the world, and could do just that. She wished she was lowborn, and he was nothing more than a farmer or blacksmith. Then they could spend hours just kissing or swimming or holding each other. But they weren’t, and there were other subjects that needed to be broached. Wrapping her arms around herself, she nodded for him to continue. His face became serious.

“Stannis is approaching, Little Bird, his ships will be here within a week.”

“A week?” Sansa felt herself grow cold, despite the heat. It was so soon.

“Aye, they’ve been spotted off the coast. Varys has contacts within Stannis’ fleet who have confirmed his schedule. The city is preparing for an inevitable siege. The Queen will order you in Maegor’s Holdfast, with the rest of the ladies, during the battle.”

Sansa felt ill. Alone with Cersei and a bunch of crying women. Sandor would be fighting in the thick. What if something happened to him?

“If…” Sandor appeared to be weighing his words carefully, “if the city should fall. Sansa, you must escape. Make your way to your rooms, I will come for you. I will keep you safe once I get there. In the meantime…”

The Hound reached down and pulled a short stick from his boot. No, not a stick, a dagger. A skinny, unadorned thing. Sansa’s hands trembled as he placed the dagger in her hand. It had a leather sheath and a metal chain.

“Strap this to your leg. Don’t take any chances, if someone grabs you, stab. And keep that maiden of yours close, she is fierce.”

“What if something happens to you?” Sansa held the dagger close to her heart. “I could not bear it.”

Sandor look surprised. “Nothing will happen to me, Little Bird, nothing. I will come for you. The city may not fall, these walls have never been breached. Not in three hundred years, and half a hundred wars. Fret not,” he ran a comforting hand up her arm.

Sandor’s hands brought the flush back to her cheeks. But Sansa forced herself to focus on his words, not the fingertips trailing her sides.

“Will we leave?” Sansa couldn’t help but ask, looking at him hopefully. “If the city falls, will we leave forever?”

This was it. The question she’d been dying to ask. The moment Sansa had waited for. Would the Hound rise to the occasion? Would Sandor Clegane be the man she needed? The hero she needed?

“Aye,” Sandor nodded. “We will go North.”

Sansa closed her eyes, basking in the knowledge that it would soon be over. Sansa had found a way out, and Sandor would be with her. The Hound never lied. Sandor never lied, and he never broke his promises. Sandor was honest. They would ride for Robb and Mother, and finally be free of King Joffrey. Sansa would have Sandor Clegane, and he was all she would ever want. My knight who is not a knight.
Sansa reached up to grip his collar and bring his lips down to hers. She briefly brushed her lips against his softly, still uncertain of how to do so. This time, the kiss was chaste and innocent, with no urgent pressing. For his part, Sandor restrained himself from pushing her back against the tree and continuing their earlier, more pleasurable activities. Sansa quickly withdrew herself, blushing. Sandor gripped her hip to steady her.

“At this rate, by the end of my life, you will have a hundred thousand kisses from me, Sandor,” Sansa breathed.

Something shattered behind the walls of the Hound, and he could only nod. Gulping heavily, his scarred lips twitched and he turned away. A frazzled hand smoothed over his face and through his hair.

“Back to the Keep,” he rasped, his voice crackled with emotion, “we’ve been together too long.”

Sansa nodded, sensing his fragile state. They walked back to the path. Sansa stroked the knuckles of his sword hand. Sandor was silent, but they played the walking game again, purposefully running into each other. Only this time, his hand would touch her back, or her arm, or her hip, in silent reverence. Nearing the heart tree, Sandor broke away and bowed.

Sansa curtseyed with shaking legs and turned to her prayers. Her mind held thousand circling thoughts and she had so many prayers to offer today. Prayers for Robb and prayers for Mother and many, many prayers for Sandor. She kneeled and smiled, listening to his footsteps grow distant. There was a tingle in the back of her neck, whenever he looked back.


Neither of them saw the boy sweeping the leaves of the veranda, watching carefully.
Sandor Clegane was not an overly patient man, and the Spider was testing his nerves.

The Hound was ushered into the Room of Whispers earlier by a small boy draped in yellow silk. The boy gestured for Sandor to stand in front of a large desk carved from glass, and wait. And wait, and wait.

When Sandor grew weary of waiting, he went to find the boy again, but the Spider’s plaything had disappeared. He was alone. Sandor returned to the room, inwardly cursing the fickleness of Lords.

Nothing else to do, the Hound’s eyes wandered.

A carved wooden clock hung from the ceiling, with eight different hands on it, and Sandor could not begin to understand what the strange mechanism might mean. Clocks in Westeros had three hands, not eight, and the hands of this artefact were decorated with various languages. Some he recognized… Valyrian, Braavosi, Pentoshi… others were altogether foreign. Another odd trinket was rotating silently on Varys desk, but Sandor could not figure how the strange metal sculpture was powered. It looked to be a series of orbs circling a large, glowing star.

Sandor touched the smallest metal ball, and it wobbled back and forth precariously.

“One mustn’t touch what doesn’t belong to us,” a smooth voice said behind him.

Sandor fixed his face with scorn. The Lord of Whispers had finally arrived, at his earliest convenience, no doubt. Perfume wafted up his nostrils as Varys swept silently past him.

The bald man sunk slowly into his seat, watching the Hound with wide eyes.

“It is called an orrery,” Lord Varys reached over his glass desk to still the swinging bobble Sandor had disturbed, “there are very few in the world. I managed to collect the pieces of a shattered one I found in my travels to the East. Once completed, it began to rotate on it’s own, held in motion by some secret magic I cannot begin to explain. This silver piece tracks the motions of the celestial bodies closest to the world we live in. It is a mysterious thing…”

“But then,” the Spider dropped his voice and met the Hound’s eyes, unflinching “there are many mysterious things in this world.”

Tick. Tick. The eight handed clock continued to move slowly above Lord Vary’s head.
Sandor waited for the Spider’s gaze to fall. Not many men could look upon the Hound without losing their courage. Then again, the Spider was not a man... not technically speaking, and he had never looked away before. It was one of the many reasons Sandor thought the Lord of Whispers was unbearable company.

Normal men show fear. This was not a normal man. Lord Varys knew him, inside and out, and never shrunk away. Instead, he was... curious.

“You are, no doubt, wondering why I called you here,” the eunuch said finally, after waiting the appropriate amount of time for the Hound to reply, “you see… I’ve been puzzled by you, lately, Sandor Clegane.”

“Is that so?” Sandor growled, hoping the conversation would end soon.

“Yes… I’ve never thought of you as a player. A player in this grand game we play, here in the capital and in the Seven Kingdoms. I’ve never given much thought to the scarred beast who guarded our Prince and now our King, long may he reign. I thought I had you all figured out. A simple man who likes to drink and kill,” the Spider paused here, “...especially in excess. I thought I knew you, until I heard a whisper floating from the Godswood.”

Sandor felt his heart thudding, and his hand moved to the hilt of his longsword. His lips curled in a sneer. “I doubt you know me, and I doubt you ever will.”

Lord Varys giggled nervously. Seven Gods was he annoying.

The Spider raised a hand, eyes flickering to the longsword at the Hound’s hip. “There is no need for that, my friend. I assure you, I have not summoned you for the reasons you think.”

That was true enough. Sandor’s forced his muscles to relax. If the Spider wanted him dead, he’d have told the King. The Hound comforted himself with that thought.

“I can see why she likes you,” Lord Varys stroked his chin in thought, “a man of action, and few words. Very appealing to one such as her, in her predicament.”

That sparked his ire.

Sandor drew his blade, slowly, inch by inch, and fixed the Spider with a hateful glare. The eunuch saw his steel and held up his hands again, but Sandor cut him off, sword half drawn. The swords rang with unsung promises of blood and death.

“You don’t speak of her,” he snarled.

“Sensitive about the subject, I see. Fear not, I never mention names. I have the utmost respect for our mutual acquaintance. A lovely flower, a beauty, undimmed before the harsh darkness of madness. But you know nothing of that,” the eunuch’s eyes cut to his scars. “Let us agree upon one thing then.”

“And what would that be?” Sandor’s felt the rage boil in and around his insides. *How dare he* speak of her? He was *not worthy* to utter her name.

“If I do not know you... perhaps you do not know me, as well as you thought.”

The Spider stood and folded his arms underneath the sleeves of his robes. The eunuch came to stand before him. Neither man had ever been in such close proximity to the other before, and they studied each other. Lord Varys was the opposite of the Hound in many ways. Pudgy, soft, short, sneaky, a
natural born liar. Sandor was none of these things and glad of it.

“I know what you plan to do, and I know you will fail,” the eunuch soldiered on. “I have summoned you here to entreat you to stay. Stay, and live. Stay, and wait. Stay, until I can fly the Little Bird away on a whisper.”

“And why should I listen to you?” the Hound growled.

“Because if you do not, you shall perish… or worse.”

Lord Varys’ countenance darkened. “He will take her. And if there is anything I will not stand for, it is that.”

The day of the Stannis’ predicted arrival was upon them. The bells woke Sansa from a deep slumber.

“Up! Up!” Shae pulled her arms, “we must make for the hold. I am glad you slept. The King wants you to meet him at the throne. We must hurry.”

“How?” Sansa’s eyes furrowed, blinking blearily. When had she fallen asleep? The last thing Sansa remembered was sitting in front of the windows, clutching her little dagger.

“I drugged your drink, you haven’t slept in days and you will need your strength. We will all need our strength.” Shae’s words turned into mumbled Lorath as she dressed her charge’s limp form.

The fog from Sansa’s mind was lifting. Her drink was drugged? No wonder her mouth felt dry and fuzzy, like it was covered in fur. Sansa has not slept in three days. Her dreams were filled with hands reaching toward her, ungodly screams, rushing water, and Joffrey’s cruel laughter. She longed for the Hound’s arms around her. Only he could chase the nightmares away.

Before Shae pushed her away, Sansa made to grab the dagger. It was a light and skinny blade. Instant understanding lit up her handmaiden’s features.

“I suppose this is a gift from your Hound too?”

Sansa nodded her head. Together, they strapped the blade to her foot. Shae made her draw the blade twice, to be certain she would not cut herself. “Good, remember you have it.” And they were off.

Every step echoed in the empty corridors of the Red Keep. No guards, no soldiers patrolled the halls because every man was needed on the battlements, and on the battlefront. An eerie feeling, mixed with anticipation and the unknown, hung thick in the air. The bells rang and rang and rang.

Sansa recalled the last time she heard those bells.

Death. The Hound had told her. What do the bells mean? Death.

Sansa’s head was clear by the time they reached the grand hall of the Iron Throne. The fuzzy feeling of sleep had faded to muted fear. Soldier after soldier pass them by, with expressionless faces. The large braziers below the grand columns were set ablaze, and the flames cast dancing shadows on the walls. When Sansa looked up, the tops of the columns were hidden in darkness. Even the starlight was dim.

“Lady Sansa and, uh, Sheila.” The imp said, approaching. He came to stand before them, dressed in armor that, although fitted, still seemed to look unnatural on his short body. Sansa itched to walk past
“Shae.”

“Shae, yes,” the dwarf nodded, then turned to Sansa. “Surely my sister has asked you to join the other highborn ladies in Maegor's holdfast.”

“She has, My Lord, but King Joffrey sent for me to bid him farewell.”

“Sansa!” Joffrey shrieked from across the hall. “Sansa, come here.”

Must he call her like that? Like she was a simpleton… a plaything to be toyed with. Behind his golden figure. Sansa could see Joffrey’s loyal hound. Sandor looked straight ahead, emotionless.

“He's been a great romantic, my nephew.” The dwarf jested wearily next to her. How could he make jokes? Sansa would never understand the imp's brand of humor, but respected his ability to turn the cruelest boy in Westeros into nothing more than that… a boy.

Joffrey tapped his foot, waiting. Sansa bowed to Lord Tyrion. “I will pray for your safe return, My Lord.” The imp looked incredulous. “Just as I pray for the King’s,” she added. He understood, and nodded. Kind as the imp may be, he was still a Lannister.

And then Joffrey was upon her. The armor on his body was newly forged, custom fitted to his lithe frame. The greaves on his shins, and the gauntlets on his hands were engraved with rose-gold stag heads. The stag on his chest piece was embedded with Alexandrite stones, the deep blue of which sparkled menacingly. He glistened in the light of the flames.

“You're king rides forth to battle. You should see him off with a kiss.”

Sansa's heart puttered. No, no. Not in front of Sandor. Not after what they had shared. It would be so cruel to him... The sound of steel being drawn interrupted her thoughts. A shimmering sword was held before her.

“My new blade. Hearteater.” Joffrey paused to look adoringly at the blade. Like a mother looked at her newborn babe. It was sickening. “Kiss it.”

Sansa bent at the waist to hover over the cold steel. Her breath misted on the blade. Joffrey looked down, sadistically pleased, and while he looked upon her, she turned her eyes to the Hound. Sandor glanced up the exact moment she pressed her lips to Hearteater’s smooth surface. His eyes darkened. He understood. She would gladly give that kiss to him.

“You'll kiss it again when I return and taste my Uncle's blood.” Joffrey boasted, unaware of the exchange. The sword was sheathed and Sansa straightened, emboldened by Sandor's heavy gaze.

“Will you slay him yourself?” The Hound smirked behind the King’s shoulder.

Joffrey scoffed and shifted on his feet. “Naturally. If Stannis is fool enough to come near me.”

“Then you'll be outside the gates fighting in the Vanguard?”

Joffrey looked her up and down, a sneer curling on his lips. Sansa could feel his hatred rising and falling like waves. She should not be goading him so carelessly, and the cost might be high for this little bit of fun. Joffrey could order her beaten before she even reached Maegor’s Holdfast. “A king doesn't discuss battle plans with stupid girls,” he finally decided to say.
“I’m sorry, Your Grace. You’re right, I’m stupid. Of course you’ll be in the Vanguard.” Sansa gushed. “They say my brother Robb always goes where the fighting is thickest. And he is a mere pretender.”

Joffrey’s arrogant back straightened like a rod. He looked down upon her, in his best kingly pose. “Your brother... the Ususper’s turn will come,” he leaned forward, to emphasize his words, “then you can lick his blood off Hearteater, too. And you will like it.”

Joffrey swooped away, done with entertaining stupid girls. Sansa bowed when the King passed, but raised her gaze to watch Sandor’s towering figure stride away. She felt her heart go with him, and there it would remain until the battle was over.

“Some of those boys will never come back.” Shae watched the King’s company depart. The white cloaks of the Kingsguard surrounded Joffrey, so he could not longer be seen. Coward, Sansa thought.

“Joffrey will. The worst ones always live.”

At that, Shae pulled her toward the Holdfast. Sansa’s eyes watched Sandor’s tall figure disappear beyond the doors. She wished… she wished she had had the time to say one last thing. To share one final embrace. But it was not meant to be.

The Queen was drunk. Outrageously drunk. Sansa lost count of how many glasses Cersei consumed, and the Queen forced her to drink too. With every sad, heart wrenching tale from the Queen's childhood, with every mocking jibe, with every thinly veiled threat, Sansa was commanded “drink”. The wine making her head swim. Drinking with Sandor was fun. This was not fun. It was terrifying and it was demeaning.

The Queen rambled, offering up more information than Sansa ever wanted to know. She said things Sansa never wanted to ponder. The drunker she got, the longer her tirades became. Damn the traitors, fuck these clucking hens, kill the traitors, Ser Ilyn, chop off their heads, Stannis, a woman’s weapon, damn the traitors, Joffrey, shut up stupid dove, Joffrey, Joffrey, Joffrey. On and on. Sansa drank and watched with rapt attention as the Queen swallowed three gulps for every one Sansa took.

“Your Grace!” Ser Lancel stormed into the Holdfast. Sansa jumped and almost knocked over her glass. Why was he here? Was the battle lost already?

“What news?” The Queen’s gaze swept her cousin up and down, her words slurred lightly.

“The Imp has set the river afire. With wildfire. Hundreds of ships are burning, maybe more. Stannis’s fleet is destroyed, but... but...” Ser Lancel’s voice dropped to a whisper. He glanced at the ladies in the room in alarm, and Sansa leaned forward to hear him say, “but his troops have landed outside the city walls.”

The reality of the battle, the situation, started to crash around her. What if they all died? What if the battle was lost? What if the Hound was injured? What if he could not come for her? Lancel had said... Stannis’ troops had landed. The Imp had set fire to the city? Knowing Sandor, he would be in the thick of battle. Fighting for his life. Would the fire frighten him? It would frighten her... she knew his fear of fire.

After Ser Lancel’s words. The ladies began praying. Sansa joined them, whenever the Queen allowed her a moment of peace. The Holdfast, Ser Ilyn, the battle, the ladies, the Queen... it was all
so overwhelming. Sansa was glad for Shae’s silent presence. At least she had one ally.

Ser Lancel returned shortly. Out of the corner of her eye, Sansa saw the frenzied craze in his eye and the Queen’s madness reared it’s ugly head. Cersei punched the knight in his wound and fled the halls.

It was over. Sansa realized with horror. The battle was lost.

Sandor, Sandor… he was coming for her. Sansa needed to flee. She looked around at the other ladies, panicked. The gaggle of hens, as the Queen would say, flocked together to pray. Sansa spun around and was grabbed by Shae.

*Gentle Mother, font of mercy...*

“You must go, flee, now while you can.”

*Save our sons from war, we pray...*

“No… what about- The Queen said-”

*Stay the swords and stay the arrows...*

“Noone is raping me,” Shae flung her skirts away from her ankle to reveal a dagger, strapped by cloth. “Do not forget yours. Now run.”

*Let them know a better way...*

Sansa raced through the labyrinthine corridors of the Red Keep. The night air was heavy with bile, smoke, and the smell of burnt flesh. Far in the distance, she could hear the cacophony of screams coming from the Blackwater and the lower city. Yet, here in the strong embrace of the Keep, it was strangely silent and very much distant from the ongoing desolation occurring just a mile away, at the city’s gates.

Sansa’s heart pounded. Her foot slipped on a loose carpet while rounding a corner, and she went hard to her knees.

“Ah!” Sansa gripped a table nearby and struggled back to her feet. Her kneecap burned from the impact. A scuffle came from behind her, and fearing a chase, she pushed past the pain.

Limping the rest of the way to her room, she barred the door. The Hound would have to knock. She would not risk the lust of other men. Hands trembling, Sansa flitted about the room like a caged bird really would.

Sansa checked the bags, folded and unfolded her clothes, and stared with trepidation out at the green flames licking the sky. Where was he?

The hour of the wolf past. Then it was the hour of the owl. Where was Sandor Clegane? Had he forgotten? Was he alive?

Soon it was the hour of the bat. Stannis has won, has he not? Has he taken the Keep? How long until they come for her? Where is Sandor? Is Shae alive?

The hour of the moth came too soon. Where was Sandor? It wasn’t too late. They might still depart. Sansa heard shouts, joyful shouts outside her window, but she dared not look into the courtyard. It was too soon. Was Sandor in pain? *Please let him not be in pain, Gentle Mother.*
During the hour of the worm, Sansa laid down her head. Only to rest her eyes, but the flickering green flames had died, bathing the room in darkness. The shouts started to die down, and if she closed her eyes for just a moment, she could imagine it was just another night…

At the hour of the bird, sleep conquered Sansa. One last thought echoed in her mind, before she fell into darkness.

Sandor never came.

Chapter End Notes

I hope nobody minds the TV series dialogue. I accepted a challenge from a friend and couldn't pass it up. It was really fun to work it in, and I had a lot of fun writing this chapter!
Chapter Summary

Sandor is held captive by Petyr Baelish, but managed to escape with the held of Lord Varys... on one condition.

Sandor woke with a blinding headache.

Blinking in pain, his vision was assaulted by rich hues of red, deep purple, and gold curtains. I know those colors… Sandor groaned and tried to move his head, to dispel the fog of morning.

But, he could not shake his head. Sandor grunted and tried again. Damn, I must be drunk.

And again, his efforts yielded no result.

Not because I am drunk… I am trapped by something. The realization felt like a bucket of cold water. Sandor’s head was being held in place. A pressure on his jugular indicated his neck was also constrained. The early morning confusion was replaced with growing awareness and alarm. Sandor attempted to lift his hands, to free his head, but soon discovered all his limbs were similarly bound. Hands and feet, neck and chest.

“Fuck!” he swore, struggling with his bonds. What in Seven Hells happened?

Then he remembered. The wildfire. The Blackwater, wreathed in green flames. Taunting him, mocking him… frightening him. Thinking of the Little Bird, Sansa, being dragged from Maegor’s Holdfast and raped, tortured, mutilated or burned like him. He remembered leading a small vanguard or soldiers, again and again, to beat back the swords and shields of invaders that sought to burn King’s Landing and all it’s inhabitants. Sandor remembered cleaving man after man, bathing in the blood of those who sought to burn the capital.

And then… his memory went blank. Sandor could recall trading insults with the Imp’s sellsword Bronn in the evening, rushing to Joffrey’s side, being ordered to the Mud Gate, fighting underneath the menacing shadows of the King’s war catapults, narrowly evading scores of swinging swords and burning arrows and then… nothing. What in Seven Hells happened?

Sansa. Sandor exhaled heavily. He failed, he failed his lady. Sansa… his Little Bird… Where was she now? Was the battle lost? Was the war over? Did Stannis succeed and if he did, had any harm come to her?

With too many questions, and too little answers, the Hound began to struggle fiercely. Sandor Clegane had not been helpless since he was a child, and he was not about to renew the habit now. If I can find out, I must. I must escape these bonds…

Hushed voices stilled his clenched fists. Tense as a bowstring, the Hound focused his ear on the sound.

A soft moan. Muffled voices and the creaking of a mattress. The rhythmic sound of fucking and the
slap of skin against skin.

Sandor’s eyes widened. When he woke earlier, he thought himself drunk… he thought he was in… was it possible? The noxious colors, the smell of spice and perfume, the frantic movements in of the room above him, all pointed to one location. All the clues led him to think of one man. One lecherous, contemptible, low, sack of shit--

“I would not struggle, those bonds aren’t coming loose anytime soon. I tied some of them myself.”

“Littlefinger,” Sandor growled, embracing the fearsome persona of Hound.

Unable to see anything, and with his head still strapped to the stiff board, bed, or whatever he was laying on, Sandor was forced to bend his ear. But the Mockingbird was careful where he stepped, or he did not move at all.

“You are probably wondering why you are here.”

“It crossed my mind,” the Hound sneered at the ceiling. What is this bastard playing at? “Perhaps you would untie me and we can talk about it. Man to man.”

The Hound could not resist an incredulous tone, while referring to Littlefinger as a man. Baelish lacked the balls to face his foe head on.

“Oh no, I can’t do that.”

Baelish fell silent, leaving Sandor to wonder what his captor was doing. Why was he held here? Sandor’s mind raced through a thousand possibilities, but only one seemed substantial enough reason for Littlefinger to turn against Joffrey’s dog.

He knows. Seven Hells, how am I going to get out of this one? Then, a horrifying thought occurred to him. Sansa. What has that bastard done to her?

Sansa. What has that bastard done to her?

Sandor Clegane was not a simpleton. Obedient, yes. Silent unless spoken to, yes. A brute, obviously, when duty called. But he was not stupid. He knew all too well the kind of man Petyr Baelish was. A liar and a cheat. An ambitious man born to a lower house, who was denied his greatest desire in life, Catelyn Tully. Knowing this, Littlefinger had clawed and backstabbed his way to the Chamber of the Small Council and set his eyes on the next best thing. Sansa, the younger image of his lost love, and just as sweet.

The Hound knew. Sandor saw the lust filled stares when Sansa’s breasts were exposed to the court after Robb Stark’s victory against Stafford Lannister. That was a cruel thing. Sandor had done very little and felt the itch of guilt for months afterwards, but Baelish enjoyed Sansa’s exposure. Littlefinger wanted to possess her, own her as a toy, and then cast her aside when she lost her youthful beauty. Sandor had seen it before.

“I think we both know why you’re here, dog.” Littlefinger finally said. Sandor heard a thunk near his left ear, and the sound of metal scraping against metal.

Baelish is sharpening a knife. Fear welled up in Sandor’s stomach and throat. The coward meant to gut him like a farm animal.

“You see, I have a friend. A mutual acquaintance of ours. A flower, a lovely flower,” the scraping paused. “A few weeks past, I heard a little song from a mockingbird of mine. The mockingbird who sings from the Godswood. It was such a strange song, I could hardly believe it, because it displeased me greatly. I thought my mockingbird was lying. So I asked for more songs, and the more I looked
for evidence to contradict this disturbing story, the more proof I found.”

The scraping began anew, and Sandor’s fists were shaking with both outrage and fear.

“My suspicions were confirmed after I found a little note, hidden away in the lovely flower’s favorite book of verses. A note she saved, foolish child that she is. It said A sennight from today, same place and time. Remember the cloak. Cleverly written. There were nothing to indicate anything suspicious about the note, but a smart man knows that what is not said it just as important as what is. Why would she hide this note unless she felt guilt? And why would she secret it away in Florian and Jonquil?”

Sandor's mind raced. That message was written ages ago. Sansa should not have kept it, although in the back of his mind, he wondered why she would. Did she treasure it? Sandor should have told her to burn the note. It truly did not indict them. However, it seemed Littlefinger had already judged him guilty.

"Still, it was not nearly so damning as your... unscheduled midnight visits. Did you truly think no one would notice, that the absence of the lady’s guard would go unnoticed? That you could sneak away with the jewel of the Seven Kingdoms and not one soul would raise the alarm. I have witnesses. I have testimonies, and with this note, I have enough doubt to commit you to the Black Cells for eternity."

"Then why don't you?" Sandor snarled.

"Because," Sandor could hear Littlefinger's lip curl, "I wanted to enact my own justice."

Does that justice apply to Sansa? You sick bastard.

“If you have harmed," Sandor breathed heavily through his nostrils, "one hair on her head—"

“IF I?!” Littlefinger’s face came into view. A blade flashed above him and a stab of pain came from his left arm. Sandor glared with loathing at the narrow face, and pointed beard of Littlefinger. Like Joffrey, he was pleasant to look at, but rotten to the core. Sandor could feel blood seeping over his knuckles and forearm, and a fiery hot sensation was building momentum and spreading upward from his elbow.

“Untie me,” Sandor’s nostrils flared as he met Littlefinger’s pale green eyes. “And challenge me to a duel so I can cut you in half just like Brandon Stark did.”

At those words, Littlefinger's face contorted with rage and grew red.

“YOU. DON’T. SPEAK.”

“UNTIE ME!” Sandor roared back.

Steel-grey and pale green met in a battle of the wills. Sandor knew Littlefinger was a businessman, not a swordsman. Baelish would never untie him. Armed combat between the two of them would easily favor Sandor, and the outcome would not be decided by the Seven Gods. In matters of strength, only Gregor could match his little brother. Littlefinger did not stand a chance.

Sandor only hoped he could infuriate the man enough that he might make a mistake. Or at least, buy enough time or make enough noise that someone comes knocking. Otherwise, he was likely to die a painful death and deserved a little fun.

“You don’t speak,” Littlefinger repeated, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Not a word from your
wretched, monstrous face. The thought…”

Littlefinger raised the dagger, dripping with Sandor’s blood, above his head so it hovered over the Hound’s burned visage. “The thought of your hideous flesh touching the sanctity of her pearlesque skin. The mere notion of her lips brushing yours. It is an atrocity!”

Littlefinger ran the flat of the blade over Sandor’s scarred cheek. “I can’t imagine how she could stand it! Forced to kiss a dog, to pet him. How our lovely flower must have suffered under your unrefined touches. How she must have loathed your presence, left with no other option but the King’s dog.”

It dawned on Sandor then, that Littlefinger was under a gross misconception.

*If Baelish believes I forced myself on Sansa, if he believes I’ve shamed her…* Sandor didn’t need to finish the thought.

“What did you promise her? Freedom? Protection? You can offer neither. You are a lowborn cretin, a bloody sword to be swung by more powerful men. You are no player.”

Baelish’s breathing grew ragged and his body shook angrily as he said, “Only a lord can keep a lady, and you are no lord.”

Somehow, Sandor had the sneaking suspicion that Littlefinger was repeating someone else’s words. Perhaps the words Brandon Stark spoke to him long ago.

“Fueled as I was, by this horror of horrors, I devised a way to bring you here today. To bring you here, to my… little workshop. Knowing the battle was approaching, I had one of my whores slip a powder into your drink knowing you would be unable to resist quenching your cowardice with wine,” Littlefinger paused here, soaking in some secret victory. He continued on, much calmer, “the drug would slowly infiltrate your body, and you would not even feel a tickle until hours later, on the battlefield. Now comes the tricky part. How to kennel the Hound in the midst of a massacre? That is why I placed several plants in the Gold Cloaks. Men who would be stationed at the Mud Gate. When they saw you fall, they dragged you into my nearest establishment and through the underground passages that connect all my businesses. You might have died, but it was well worth the risk.”

“So,” Baelish flourished his dagger and then pressed the blade into Sandor’s scarred cheek, “here we are.”

“You are a coward,” Sandor said through gritted teeth, “she will never love you.”

“As if Lady Sansa could STAND the sight of you,” Littlefinger raged, pressing the knife deeper. Sandor tasted blood in his mouth, but Baelish should have realized he lost sensation in the left side of his face years ago.

Sandor was already tired of this man’s diatribe. Littlefinger was not nearly as clever as he believed himself to be, and his arrogance would always be his nastiest feature. “Do you want to know what you missed?” Sandor scowled, "In your grand little plot? What crucial detail you skipped?”

Littlefinger’s expression slipped, but his eyes told it all. Baelish was surprised to find out his victory was not as perfectly complete as he believed it was. *You self important, haughty ass.*

Sandor grinned cruelly, contorting the left side of his face, planning on delivering his last words slowly and with relish.
“She kissed me first.”

A madness overtook Baelish’s eyes and he raised the dagger high with both hands. Only a few seconds left of his life, Sandor thought of that day. The only day of rest he had been granted before Stannis arrived. He remembered the feel of her hand in his, the smell of her hair, the softness of her lips--

BANG.

Muffled shouts. Baelish’s grip faltered long enough for the dagger to slip. It landed, hilt first thankfully, on Sandor's right side. His eyes flickered to the ceiling, where a ruckus seemed to be taking place. Footsteps pounded from the room above them, down a hallway and out of hearing.

CRASH. A vase was shattered.

Baelish rolled his eyes and then disappeared from eyesight. Backing away from his prisoner and reaching for the knife, Sandor could hear him rustling in the room.

“I’ll be back, cockroach, and then I will draw out your suffering. Such that you will soon think fondly of the day you received those burns.”

With the swoosh of a cape and the smart click of his heels, Baelish shut the door to Sandor’s prison. Sandor listened to his footsteps retreating with relief, but knowing he was living on borrowed time.

With newfound fervor, he struggled against his bonds. One weak thread… some shoddy strap and I could be free. Free to strangle that conceited worm. Yet, the more he struggled the tighter the constraints became. Sandor growled in frustration. How could this be?

Sansa... Sansa, he thought despairingly. He hoped she was unharmed. Sandor could just imagine her, pacing her gilded cage, waiting for him during the Battle of the Blackwater. The horror she must have felt. Perhaps she thinks I have abandoned her. Perhaps she thinks I fled without her, thinking a stupid girl was too much trouble. Would she still care for me if I returned? Sandor shuddered and dragged himself out of his thoughts.

Enough! He had to think. Sandor was obviously being held in one of Baelish’s many brothels. The curtains around him indicated a higher clientele. The whorehouse closest to the Red Keep that serviced the lords and ladies? Not likely. It was too close to Joffrey. The King would no doubt want to punish his Hound personally, if Baelish was forced to confess his reasons for holding Sandor hostage. One of his other brothels, then. But which? The small brothel on the Street of Steel? The mance of whores in the market district? A private house?

A tapping to his right made his ear twitch. Sandor’s head snapped automatically toward the noise, and his neck cracked painfully when it met resistance.

The sound of a door sliding, followed by silence. Sandor wished he could just crane his neck around. A cloaked figure appeared in front of him and Sandor jumped in surprise. The man moved without sound!

“Varys,” Sandor gaped, genuinely surprised. The spider's characteristic flamboyant robes, and his flowery stench were strangely absent.

“Yes,” the eunuch drawled, lowering his hood. Even his voice was different, his accent was slow and deep. Identity confirmed, the Spider’s eyes traveled the Hound’s bound frame. “I came to see for myself if my suspicions were correct.”
Sandor snorted. “And are they?”

“Yes, very much so,” the Spider’s eyes lingered on what Sandor could only assume was the gaping knife wound on his arm. An unfamiliar cold, numb tingle was working its way into Sandor’s right fingers, frightening him. The damage might be irreparable. “I suspect my suspicions will continue to prove true. I suspect that my suspicions will get worse, and I also suspect I should release you before my suspicions become even truer.”

Barely following the Spider’s usual riddles, Sandor could only grunt. “Does that mean you’ll free me from these damned binds?”

Lord Varys merely hummed, and Sandor could feel soft, pudgy hands feeling around the constraints of his right leg. Relief coursed through Sandor. Once free, he could strangle Littlefinger and run to Sansa, to save her from Petyr Baelish’s evil scheme.

The fiddling suddenly stopped, and the eunuch appeared once again in his eyesight. Closer, this time, the Spider stared intently, unwaveringly at him. It was unnerving and Sandor almost recoiled. If he could have moved his neck.

“Only… if I do release you. You must promise me something, Sandor Clegane.”

Sandor wanted to yell. He wanted to beat that curious, shady look from the Spider’s face. But it would do no good to start arguing. He was in no bargaining position, he could only nod slowly.

“When you, undoubtedly, spirit our lovely maiden away from this once noble city, which you will do with my help, you will take her to a ship I have waiting. That same ship will sail you both to Pentos, where you will go to a man named Illyrio Mopatis. Simply say his name, and the poorfolk at the docks will point you to his mance. Hide there. Keep her safe. Guard Sansa Stark with your life.”

It did not take much time to decide. Sandor had no choice in the matter. It was either stay here, and be tortured and die at Littlefinger’s hands, or go with the Spider. Only the Seven knew what the eunuch kept hidden up his sleeves.

“Aye,” Sandor agreed. “I will do this.”

The bond on his right leg was instantly loose, the eunuch had kept it taught until he agreed. Varys made quick work freeing his other appendages and head. Soon, Sandor was lifting himself up with a stifled groan. Cradling his torn arm, he shakily got to his feet.

The Battle of the Blackwater had not been kind to his body. He was bruised, bleeding, a little feverish, and half starved. Not to mention, his head was pounding. Blood rushed to temples, but a few teetering steps cleared his vision. Turning to his unexpected savior, he scavenged around the room for some cloth to bind his arm.

To his horror, Sandor finally saw the flat surface he had been lying on was not a bed, or even a board of wood, but a stretching rack. The room it was contained in was unremarkable. Looking down, the floor was quarried stone and clay. Probably a storeroom of some sort. From the ceiling, hung swaths of the rich fabric Sandor recognized, and beyond that, woman’s clothing. Barrels of mead were stacked against the wall, and the only other furniture was a wooden chair and square table. The materials on the table gave him pause.

A bloody knife, a hammer, an embalming tool… That ass wanted to hear me scream. Snatching up a torn piece of red cloth, Sandor bound his arm carefully, knowing he’d have to tend to the cut later. It burned, and would likely get infection, if Sandor refused to care for it.

“Tywin Lannister and the Tyrell army broke the onslaught. Some say the ghost of Renly Baratheon fought on the slopes of the Blackwater. Without question, Stannis has retreated… for now.”

“And…” Sandor could not bear to ask. Understanding graced Lord Varys’ features when he heard the Hound’s almost broken sounding tone of voice.

“Unharmed,” the eunuch gestured for Sandor to stand aside. Turning some unseen handle on the wall and the stone magically shifted to the right, to reveal a hidden passage. It was dank and dark, and far too short for the Hound’s height, but it would have to do. “… and her betrothal broken. Instead, Joffrey will wed the young Tyrell beauty. Margaery. And Sansa will escape with her dog.”

“How do you know I will keep my word?” Sandor asked. The Spider pulled a rusty lever and the secret door closed behind them. Sandor could only grapple along the dark hallway, hunched over, and hoping not to get lost.

“Oh, do give me some credit.” Lord Varys tittered. “I know with whom I speak. A Hound would die for you, and never lie to you.”

No, Sandor thought to himself. A Hound might not, but that beast was slowly dying, and Sandor Clegane most certainly would.
Sansa believes Sandor has perished in the Battle for the Blackwater and is contemplating her unofficial betrothal to Willas Tyrell.

The sound of rustling napkins and the clink of utensils filled the air awkwardly. Sansa sat, staring into nothingness. Distantly, she registered a butterfly landing on her arm.

“Lady Sansa, Sansa…?”

The butterfly shook her. Sansa sighed heavily and mutely turned her head. The beautiful doe eyes of Margaery Tyrell stared compasionately back at her. *Unless that is what Margaery wants me to think… she is so very beautiful…* Sansa’s eyes wistfully traveled the pattern of golden roses on Lady Margaery’s strikingly scandalous dress. Fine blue fabric rippled in the light southern wind, a wind that did nothing to abate the heat.

“You seem… distracted… Lady Sansa.” Margaery gently took her hand and squeezed it. “Perhaps you might like-”

“Distracted?! Puh,” from across the round table on the garden pavillion shared by the Tyrell family, Lady Olenna Tyrell sat in her fine green robes and cowled head, “she seems half empty headed. Are you still alive, girl?”

A cheery pit was flicked across the table and smacked Sansa on the arm.


“It should,” the old hag popped another cherry in her mouth, “a good smack wakes a young mind from it’s slumber. Arise! There is a world awaiting you, Lady Sansa. Cheese and figs to be eaten, trivial gossip to be said. And to think you might miss it all today, a pity.”

Shocked at the audacity of the old crone and overall, not fond of the older woman, Sansa turned to Lady Margaery instead and offered her apologies.

“I am sorry, Lady Margaery, for my distance.” Sansa blinked prettily, as she had seen Margaery do on occasion, “much has happened in such a short period of time. I was simply taking in the splendor of your family’s company.”

“Hmph,” Lady Olenna mumbled, “more likely the safety of our company.”

Leveling a chastising glare at the elder matron of the Tyrell house, Margaery stood and offered Sansa her hand. For a moment, Sansa could only stare, imaging the rough callouses of a man whose name she could not bring herself to utter, for it caused a deep pain to throb in her heart. *I cannot think of him.* Shaking herself out of her stupor, Sansa took the proferred hand and stood.

“Thank you for the company,” Sansa managed, before being swept away.

Margaery led her on a slow stroll, down one of the many garden paths that Sansa had come to enjoy,
especially now that they were actually being tended to by skilled Tyrell gardeners. Seven Gods, how King’s Landing had changed. Tyrell flags, Tyrell flowers, Tyrell colors, Tyrell ladies, a Tyrell army and to crown the cake, a Tyrell Queen. Will wonders never cease? If Sansa detested the color red before, now she almost vomited at the color green.

Passing a new installment of pink roses, Margaery stopped to pluck one gently and offered it to Sansa. She shook her head.

“No, no, I would only prick myself. I have never been skilled at avoiding the thorns.”

Margaery smiled her mysterious smile and thrust the rose at her. Sansa took it tentatively, careful to place her hands where she might not be pricked or cut. It’s sweet scent rose to greet her, and with the sun shining happily, Sansa almost smiled for the sweet pleasure of holding a flower again. Almost.

“You may learn to hold a rose with time, Sansa,” they continued their stroll with linked hands. “What troubles you, my sweet friend- oh!”

Margaery paused, eyes wide and mouth agape, “Oh, we are friends are we not?”

“Yes,” Sansa agreed, as close to a friend as she would ever have in this place, “yes, we are.”

“Good,” they continued their walk, Margaery entwined their arms so the world might witness their camaraderie. They passed by Lord Varys, whose robes were a vibrant green and pink today. The Lord of Whispers bowed low when the two ladies approached, his billowing sleeves touched the ground. Rising, Sansa swore she saw him smirking maliciously, like a cat who had just caught it’s mouse.

“Then I must ask, Sansa,” Margaery plowed forward, ever persistant, “what troubles you so?”

“Troubles me?” Sansa’s eyebrows furrowed.

For all known reasons, Sansa should be rejoicing right now. Joffrey broke their betrothal officially. The entire court witnessed the dissolution of her engagement, so none could contest it. Margaery now blessedly occupied Joffrey’s time, leaving Sansa to recover her health and nurse her broken heart. King’s Landing was not sacked, but saved by the miraculous appearance of both the Lannister and Tyrell forces. Sansa would marry Willas Tyrell, a kind and gentle man, who despite being a cripple was decent company and would make a fine husband.

And Sandor…? Sansa almost stumbled at the thought. Her breath caught painfully in her throat.

The Hound had died… Sandor had died in the Battle of the Blackwater. Men saw him fall, they saw him being dragged into the sewers to join the other mounds of dead bodies. He had not come to spirit her from her cage, as he promised he would. _The Hound never lies, but dead man cannot keep promises._

How long had she cried? The tears she had shed weeping into the open arms of Shae, crying for her lost… love. For that was what he was. An immature, unrequited love that would never blossom into romance, never grow to it’s greatest heights. Sansa wept for the future she lost, whatever future that might have been.

Now she felt empty from weeping. Sansa ran out of tears, and replaced the sorrow with numbness. Sandor was dead and with his death, her blood ran cold.

_But where is his helm?_ Another nagging voice asked her. _Where is his armor? Where is his body?_ Not a trace had been found, despite Joffrey’s demands that the King’s hound be returned to him.
Doubt riddled her heart, while her mind told her that Sandor Clegane was dead.

*And if he is dead... no one can witness your mourning.* Sansa shook her head.

“No, I am not troubled.”

“Ha!” Margaery jostled her arm playfully, “are we not friends? I can see from here the look on your face. That look of longing and sadness. Do you grieve for your brother? Do you weep for your mother? What disturbs you? You do not eat. You do not sing. You do not sleep I would wager, judging from the black puffiness underneath your eyes.”

Sansa remained silent, choosing to ignore the question, instead of encouraging Margaery. Once the young Queen grasped an idea, it was difficult to make her let it go.

“If I tell you my troubles,” Margaery paused to pivot them about, walking them back toward the dense mass of the garden’s hanging vines and rose bushes, “will you share with me some of yours?”

Sansa sighed, but nodded once.

“Excellent, I am so glad. Let’s see,” Margaery ticked off her concerns with her free hand. “For one, I am nervous for the wedding. For two, I am doubly nervous to marry the King of all men. For three, I am in a new city with hardly any friends—”

“You have eleven ladies in waiting,” Sansa reminded her.

“Most of which are cousins or ladies that only wish to curry favor with my father, hoping for an advantageous marriage.”

“They love you,” Sansa whispered to herself, “I can see it in their eyes.”

“Hmm,” Margaery had no response for that, they passed by the pavilion that housed Lady Olenna and Margaery gave a cherry wave. Lady Olenna and her ladies responded in kind. “Perhaps... now. I have told you my concerns. You must tell me yours. That was part of our agreement.”

“I...” Sansa fumbled. “I... I am only worried for my future.”

“Willas is kind,” Margaery smiled indulgently at her, “I assure you. And if he ever bothers you, I will be Queen soon, and I can command him not to.”

Sansa nodded, and fell quiet.

“Oh, that wasn’t it, was it?” Margaery giggled. “Might I propose to you, what I think troubles you?”

“What?” Sansa snapped.

“You are lovesick.”

Sansa gasped, her heart thudding. Clenching her skirts in her hands, she whirled around to face Margaery, expecting to see the cruel expression of Joffrey, mocking her for seeking love with a Hound. Instead, Sansa came face to face with Margaery’s sad brown eyes, looking at Sansa’s horrified expression with unbounded benevolence.

“No,” Sansa denied it, shaking her head. Her hands shook as well. If she told Joffrey, he would... he would torment her! “No, no.”

“Oh, you sweet girl,” Margaery took her hands and led her to a stone bench. Sitting softly, they were
hidden from view by the surrounding lemon trees. “No one shall hurt you, least of not myself. Has… has some great ill befallen your love? Is that why you are so morose?”

“I…” Sansa swallowed heavily, forcing back the tears that threatened to spill. “He…”

Margaery leaned forward, noses almost brushing, and touched their foreheads together. “I will not mock you.”

Sansa took a few shuddering breaths and closed her eyes, willing the tears away. A dramatic scene in the garden would reach Joffrey’s ears, he would accuse her of disturbing Margaery’s peace. The last thing Sansa wanted, was any more of the King’s attention.

“He died,” Sansa whispered, “he died at the Battle of the Blackwater. They never even found his body.”

“Oh no,” Margaery wrapped her slender arms around Sansa, and pulled her close, like a mother would. “How long did you known each other?”

“Years,” Sansa choked, “almost three now. We weren’t always… we weren’t always close.”

Margaery and Sansa sat for a while, on the stone bench, Sansa silently weeping. The King’s fiancee comfortingly stroked her back and muttered her condolences softly. Not a soul disturbed them. Sansa could only assume Margaery had given some signal to the Rose Guards swarming the garden.

“I am so sorry, Sansa. I have also felt the loss of a loved one. It is a pain no one should bear alone. I am glad you told me, I worried for you, and my grandmother worried for you.”

“Do not tell her!” Sansa squeaked and jumped out of Margaery’s arms. “Do not! Swear it!”

Startled by Sansa’s outburst, Margaery held up her hands in surrender. “I will not utter what you have told me to another living soul.”

Sansa deflated, relieved and too wary to care. “Thank you, I do not want anyone to know. Nothing ever came of it, and now nothing will. It is in the past and I do not want to relive the pain his loss caused me.”

“I understand,” Margaery’s eyes softened. “I loved a boy once too. We loved each other in the summer, and in the summer our love must remain. Just as you loved your boy in the past, and in the past, now, he must remain.”

_He was not a boy, he was a man and a killer_, Sansa thought. _Sandor would have cut your boy in half, chopped off the rest of Willas’ legs and then thrown me over his shoulder. We could have run away together._

“Look to the future Sansa. It is where you next love lies.”

“Yes,” Sansa cringed at the thought of Margaery’s brother, Willas. “To the future.”

Margaery smiled, and led Sansa back to the group waiting for them. Lady Olenna greeted them caustically, remarking on how much paler Sansa had grown in only a few minutes. Margaery’s cousins chittered and chatted, casually including Sansa in their gossip about the Kettleblack brothers. Sansa smiled as a good lady should, and finally allowed herself to relax in the company of the young girls.

Later that afternoon, Margaery sat close to her grandmother and relayed the conversation with Sansa
in her ear.

“You were right, gradmama, as always,” Margaery whispered conspiritorially, “there was a lover.”

“Hmm, was.” Lady Olenna stroked the jewels on her cane, ”I can read between those lines. What was?”

“He was. He is dead now. In the Battle for King’s Landing.”

“Good!” Lady Olenna clapped cheerfully and called for red wine, “that saves us the trouble of having to kill him!”
The Escape (Part I)

Chapter Summary

Sansa is surprised by a midnight visit from Sandor, whom she thought dead. Together they travel through a secret passageway to his rooms, and plot their escape. Sansa also discovers a mysterious woman from Sandor's past.

Sansa sat at the window, staring at the Blackwater. With detached emotion, she recalled the unholy green flames that once encompassed the bay.

The imp… she thought with disgust. Bile threatened to well up in her throat. A dwarf? Seven Gods. Even worse than that, a Lannister?! How could she marry, how could she kiss that spawn of evil at their wedding ceremony? True, Tyrion had not been unkind. But neither was he desirable. How was she going to lay with him. To produce his heirs? *We would be forced to… to… fornicate!* *And I shudder at the mere thought of his hands.* No, Tyrion could not compare, and would never compare to the dead man who still held her heart.

Having enough of these morbid thoughts, Sansa pushed back from the balcony and opened the small cabinet at her bedside. Sleeping drugs, bandages, a small knife… ah! Sansa grabbed the skin she desired and flung herself on the bed without a care. After all, nothing in the world would ever inspire her passions again.

Shae had not come to tend to her. As Sansa suspected, Lord Tyrion and Shae were entangled in an affair, and Sansa had managed to land herself a spot between two lovers from differing classes. How damned could she be? Sansa had lost the Hound, and now she had lost Shae… one of her only true friends. Shae, the most awful handmaiden she ever had. Shae, who poked her when she grew distracted. Shae, the woman who drank with her these last months. Shae, who slept by her side when the nightmares returned after Sandor’s death.

Sansa took another heavy pull from the flask. Red wine, his favorite. It was sour and tasted awful, and Sansa knew she preferred the sweeter liquors, but damn it! The taste reminded her of Sandor.

The dizzying effect of the alcohol was starting to take affect. What if her mother could see her now? Engaged to a Lannister, a dwarf no less, and drinking herself silly, alone? What a sight! *Mother would be disgusted.*

“Ha!” Sansa giggled, thinking of Catelyn Stark’s stern expression. Her giggles dissolved into laughter, and then sobs. “Sandor.” Sandor would laugh at her, in this state…

Sansa took another long pull, gagging at the drink, and then chucked the skin far away. It clattered loudly. Throwing her arms wide, Sansa embraced the pillow next to her, curling in on herself. Sobs wracked her body, and she finally gave in to another session of grief.

“Sandor,” she cried to the empty room, “Sandor, why did you leave me?”

It had been over a month, and the grief still felt fresh, as if she had learned of his death that morning. When would it feel real? *Will I ever be able to heal?* Sansa wished they had more time. Days, weeks, months. To talk and laugh and kiss. It was too cruel, to rip away a love that had barely even begun.
What might they have accomplished together?

In her fantasies, the two of them fled North, the night of the battle. Together, they rode through muck and mud, braving foul weather and witless bandits. Sandor would rescue her from any harm, and after a few weeks they would have ridden into Riverrun. In the company of her family, Sansa would trumpet Sandor’s cause. Robb would raise him to a lord, and win his war with the help of the ferocious Hound. Sansa and he would marry and… Seven Gods. What lies do I tell myself? Robb and Mother would have sentenced Sandor to the headsman’s axe at first sight. I would have begged for his life and still witnessed his death.

You beg for his life now, Sansa cried again. “I need you! Sandor, why did you leave? I need you.”

If Sansa had been paying more attention, she would have noticed a creaking sound coming from the planks of the wooden floor. A bulge appeared in the center of the rug, and the fabric of the red carpet began to slide. As it was, Sansa was too absorbed in her own despair to notice the unusual occurrence.

I would have liked to see him, one last time.

Sansa’s final sobs drowned out the sound of a hinge moving. Two heavy feet ascended a stairway and stilled themselves at the sight of her despair. Sansa’s back faced the quiet intruder and she remained unaware.

“Sandor,” she closed her eyes, seeking solace in the sweet bliss the wine was giving her, “why did you die?”

“I did not.”

Sansa’s eyes flew open and her heart beat painfully in her ears. It was silent. Sansa listened intently for another moment, before tears welled in her eyes. Sobbing, she realized she was now hearing voices. I am imagining the sound of his voice, so strongly does my heart yearn. What a fool I am!

“Sansa.”

Sansa tensed. The sound of his baritone, so believable, and yet it could not be true. Sansa clutched the pillow tighter, a forlorn sob escaped her. Is my fate to be the same as Ashara Dayne? Have I gone mad with lovesickness? Will I throw myself from a tower?

“Sansa,” he called again more insistent. Heavy footsteps grew closer to her bed, and Sansa whirled around. Ghosts do not make sounds.

“Stop!” Sansa cried, as a shadow fell over her.

There he stood, in all his disheveled glory, black hair sticking out of a bandage wrapped around his head and left cheek. The spectre, though he seemed too solid to be one, was clothed all in black, hands outstretched and palms forward as if yielding to her.

“Oh Gods,” Sansa furrowed her eyebrows, “I am going insane. I have lost my mind.”

“Sansa,” the apparition stepped forward.

“No!” Sansa stumbled to her feet, almost tripping over the wine skin and reeling when her head spun. She almost fell, but the ghost caught her swiftly and set her aright. Sansa pushed the man away angrily. “No, stop! If this is some cruel trick, I want it to end now. Stop. I cannot bear it.”
The man released her and stepped backward, hands raised again. Sansa’s eyes fell to his boots. Black leather, with scuff marks and mud caking the heel. Traveling upward, her heart hammered at the familiar stance and figure of the Hound. Same knees, same waist, the same chest, breathing anxiously and impatiently as he was wont to do when something bothered him. Sansa glimpsed a white bandage peeking out of the bottom of one of his sleeves.

Glancing over the grey orbs staring insistently back at her, Sansa drank in his features. Same black hair and hollow cheeks. Two bumps on his nose remained from the numerous times he’d broken it, and a thicker scruff adorned his square jawline, but otherwise….

“Look at me, Little Bird.”

Sansa met his eyes and crumbled. This time, Sandor caught her and pulled her into his embrace, although with a grunt of pain Sansa barely registered.

“Sandor!” she cried. “They told me- Everyone said -”

“They told you I died, Little Bird, but they lied.”

That voice, so familiar and comforting. Sandor’s hands ran up her back, warming her. Sansa inhaled deeply, the heavenly scent that clung to him. The scent of a man. She clutched at the fabric of his black tunic and ran her hands over his shoulders, and then his back. She had only been able to do this once before, and though the muscles felt familiar, it was also new and dangerously intoxicating.

Alive, Sansa's heart rejoiced and her mind swam with the possibilities. My love is alive, he's come for me.

“How?” Sansa pulled back, feeling dizzy. “I prayed for you to survive the battle, then I prayed for you to return to me, and then I prayed for your soul to find peace.”

Sansa swept her hands up his neck to where his lifeblood beat rhythmically. Between her fingers, she could feel his pulse. With each beat, she began to believe.

Sandor closed his eyes and exhaled roughly, shaking his head. “It is a long story.”

“Does it have to do with these bandages?” Sansa reached for his cheek. “Let me see,” she commanded, her voice brokered no room for argument.

Sandor sighed and shifted, using his right arm to lift the gauze slightly from his head, so she could peek inside. In the dim light, she could barely see the familiar burns, but she could see the tip of a long gash almost touch the corner of his lip. The surrounding dressing was stained red, and the wound still leaked.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I will tell you later. Suffice to say, I’m even uglier than before.” Sandor smiled lightly down at her, trying to lighten the darkness that swept across her face.

“And this?” Sansa stepped out of his light embrace and gently lifted his left arm. It hung between them.

“Later,” he said gruffly, and tugged away. “It will all be explained after we escape.”

“Escape? Tonight?” Sansa asked, baffled.
“Yes, tonight,” Sandor moved aside and started searching her room, opening her drawers and rummaging through her belonging. “I have a pack prepared,” he gestured toward the floor, “and a few clothes for you, but we will need more.”

Sansa followed his hand to see a large tan pack lying on the floor, next to an open trapdoor. Her red carpet has been moved and was now bunched up behind the latch. Sansa peered cautiously down into the dark. A steep set of stairs led into an abyss. The secret corridor was narrow and ominous.

“Has this always been here?”

“Aye,” Sandor produced an empty satchel and began tossing leftover honeycakes, a wineskin he’d found, and some clothing into it. “If I had known before,” he sounded pained, “I would have sealed it shut, for your own safety. Fortunately for us, it serves some purpose. The passage will take us underneath the Keep, and from there we will travel in the shadows toward my quarters. I will need some armor.”

Sansa stared into the dark passageway, built underneath her chambers.

“I can’t believe I didn’t know,” she mumbled. “I can’t believe I’m finally leaving.”

“Aye,” Sandor said, searching her writing desk for other materials. Abruptly, he paused his movements and gave her a long searching gaze. Something in her eyes spoke of Sansa’s fears. With care, he moved to stand before her and gripped her shoulders. His thumbs stroking the skin left exposed by her shift.

“Sansa,” he rumbled, the familiar purr of his voice reminded her of the hushed words of devotion he once spoke, long ago, when no one was listening. “I know this is sudden and I know how shocking all this must be. You have endured much, my lady, my Little Bird, and I am sorry but I have to ask you to soldier onward. There will be time for us later. For now, we must move.”

Swallowing heavily, Sansa took a deep breath and nodded.

“I shall prepare myself.”

Minutes later, Sansa was dressed in a pair of breeches and a mud colored tunic. She picked at the worn clothes Sandor brought her, and tightened the leather belt a second time. It was strange to be dressed in boy’s clothing, but Sansa had consented, knowing it would be safest. Although, without the cloak, she was still very womanish. Few disguises could hide the shape of her breasts or the feminine sway of her hips.

Sandor nodded approvingly, and handed her a dark traveling cloak. Black, like his. Sansa raised the hood over her face and looked at her non-knight.

“Ready?” he asked.

Sansa hesitated, her eyes sweeping the familiar sight of her gilded cage. For so long, she had lived here, and now she felt an unbidden rush of nostalgia. So many dark memories of helplessness and fear. The room had been tidied, and no evidence suggested where she might have gone. Only the rug had been moved, rolled into a column and placed under the bed. Sandor dragged her small square table over the trapdoor, hoping that the furniture covering their escape route would at least buy them some time.

Sansa nodded and followed him, she crawled under the table awkwardly carrying her satchel. Sandor’s hands reached up to help guide her down the steep stone steps. After a few terrifying moments, Sansa’s feet reached a stone bottom, and Sandor swung the door shut, bathing them in
“Sandor?” she whispered.

A hand grasped hers, and tugged. Sansa’s feet moved of their own accord, following her rescuer. The stone beneath her was rugged and uneven, and Sansa had to be careful or she might trip and fall. She wished she had a light to follow. In the dark, she could hear Sandor counting their paces out loud, wondering how exactly where to go.

After fifty paces, they turned left, or what Sansa thought was left, and grappled along a new wall. In this passageway, dark roots hung from the ceiling, smacking and scratching her face. Two hundred and eighty paces brought them to a circular room, illuminated by a few beams of moonlight corralled in by deep fissures in the ceiling. Sansa and Sandor stopped at a tiled mosaic of the Targaryen dragons on the floor, each beam struck a dragon’s head precisely.

Here, seven doors led to seven branching passages and Sandor chose a passage, mumbling under his breath about a spider, and they continued onward. When they passed underneath the stone arch of the door, Sansa could see the symbol of the warrior drawn in chalk above it.

Three hundred and fifteen paces and Sandor stopped below another chalk drawing of a crude dog. The chalk was bright, as if newly drawn. While the warrior had been dimmed from age.

“Lovely,” Sandor snorted and ran his hands along the wall, searching for something. Finding his target, he pulled and twisted a handle Sansa would never have found by herself. *These are secrets that must be told, elsewise you would never know them.*

A crunching, sliding, jarring sound made Sansa clap her hands over her ears. Sandor gripped her arm, afraid to lose her in the dark. The stone gave way to an opening, and Sandor cautiously stepped forward. Light came from a grate above, and a strong current of water flowed underneath.

“The waterworks channel,” Sandor murmured.

Sandor and Sansa cautiously walked a narrow passage along the wall, Sandor pausing to pull a lever disguised by rock, sealing the passage behind them. Sansa focused on putting one foot in front of the other, before they came to a final steep set of stairs leading to a corridor. The stone was wet, and Sansa nearly slipped, but Sandor caught her.

“You’re alright, Little Bird,” he said, patting her back, “do you know where we are?”

“No,” Sansa looked around, “near the barracks?”

“This is the channel you fell in, during the Great Storm of Robert’s Reign.”

Sansa’s eyes flickered to the tumultuous water. *It had risen so high that day,* she recalled. *If not for the Hound, this would have been my watery grave.* Sansa squeezed his hands in thanks, but Sandor took the moment to usher her forward.

The two pulled their hoods further over their heads and stuck to the darkened passages of the Keep. At one point, a patrolling night’s watch could be heard bumbling ahead, so they ducked into a side passage and had to traverse the roundabout way, which eventually brought them to Sandor’s door. He produced a key from inside his shirt, it hung on a twine necklace, and unlocked the room quickly, practically dragging her inside.

Sandor quickly moved to close the curtains on the single window he had, and then scoured the room. It was left untouched. Most men feared the Hound, and there were enough empty barracks due to
desertions under Joffrey’s reign, that no one would require this room for some time. It remained
unused and unnecessary, thankfully.

Sandor lit a small fire, quickly recoiling from the flames that burst from the flint spark. Sansa
contented herself with resting against the door, and placed a hand over her hammering heart. The
room smelled like Sandor, and the comforting scent helped to quell her anxiety. There will be time
for us later. For now, we must move. Sansa clung to Sandor's words, and willed herself to silence
any racing thoughts. Now is not the time.

Sandor quickly moved toward a large chest in the corning, throwing it’s lid open. He placed a
studded leather brigandine over his chest once, and dug deeper for other armor.

Sansa had not been here since that night, almost two years ago. With a fire in the grate, and Sandor
sufficiently distracted, her eyes were free to room. His room was like a curiosity to her, and a good
diversion lest she give in to her internal struggle. A large bed was pushed in the corner, with the
blankets still askew. The sight made a small smile come to her face. In the opposite corner was a
washstand and a square table with what Sansa assumed were sharpening tools. The far wall was
home to a long row of weapon stands, carrying longswords, great axes, and two maces. Three large
shields hung above them, unpainted, and scored by blades and axes.

Opposite the bed, near the washbasin, was a shattered mirror. Sansa heart wrenched at the sight, her
smile disappearing. The pain emanating from it’s reflective surface was almost palpable. It was half
covered hastily, with a white curtain. Sansa took a step toward it, but thought better of the matter.
Instead, her eye was caught by something else entirely unfamiliar.

A small portrait hung on the wall, next to the window. Sansa curiously moved closer. She glanced at
her, still alive, non-knight. Sandor was still distracted, placing leather shin guards on his legs.

The rounded frame was made of wood, and the picture itself had a small water stain in the lower
right corner, yet it did not hide the beauty of the sketch within. A woman’s face peered outward and
to the left, smiling happily. A yellow coloring was used to fill in the neck and sleeves of her dress,
and her hair was a lovely curled black that framed her heart shaped face. She looked refined and
ladylike.

Who is this? Sansa wondered. A former love? She felt a stab of jealousy at the thought. If this frame
still hung, than Sandor had this picture displayed the entirety of their known relationship. Sansa
could not help but wonder if he still coveted this woman. Do I dim in comparison to his former
sweetheart? Was this Sandor’s one true love and she a replacement? What if Sandor married before,
and she never knew? Sansa felt a cruel, sinking feeling in her stomach.

A hand reached around her and plucked the frame from the wall. Sansa jumped, startled.

“You found that, did you?” Sandor grumbled, running a finger around the frame. The way he looked
down at the woman’s image, so forlorn, made Sansa suspect the lady met a cruel fate.

“What happened?” Sansa asked, watching him stare in anguish.

“Gregor,” he nearly choked.

Nothing else need be said. Sansa could feel the mixed emotions in his tone. Anger at his brother.
Sadness for his loss. Love toward the mystery woman. We have both lost someone we love at the
hands of a monster. Sansa tentatively touched his arm and rested her head gently against him.
Together they looked down at the picture, and stayed that way in silent vigil until Sandor sighed
heavily.
“I think she would have liked you,” Sandor’s lips brushed her head gently. Sansa’s scalp tingled slightly where he had kissed her. The action made her throat constrict painfully.

“What was her name?” Sansa’s curiosity got the best of her.

“Joria, for our mother, Jola.” Sandor handed her the frame. “Will you keep it safe?”

His sister, Sansa realized with horror. I was jealous of his sister, Seven Gods. Sansa could not stop the relief that swept over her, but she felt guilty for the surge of jealousy and insecurity, now of all times.

“Of course,” she took the picture gently and placed it with care, in her satchel. “I will guard it with my life.”

“Don’t do that,” Sandor grumbled, adjusting the vambraces he’d just equipped, and failing to meet her eyes. “I’d rather have my Little Bird, than a dead memory.”

Sansa stifled a smile. With nothing left to do, the two turned toward the door, and Sandor paused at the handle.

“We will be headed to the Godswood, to the dock. Yet we’ve no time for prayers.”

“I understand,” Sansa nodded.

“It will be dangerous, any sign of trouble, and I want you to run, Sansa, back to your chambers. They might take me, but they cannot have you.”

Sandor looked at her intently. Sansa could see the silent desperation for her promise in his eyes.

“I would be loath to leave you…” Sansa began, but placed her hands on his shoulders, before he could react. “... but if it would give you peace of mind. I swear I shall run.”

Sandor exhaled heavily, his thanks shining in his eyes. His hand rose to turn the handle, but Sansa suddenly panicked and grabbed his hand, putting a stop to his movement. Sandor looked down at her, confused. Running her fingers along the knuckles and digits of his hand, she contemplated her next words.

“I… this may be the last time we are together.” Sansa started. “And I don’t know if this is a dream I have concocted in my sleep. All I know is that…” she felt at a loss for words.

He understood. In an instant she swept into an embrace. Sansa’s heart hammered when he leant down to kiss her. Softly, ever so softly at first. This kiss was not similar to their last. This time, Sansa knew to move in tandem. Longing to stoke the fires of his passion, Sansa pressed herself fully against him, lacing her hands in his hair and pulling him closer. Sandor grunted in pain, and Sansa remembered the wound on his cheek. She broke off, blushing for shame.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Sansa tried to extract herself but her non-knight chuckled softly and pulled her back, reuniting their lips. The kiss continued, softer this time. Sansa could feel the rougher part of his face, where his burn began, and the scratch of the scruff of his beard. She could smell the medicinal herb caked on his cheek, and feel the rise and fall of his chest. But all coherent thought left her when Sandor began kneading her lips with his in a seductive rhythm, and soon Sansa could hardly breath.

It was over too soon. Gasping, they pulled apart. Sansa felt euphoric, a wide grin splitting her face. The feeling was too good to last, though, because they were soon face to face with the door again.
“Seven Hells, Sansa,” he whispered, his eyes dark before opening the door, “I swear, I will one day show you how a kiss ought to be had. Not in secret, and not before we might die. A real kiss.”

“I look forward to it.”
The Escape (Part II)

Chapter Summary

Sansa and Sandor escape the Red Keep.

To say the Sansa was in a shock over the events of the night, was an understatement. But earlier, she had vowed to be strong. She gave her word to Sandor that she would weather this storm. There will be time for us later. Sansa repeated to herself. For now we must move.

The journey to the Godswood went smoothly. Sandor still knew the routes and times of the patrols, and managed to spirit them through the castle relatively undisturbed. Only once were they forced to hide in a small broom closet, Sansa pressed against Sandor’s chest, listening to his rapid heartbeat. They waited in suspense for the set of armored footsteps to pass. After exiting their hiding space, Sansa was horrified to see the hulking form of Ser Boros Blount round a corner. It was too close a call for comfort, and Sandor quickened their pace afterwards.

Reaching the stairs to the Godswood, Sandor pushed Sansa ahead. Unfortunately, it was a bright clear night, the air illuminated by the moon and stars. The grand steps laid in open air, and in clear view of anyone watching. This was the most dangerous part. It was now or never.

Sansa squeezed Sandor’s hand before rushing downward and into the trees. She paused, hidden behind the wood frame of the closest rotunda, and looked backwards. Sansa counted to one hundred, before Sandor silently glided down the steps and hastily rushed to her side.

Feeling the pressure more acutely than ever, Sansa and Sandor ran through the Godswood, safe from the prying eyes of the Red Keep, but feeling more exposed than ever in the open space. Sansa did not know how she managed not to trip on a root, her feet flying through the underbrush, following in the footsteps of the man in front of her.

Together, they passed the small unmarked grave. The three stones piled atop one another precariously. In the moonlight, Sansa was certain she saw a flash of reflected light coming from the it’s whereabouts. For some reason, Sansa paused. Her hand jerked Sandor to a stop, and he whirled around, undisguised in his anxiety.

“One last thing.” Sansa said, and rushed the last thirty paces to the gravesite.

“I told you we’ve no time for praying!” Sandor called after her hoarsely.

Sansa heeded him no mind, her satchel thumped awkwardly on her back. When she reached the rock site, she knelt in front of the grave. As she suspected, a little red dragon was painted on the surface of the smooth stone. Sandor reached her shortly after, and he whirled around, undisguised in his anxiety.

“We must move,” he breathed in her ear.

Sansa knew he was right, but she felt pulled toward the grave. She was certain she saw something. Running her hands over the soil, she saw an unusual object jutting from the surface. A black orb. Sansa reached forward to pull on it, but failed. The orb was stuck to the ground.

“Help me,” Sansa pulled on the object again. “Quickly.”
Sandor growled in frustration but nudged her aside. He took two hands and dug around the orb, to reveal a hilt. Sandor scowled, and moved the long metal back and forth, slowly loosing it from the ground. Luckily, the soil was not heavy in this area of the Godswood, and the long object was dug shallowly, almost horizontally along the ground.

Sandor grunted in satisfaction when the mystery item was freed from the Earth. He deposited the weapon, now clearly a sword, into her hands and pulled her to her feet. It was surprisingly light.

“Bugger me if I will ever understand you or your Godswood, Little Bird,” he grumbled under his breath, rushing them again. Sansa grinned at his words.

They reached the dock shortly. Now over encumbered by her satchel and the short sword, Sansa dropped all that she was carrying over the ladder into Sandor’s open hands. From atop the wall, she could see a small boat bobbing in the bay, attached to one of the rings of the dock by a thick rope. Sandor caught her on her descent, and placed her lightly on her feet.

Another minute, and all their belongings were loaded onto the tiny vessel. It was a humbling thought for Sansa, to realize that all she now owned could fit into one small bag. There was a time when her dresses would have filled five long chests. *A small price to pay for freedom,* she wistfully thought.

Sansa carefully stepped over the dock and placed one foot into the watercraft. Beneath her, the Blackwater churned angrily, as if the bay knew of her betrayal. *I will never return,* she vowed. Once Sansa was sitting securely, her non-knight climbed in after her.

Sandor untied the boat, and kicked them off into the night.

Sansa gripped the side of the boat tightly, frightened by the thought of capsizing. *Now is not the time to be afraid.* Thanks to Sandor, she was a decent floater, but still struggled with paddling her own weight in the water. She swallowed heavily and willed herself to be brave.

Slowly, silently, they glided down the bay. There was only one paddle, which Sandor used. He was careful to dip the flat of the wood into the water such that he made minimal noise and splashing. Passing underneath the shadow of the Winch Towers, where Lord Tyrion once raised his great chain, Sansa held her breath. But no one called to them.

Sandor kept the boat close to the walls of the Keep, until they passed beyond the towering structure atop Aegon’s High Hill, and entered the marina closer to Flea Bottom and the Ruby Road. Here, they blended in with other decrepit fishing boats. Sansa’s knuckles grew white whenever a small current rocked their boat. She kept her center of attention on Sandor’s boots, and repeatedly fidgeted with her hood, making sure to keep her face covered.

The Red Keep grew ever more distant with every stroke of the paddle. Sansa watched, transfixed as the light of the still burning torches dimmed. No bell, no alarm sounded, to alert the Keep of her escape. It was deadly silent, save for the song of the night crickets.

Sandor suddenly stopped paddling as they grew nearer the Iron Gate. An adolescent boy was bathing in the water, and waved cheerily at them as they passed. Sandor raised a hand in acknowledgment, but Sansa was beset with terror at the thought of being recognized, and froze.

“The current has turned in our favor,” Sandor said in a low voice. “My arm is in need of rest, I fear I might retear the stitches, and should not paddle heavily unless necessary. Let us keep quiet for the time being.”

Sansa nodded mutely, watching the Keep in the distance. It grew smaller still.
Sandor and Sansa sat in silence, Sandor paddling every once and while. A thousand thoughts battles for dominance in Sansa’s head. Where would they go now? Would Joffrey send soldiers after them? How had Sandor manage to acquire this small watercraft for their escape?

For the first time that night, Sansa began to contemplate whether or not he was working alone.

The more Sansa explored that line of thought, the more it became obvious. Sandor admitted he had not known of the passage connecting her chambers to an underground web of tunnels. Who showed it to him? The boat and a small bag of food waiting for them at the dock. Who placed them there? Who stitched his arm after the Battle of the Blackwater? Where had Sandor stayed if not in the Red Keep?

Sansa head swam with unanswered questions. There will be time for us later, and there will be time to press him for answers. For now, the Red Keep was still in sight.

Although… it was fading, Sansa realized, joy bursting from her chest. She could no longer make out the details of the Keep’s balconies, or the dancing stags on it’s banners, and she smiled, truly smiled. Soon, I will be beyond Joffrey’s reach altogether. I will be invisible to the Lannisters, only a whisper in the wind. A needle in a haystack of the Seven Kingdoms.

Sandor basked in the carefree smile of his Little Bird. Relieved to see her dark look of contemplation transform into happiness. Glancing covertly behind him, he could see the Red Keep melting into the horizon. I cannot deny, it brings me joy too. The Hound had broken free of his chains. Perhaps it is a new dawn for both our souls.

Shaking away those frivolous thoughts, Sandor returned to paddling, cringing as his torn forearm flexed. There will be time for us later, his own words came back to haunt him. For now, we must move.

At dawn, Sandor turned the boat toward a sandy shore. The sound of crashing waves, and the cry of two seagulls fighting over a tiny crab, woke Sansa from her trancelike state. Sansa’s eyes snapped open, embarrassed to realize her head had lolled forward in the night and a crick had formed in her back. Stretching her numbed legs, she swiveled her head, taking in their surroundings.

Coast. A rocky coastline as far as she could see. Sansa checked her hood, and looked behind the Hound. There was no Red Keep. That means we must be several leagues beyond it… Sansa thought to herself. Gods, the air is so fresh here. I never realized how much the city stunk.

On the shore, a yellow flag had been planted on a rock outcropping, and two figures waited for them to dock. A boy and a large black horse. Sandor leapt into the water, as soon as the boat crunched against the sandy shore. The horse whickered in anticipation.

The boy, a lad, rushed forward to assist them. Sansa tightened the hood around her red hair and ducked her head when the boy reached them. Sandor obviously recognized this rendesvous point, and hadn’t a second thought about trusting this strange lad.

Once the bags were unloaded. Sandor lifted her effortlessly onto shore. A wave instantly washed over her feet, flooding her boots. She took several steps backwards, toward the nervous, dancing horse she now recognized as the black charger Sandor rode. Sansa's legs wobbled, but the open air and the wilderness around them was like a balm on her soul. I am free. The reality of her freedom was slowly sinking in. Sandor is alive, I am free, and we are together! If this is a dream, let it never end.
Her non-knight flung her satchel and his possessions onto the horses’ saddle, pausing to stroke the beast’s muzzle affectionately. “Hello, Stranger,” he whispered soothingly. The stallion stopped its impatient movements and accepted an apple from his master’s sleeves. Sandor tugged her forward, and handed the apple off to her.

“Befriend him, it will save us more trouble later,” Sandor muttered to her, before walking over to the boy. “Do not look behind you.”

Sansa nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

The stallion turned its ears back at her close proximity, but it seemed the animal’s hunger won out over any lingering doubts. Stranger, Sansa believed she heard his name was, quickly devoured the rest of the apple while Sansa listened acutely behind her.

“Your horse was more trouble than it was worth,” the boy complained, sniffing his nose. “It bit my arm and shoulder in the night. I had to entice him with food, and he ate almost all my apples! Now I have none to eat on the journey back.”

“Here,” Sansa heard the clink of coins, “for your trouble.”

The boy said nothing, but sniffed again and counted the coins. Satisfied he was well compensated, the lad spoke again.

“The Spider begs me remind you of the lemons and lye, and the name Illyrio Mopatis. My lord also offers his voice in this time of need, should your companion desire to howl with wolves in secret.”

Sansa’s breath hitched. Howl with wolves?

She could hear Sandor’s feet crunching behind her. A hand rested on her shoulder and his warm breath fell on her ear.

“I can barely understand this bloody bastard, but I think he’s asking if you’d like to send word to your family. Your brother and mother.”

Sansa swallowed heavily and nodded, hands trembling as she stroked the horses muzzle, seeking comfort, her fear of the stallion momentarily forgotten. Sandor squeezed her shoulders and released her. A minute later, a piece of parchment was shoved into her hands, along with a charcoal pencil.

“Write in code, nothing to identify us,” Sandor hunched over her shoulder, shielding her from view.

Sansa shakily smoothed the parchment and looked around for a flat surface to write on. She settled on using the leather of Stranger’s saddle, being the smoothest material in the immediate area. Looking down in thought, she could see Sandor’s foot tapping anxiously. She bit her lip, and licked the pencil.

Signing the letter with a flourish, she rolled it tightly and handed it to Sandor. He placed the parchment in a glass bottle, and handed it back to the boy. Sansa prayed to the Old Gods and the New for her message to reach Robb and Mother safely.

“Remember, the Spider begs you remember the name--”

“Illyrio Mopatis,” Sandor interrupted, “I know, and the lye and lemons. I’m not daft. Safe travels, lad. Tell your master I keep my word and use that coin to buy a hot meal.”

“Seven keep you, Ser.”
Sansa wondered what they were talking about. It hardly made sense. Spiders, lye, lemons, Illyrio Mopatis? A feeling of dread was creeping into her stomach. Who was Sandor’s collaborator? Who was this boy’s master? Obviously, he did not recognize the Hound. The boy made the foolish mistake of calling him Ser. Anyone familiar with the Hound would not make that oversight. She could hear Sandor's teeth grinding in vexation from twenty paces away.

Sansa waited for Sandor to tap her leg from behind. “Walk,” he whispered, “follow my lead.”

Sandor untied the stallion’s reins from a piece of driftwood stuck in the sand, and led Sansa and the horse along the bay. Sansa clumsily walked along the sand, her boots sliding in the softness of the ground. She counted to fifty, before daring to look back.

The lad was perched atop the humungous wet rock. He plucked the yellow flag from it’s place, and leapt off the rock and into the boat. Sansa gasped as he flew through the air and landed with catlike grace. *There is more to that little boy than meets the eye*, she thought. The boat disappeared beyond the rocky shore, she could only assume the boat would be returned to it’s owner. Who though?

“Sandor…” Sansa finally said, weighing her words carefully. “Who is his Master?”

“I swore to Lord Varys that I would take you across the Eastern Sea,” Sandor explained, never meeting her eye. “In exchange for my life, I would shuttle you in a boat to Pentos, and the house of Illyrio Mopatis, Varys’ ally. I swore I would guard you with my life.”

“I…” Sansa gaped, astounded, “what?!?”

Sandor’s countenance broke, and he threw his head back and laughed. “Fuck! I wasn’t telling the truth, Little Bird!” His grey eyes lit with mirth and he turned to her.

“Now, where would you like me to take you?”
Day One In the Wild

Chapter Summary

Catelyn Stark receives her daughter's secret message. Sandor and Sansa spend their first day and first night alone.

Catelyn paced in front of the small hearth built in the King’s tent. My son’s tent. A headache was throbbing behind her left eye, and she rubbed her temples in frustration. A mounted patrol accosted a group of traveling Gold Cloaks earlier in the afternoon, and after some interrogation, Robb managed to draw a confession from the youngest soldier.

Sansa has escaped King’s Landing. Somehow. Someway. Catelyn's heart had soared with hope, after hearing this news. The Gold Cloaks that the patrol captured had been sent to retrieve her. The young lad who broke under interrogation knew very little, and the other men held their tongues. Robb put them to the sword, but kept the boy for further interrogation.

How? Catelyn wondered. The Queen, Joffrey, Tywin Lannister, they would never release Sansa of their own accord. Sansa was a coveted piece in the Game of Thrones. The Lannister's were many things, but she never considered them to be this foolish.

The young lad revealed that the Hand of the King had been plotting to marry Sansa to his dwarf son. Married to that demon! Catelyn scoffed and ran a shaking hand over her face. Tywin Lannister was indeed very conniving and cruel. Cloaked in red and gold, Sansa would be susceptible to the lion's whip. What choice would Robb have then?

Sansa must have made some friends, or the Starks still have allies in the Red Keep. Or they took her for their own machinations… perhaps she was kidnapped? What if the circumstances were worse? What if this is a trap to delay Robb? Too many questions remained unanswered. Sansa’s escape was shrouded in mystery and Catelyn could not stand these games. For the sake of her peace of mind, she needed to know. What happened to Sansa? What happened to her eldest daughter?

The tent flap rustled, and Robb walked in slowly. Dressed in furs, The King of the North was a regal sight. Tall, and broad, handsome and kindhearted, Robb's success made Catelyn's heart swell with pride and joy. If only I could find my other children.

Robb kept his head bowed low. His young wife trailed after him, ever his shadow. Jeyne took a seat in the corner of the room, quietly. Robb’s hair stuck to his face, from the light snow that was falling, making him appear gaunt and pale.

It had been a long month. The trip to the Twins was taking far more time than expected, and the journey so far had been riddled with bad weather. All the worse, Catelyn thought. I do not trust Lord Frey to not begrudge us this delay. And now, we are further postponed by these bumbling Gold Cloaks.

“Mother,” Robb sighed heavily, turning a weary eye to Catelyn, “there is more.”

More? Fists clenched, Robb gestured for the guards to fetch the boy. Catelyn could see a wrinkled piece of parchment peaking out from underneath his fingers.
“Robb, what--?”

“A young lad snuck into camp today,” the King of the North cut her off. His voice was low and menacing, it rumbled with undisguised anger, “just a boy, no older than Bran. The youth demanded an audience, saying he held a message of great importance and was instructed to deliver it directly into my hands. I have read it, and now I ask you to read it. I only hope I am wrong.”

Catelyn could see the dark expression on Robb’s face. Glancing over her shoulder at Jeyne, the Queen also looked decidedly grim. This was bad news, then. Very bad news. The boy appeared a second later. Cately looked up at the sound of the tent flap rustling. A bony, awkward lad was dragged in by the scruff of his collar by her uncle, the Blackfish. Catelyn’s uncle threw him to his knees. At the sight of the young, brown haired orphan, Catelyn felt a twinge of pity, but she shoved it away.

I am stone. I am Winter. I am a Stark.

Robb handed her the parchment and then turned his mutinous gaze onto the lad. Cately smoothed the wrinkled not in her hands and immediately, her eyes widened. There is hope again, she thought. “This is Sansa’s handwriting!” Catelyn exclaimed, moving closer to the candlelight. “I would recognize her script anywhere.”

Catelyn looked up in wonder. Robb nodded and the messenger fidgeted uncomfortably under the King’s stare.

“Keep reading Cat,” her Uncle said.

Mama,

I have run out the back door with the Dog. Do not fear for me, I am safe. I hope to see you soon.

Peaches

“I used to call her Peaches, when she was a little girl,” Catelyn breathed. Rereading the letter, tracing the letters of Sansa’s nickname fondly. Catelyn did not know how Sansa managed to deliver this letter, but it warmed her heart.

“I know, I remember.” Robb turned to the boy. “Who gave you this?”

“Another boy, younger.”

“And where did he get it from?”

“He did not say, my King. Just that our Master wanted it delivered.”

“Who is your master?”

The boy clapped a hand over his mouth and shook his head vehemently. Robb slammed his fist on the table. The little messenger started, but did not say anything more. Jeyne rushed to Robb’s side to run a comforting hand over his back. The action calmed him, but did not fully erase his frustration.

“This is all the boy will say,” Robb growled. “It is aggravating.”

“Robb,” Catelyn’s brow furrowed. One phrase puzzling her, as she scanned Sansa’s words again. “What dog?”

The Blackfish snorted and moved to warm his hand on the fire, looking at Catelyn as if to say ‘you know who the dog is’.
“No,” Catelyn gasped.

“Yes,” Robb bit his thumb and angrily glared into the flickering fire. “The Hound.”

The truth of the matter was, Sansa did not know where to go.

For the first hour of their journey, Sandor and Sansa debated their options. Her non-knight found a thin stick in the brush, and drew a map of the North, the East, and the West in the sand. The final picture was a misshapen blob that barely resembled Westeros, but it served to organize their thoughts. After some argument, Sansa convinced Sando to consider Essos and Dorne, and those land masses were added to his makeshift diagram. Once the picture was complete, Sandor leaned back and waited for her to speak.

*He truly will take me wherever I wish...* Sansa felt her heart burst with joy, and she resisted the urge to throw her arms around her rescuer. *Now is not the time...*

Sansa’s first thoughts were of home, and Winterfell. However, reports from the North spoke of an Ironborn takeover, and Bran and Rickon were taken hostage. Sansa’s heart ached to see her little brothers, but they both knew it was impossible. The journey through the Crag might kill them, and they’d have to fight a path through the wartorn lower continent. Sansa could tell that it pained him to admit it, but the Hound alone could not keep her safe against two hundred Ironborn reavers. With that, Sandor drew a large X in the sand, where Winterfell was written.

Which brought them to Riverrun. Riverrun's lands were surrounded by raiders and outlaws, and ruled by the Mountain that Rides. Attempting to reach Robb or Mother would surely cost them their lives. Sandor considered various routes but Sansa soon realized the impossibility. Sansa and Sandor would never be able to reach the Stark encampment without help. Hopefully, Mother would receive her letter, and send a part to search for them. Riverrun received the next X. That ruled out going North.

"At least we will not move where they expect," Sandor muttered.

Next, Sansa suggested the Eyrie, but Sandor shook his head. Petyr Baelish had been awarded the Eyrie after the Blackwater, and acted as the new Lord Paramount of the Vale. Sandor still hadn’t revealed the details of his skirmish with Petyr, but Sansa saw the anger in his eyes, and agreed. The Vale would not offer any sanctuary.

The Westerlands were ruled by Tywin Lannister, and they’d have to be mad to run straight to the lion’s den. Sandor regretted he had no lands to offer, but Clegane Keep was still held by Gregor. It would be one of the least likely places Joffrey would ever look, but still too dangerous. Sandor stated explicitly that he would never allow Sansa within a stone’s throw of his brother. Another X was placed to the west of Riverrun and Sansa wracked her brain for another option.

Princess Myrcella might shelter them in Dorne, but she was too young to hold much political influence, and the Prince of Dorne might send Sansa back to Joffrey to curry favor with the Lannisters. Besides which, Sandor would be executed on sight for his brother’s crimes. “The Dornish hold no love for the name Clegane, for the great crimes my brother committed in Robert’s Rebellion. Against Princess Elia.”

“It was not you!” Sansa protested. “We might convince them of your innocence.”

“Before, or after the Prince chops off my head?”

Another X. No to Winterfell, Riverrun, the Vale, Dorne, and certainly not the Reach… which led
them back to Lord Varys’ offer and the Free Cities of Essos. In Pentos, there was certainty of shelter. Sansa was loath to be another lord’s pawn, and they did not know the Spider’s motivations, but Illyrio Mopatis was quickly becoming the safest course of action. It seemed that no place in Westeros was safe, and in Essos they had the advantage of anonymity. Sandor's face and Sansa's appearance would not attract as much attention, and they might be able to escape from this Illyrio character, if they were clever enough.

At a loss for what to do, Sansa and Sandor finally settled on making their way toward White Harbor. If nothing else, they might be able to take the Spider’s gold and purchase passage to another city. Sandor mentioned traveling to the Dragon Queen, and Sansa was suddenly struck by the beauty of the idea. How it would feel to arrive in King’s Landing again, atop a dragon, and set fire to all that Joffrey loved?

The matter settled, the two began to walk. The landscape was dotted with large rocks and sparse trees. They stuck close to the bay, planning to follow the curve of the ocean until they neared Salt rpans, from there Sandor hoped to barter passage onto a ship and voyage to White Harbor. Hopefully, they would not need to enter Salt pans themselves to find an anchored cargo carrier.

The first day of their journey was mostly silent. Sandor was not an overly talkative man and Sansa was still slightly in shock, enjoying her newfound freedom. Beyond the joy of freedom, it was finally sinking in that Sandor was alive. After so many weeks of believing that her non-knight was dead, he returned to her, rescued her from her cage, and set her free.

Sometimes, she stopped walking, just to see if she could. Other times, she skipped or spun on her toes, just to feel the wind caress her face. Colors were brighter, the air was fresher, it was as if her emancipation allowed her to enjoy life to its fullest, when she had been downtrodden for so long.

It was glorious, to no longer fear the Lannister whip at her back. Sansa said so to Sandor, who looked at her strangely, and then kissed her head, stating he felt the same.

If Sansa was to be entirely honest, their journey began rather awkwardly. Sansa and Sandor had been alone together, they had been intimate with each other, but they had never been so completely and utterly isolated. Having spent most her life underneath a watchful eye, Sansa was at a loss for what to do. She had dreamt of more time with Sandor for weeks now, and he was finally here. The non-knight of her dreams was walking beside her, alive and well.

Before his presumed death, Sansa used to fantasize about what it might be like… to be alone with Sandor. A full grown man, whose strength she had felt, whose lips she had kissed, who hands had pushed and pulled her body. Her stomach tingled at the thought and the memory of their shared passion in the Godswood.

Sansa was rather glad when the awkwardness passed and the walking game began anew between them. It started past noon, after they broke for a simple lunch. Sandor reached for her hand, to lift her off the sand, and she stumbled against him. He caught her easily, and their hands remained entwined afterwards. Clasped hands led to subtle brushes, nudges, and a quiet admiration of each other that Sansa enjoyed. It was a new day, and the Hound and his Little Bird were free.

By the end of the day, Sansa was eternally grateful for her fine boots. Stranger’s presence made her believe she might be given a reprieve during the day, but Sandor was afraid to overburden the Stallion. If Stranger grew too weary, he might not be able to carry anything at all, and they’d be left shouldering their packs through the wilderness. Besides, Sandor pointed out, Stranger needed energy to help keep watch in the night. They needed his strength and speed in case of an emergency.
Sandor chose a small fisherman’s hut for shelter. Sansa was so exhausted when they reached the shanty, she collapsed onto the muddy wooden planks that served as a floor. The hut was cramped, and Sandor had to hunch over to fit inside. Their shelter only had three walls, and was open to the elements. Sansa shivered as the temperature steadily dropped. They were lucky it had not rained yet, or snowed.

First, Sandor checked the structure. Once he was certain the building would not collapse in the middle of the night, he unsaddled the black charger, and smiled softly when Sansa immediately crawled onto the bedroll he placed on the floor. It was made of rabbit and fox furs, sumptuously soft. Sansa closed her eyes, to rest a moment, before she heard the thwump of Sandor placing his own bedroll. Across the fire. Away from her.

Sansa’s heart sunk. She glanced up at him, but he was busy bustling around the hut, unbuckling the heaviest bits of armor he had equipped. Sansa watched as Sandor wrenched off the bandage covering his face, and deposited it without care in his satchel. Throughout the day, he had been scratching at the healing wound on his face. As soon as the bandages were gone, he looked immensely relieved to be rid of the wrapping. Sandor opened one of the satchels to find inspect the lemons and lye, not noticing Sansa distress.

While she was thinking of something to say, Sandor found a wooden bucket outside the door. Using the sack of lemons, and the tiny bottle of lye, he busied himself with creating a strong smelling concoction. Sansa watched him distantly, wondering what purpose the lemons might serve, but too tired to ask questions. When Sandor was finished, he moved to gently jostle her.

“We should get this part over with,” he murmured, and the bucket thunked beside her head.

“What is it?” Sansa asked and moved to kneel before him and inspect the strange potion. The smell of lemons was strong and acidic. A cleaning agent?

“Something to lighten your hair,” Sandor muttered, “twas the eunuch’s idea, and I agree with him. If you would consent.”

“Consent?” Sansa’s eyes widened and reflexively clutched at her red locks.

Her red hair… it was part of her identity. Ever since she was young, Sansa had loved her hair. It’s red coloring was bright and unusual, it distinguished her from other ladies. And, if Sansa was honest, she was more than a little vain about her most appealing feature. One time, Sansa even caught the Queen glaring enviously at the halo of red on her back. Sansa ran a few fingers fondly through the ends of her hair. That was the problem though, wasn’t it? Sansa’s hair was too distinguished. The Gold Cloaks might be searching for a fair skinned, red hair maiden right now.

“I won’t ask you to do anything you aren’t willing to,” Sandor leveled her with his gaze. The dying sun highlighted the brutal scarring of his face, drawing attention to mutilation. Sansa felt a twinge of humility.

I am being vain in front of the Hound, that is shameful indeed.

His words hung in the air for a while and the bucket sat between them. Sansa peered into the mysterious mixture and saw her watery likeness reflected back at her. A pale face with black bags underneath her eyes peered back at Sansa. The figure was almost unrecognizable. Years ago, Sansa even caught the Queen glaring enviously at the halo of red on her back. Sansa ran a few fingers fondly through the ends of her hair. That was the problem though, wasn’t it? Sansa’s hair was too distinguished. The Gold Cloaks might be searching for a fair skinned, red hair maiden right now.

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Curious grey eyes tracked her movement, waiting for a response. Sansa felt the pressure to make a decision, and soon. Can she? Would she?
Yes, the answer came from within her. *I would do anything to keep us safe.*

Sansa nodded her head gravely, and without waiting for him to respond, she carefully dunked her head into the bucket. From beside her, she could hear Sandor move onto his knees. He gently began working her hair, using half sliced lemon wedges to move the potion through her locks. Sansa jumped when he first touched her scalp, startled by the almost unexpected invasion. Sandor paused in his ministration.

"No," she said into the bucket, her voice echoed strangely, "continue."

The smell was overpowering, and Sansa found herself gagging periodically. Sandor apologized once but she waved it off. *I'm a stark,* she thought. *I will do my part to keep us safe.* After a minute or two, Sansa scalp started to tingle awfully. The tickle started around her ears but then grew to surround her head. It felt like her skin was crawling. With more time, the light tickle turned into a fierce discomfort, and the fierce discomfort transformed into a burning sensation. Sansa’s face scrunched with displeasure, but she tried desperately to keep her scalp submerged. Finally, when her legs began to shake against her will, she relented.

“It burns,” she whimpered. Sansa would have been ashamed with the weakness in her voice, if it had been anyone other than Sandor. The Hound knew what burning felt like, and would not begrudge her for

“Enough then,” he said roughly, and grabbed her shoulders. Sansa was blessedly lifted away. Instantly, another bucket was placed before her. This one was filled with water. Sandor reached and drew out a cup, pouring the soothing liquid over her head. Instantly, the burn began to abate. Sansa sighed with relief.

After a few cupfuls, Sandor started running his fingers through her hair. The repetitive stroking action drew a contented moan from her. At the noise, Sandor froze and wrapped one of his spare shirts around her head. Sansa sat back, disappointed.

*Every time I respond in kind, he recoils,* Sansa puzzled. Any other day, Sansa might have confronted Sandor. But, in truth, she did not know what to say. Sansa had been raised as a proper lady, and she knew Sandor was only acting as he'd been taught. Sandor was a soldier, and she was a lady, and they were alone in the wilds with no chaperone. Considering the circumstances, Sandor was treating her with the respect she was due. In fact, her non-knight may have even crossed the line of propriety. Sansa knew all this, but for some reason, she'd been expecting something else, something more.

Sansa dried her hair and watched Sandor shifting uncomfortably under her scrutiny. She idly wondering if the color would truly become lighter. Sandor cleared his throat when she was done working his shirt through her hair.

“And… if you’re masquerading as a boy,” Sandor unsheathed his knife at his hip.

*It is too long...* Sansa realized with dread. Lady Stark had always taught her daughter that long hair made a lady. It was a staple of womanhood. Cropped hair was for soldiers and laborers. A true lady could be found with a full head of shiny hair. Mentally, Sansa tried to calculate how long it might take to regrow her red locks. One year, two years, three years...? Then, glancing at Sandor's face, she inwardly chastised herself. Sandor lived with his burns for over a decade. Sansa could sacrifice a year or two.

Sandor looked at her cautiously, his burned face stretched as he grimaced. “... again, I would not ask unless--”
“Do it,” Sansa swallowed her pride. The thirteen year old, who lived to please her mother, screamed internally at the thought, “before I lose my courage.”

Sandor bid her to turn around with a twirl of a finger Sansa sat, shock still between his legs. She could see his knees out of the corner of her eye. There was a small pause, and then Sandor lifted the length of her hair off her back, taking a moment to run his hands through her wet tresses. Sansa heard him sigh with a wistful tone.

“I have always loved your hair,” he whispered, slicing a large chunk off of the bottom. Sansa winced, at the harsh sound, but was quickly enraptured by the soft tone of his voice. “Ever since I first met you. It shines like... the fiery red of a setting sun. Seven Gods, I sound like a clod.”

“Ha!” Sandor could make her laugh even when she was crying. And, by now, she was crying. Sansa could hear the slice of his knife, hacking away at the symbol of her femininity. Wet locks fell around her, on her back, and into her lap. With one hand, she twirled a wet strand fondly. It was over six inches long and it did seem to be lighter in color. Before this, Sansa’s hair covered her back, it billowed behind her as she walked. Sansa would miss her copper curtains.

“It will grow back,” Sandor rumbled, sensing her silent anguish. A hand stroked her shortened locks and squeezed her shoulder comfortingly. Sansa shivered when his thumb came into contact with the back of her neck. Sandor continued to touch her neck, perhaps he was unable to resist the temptation, leaving Sansa momentarily confused. Does he think I haven’t noticed his caress?

When he was done, Sansa’s hair fell down to her chin, and her head felt lighter. Running her hands through the shorn locks, she was surprised by how short it felt.

“Well,” she said, turning around. “Do I look like a boy now?”

Sandor was leaning against the back wall of the hut, hands on his knees, surrounded by swaths of her hair. Sitting up, he burned her with his gaze. Sandor’s eyes took the same slow path down her body she was growing accustomed to, lingering on her breast and hips. Sansa blushed, and grew even redder when she realizing her position. If she scooted forward, even a little, she’d be resting in between his legs.

“No,” Sandor said honestly, reaching a hand forward to tug on a stray lock, “you are far too beautiful.”

Sansa smiled and leaned into his hand, which now cupped her cheek. Sandor inhaled sharply, but did not retract his hand this time, for which Sansa was thankful. He watched her carefully, like a deer watches a wolf, and slowly, ever so slowly, brushed his thumb across the arch of her cheekbone.

“I’ve always liked your hands,” Sansa said, recalling his compliment to her earlier. Figuring she should return the favor.

“No?” Sandor’s hands moved to her neck, his thumb tripping over her lips. Sansa smiled at him again and cleared her throat, thinking now might be the best time to broach the subject.

“Sandor--”

“We should get some rest, long day of traveling tomorrow. No fire tonight,” Sandor interrupted. Grey eyes fell to the floor and he scooped up her fallen locks without care. Sansa's heart beat painfully. She watched mutely as he gathered the various strands of hair and then threw them into the nearby waters.
“I do not want to alert anyone to our position,” he said when he returned to the lean-to. “We do have the advantage though, the current took us far, and they will not expect us to have escaped using the waterways. I bet those fools are combing the Kingswood right now.” With that, her non-knight turned his back on her to check on the horse.

Sansa placed a hand over her racing heart and fell back on her bedroll with a thump. These games are going to drive me mad... she thought. Sansa had spent so long wishing for Sandor to reappear at the Red Keep, she'd forgotten the fickleness of his nature. In the dark of her room, she'd romanticized the Hound and forgot the man behind the scar. The man who shrunk from the affection he secretly craved.

Sandor returned and lowered himself to his furs, throwing an arm over his eyes. Sansa’s heart sunk, when she realized she still needed to speak to him about their sleeping situation.

“Sandor,” she began, swallowing nervously. “Might we, would you… ah, um, do you think you could, we could…?”

He raised his arm, and looked expectantly at her. “What do you need, Little Bird?”

“Might we sleep next to one another?” Sansa blurted out, blushing horribly. Sandor's eyes widened and unintentionally, his mouth dropped slightly in awed surprise. Sansa braced herself for his possible rejection with her next words, “Do you think you will be able to, oh, I don’t know how to say... Resist?”

Sandor stared at her. “Well, it helps that you’re dressed like a boy,” he deadpanned.

Sansa was momentarily shocked, before she perceived the teasing tone of his voice, and the smirk on his lips. A great weight lifted off her chest and she breathed an airy laugh.

“I won’t deny it,” Sandor said softly, before she could respond. He looked conflicted with his thoughts, “it will be difficult. And forgive me, Little Bird, but I may try before this journey is over. I am only a man and you may have noticed how your presence… affects me.”

Sansa’s mind returned to the passion he displayed in the Godswood of King’s Landing. She knew the intensity of his passion and how he reacted to her touch. How could she forget? But, Sansa needed his embrace at night for other reasons. Embarrassing reasons she struggled to reveal. Sansa licked her dry lips and looked toward the night sky. It had darkened considerably now, and Sansa took comfort in the fact that Sandor could not see the physical manifestation of her shame.

“You remember the riot?” Sansa whispered into the air.

“Aye,” Sandor nodded. Past dusk now, she could barely detect the slight movement.

“Ever…” Sansa swallowed again heavily, “ever since then I’ve had these awful night terrors. I… in these dreams, you do not come for me and those men--” Sansa broke off, tears threatening to spill. “When I wake, I can feel their hands, grabbing me. I feel disgusting, vile, and sometimes I scream at night. Shae used to hold me, but I always thought... I always wished it was you.”

“I feel safe with you,” Sansa concluded.

It was silent, long enough for Sansa to feel self conscious about her confession. Closing her eyes against the pain of rejection welling within her, she waited for his response. Instead of spoken words, Sansa heard Sandor shifting and a rustling sound.

Sansa yelped when the furs beneath her moved. Sandor dragged her gently across the floor of the
fishing hut until they lay next to each other. Before she could say anything, he snaked a hand around her waist and pulled her tight against his chest, careful to keep their hips apart.

“Sleep,” he whispered against her neck. The breath ghosted against her ear and she sighed in pleasure. Sandor’s arm tightened around her, and she lay her head down on his chest. Thu-thump. Thu-thump. Thu-thump.

“I will keep you safe. Even in your dreams.”
A Nameday Not to Celebrate

Chapter Summary

Sansa receives some unpleasant news from a stranger on her nameday.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It is my name day,” Sansa said, “I am eight and ten today.”

Sandor looked at her, puzzled. The clip-clop of the horse marked his befuddlement. “How do you know?”

“I’ve been keeping track of the days since we left King’s Landing,” Sansa shuffled through her tunic pocket and revealed a thin scrap of paper and a charcoal pencil that was given to her by the eunuch’s boy. She held them proudly before his eyes. “I stole the paper in case we needed it. But I ended up keeping track of the days instead.”

“How many days has it been?” Sandor asked, peering at the setting sun over the bay, then added as an afterthought. “Happy name day.”

“Twelve,” Sansa turned and smiled teasingly at him. “And, thank you.”

Not knowing what else to say, and flustered by her attention, Sandor decided to set up camp. Stopping to rest in a small rock overhang for the night, and making sure Sansa was settled safely. Sandor went into the forest to gather wood. Looking behind him, the Little Bird smiled and waved him away. Once he was certain to be out of eyesight, he ran a hand through the tangle of his hair and took a moment to gather himself.

Twelve days, and no closer to the Saltpans or Whiteharbor. How long would it take to navigate the sandy shores? Sandor wracked his brain, wishing he'd studied maps of the Eastern coat more carefully as a youth, but his travels never took him to these remote and sandy beaches. The food was rationed for three weeks, but their slow pace was working against them, and Sandor would not push any faster. However, the lack of food was taking a toll on their spirits. If only they had taken a second horse.

I should have asked for one, Sandor thought. But I had thought two horses would attract too much attention. Stupid dog. A faster pace would benefit them both. The greater the distance between Sandor, Sansa and King’s Landing, the Lannisters... Joffrey, the better.

A faster pace would be a benefit, but the beneficial effects of their travel could not be ignored. For both the Hound and his Little Bird. The influence of the Red Keep had been greater than he imagined. With each passing day, the wilderness worked to heal the open wounds on their hearts and mind. No longer under the dark shadow of the King and the court, Sansa was changing, the fog in both their minds was clearing. Sandor felt a weight lift from his shoulders, a weight he wasn’t aware he had been carrying. In many ways, the Hound was dying. Sandor drank less and smiled more, even if it was mostly internally. And Sansa, Sansa was transforming into the lady he always knew she was, but more so.
Of course, they could do with more food and more comforts, but in general, Sandor had never seen his lady smile so often, and so freely than in these last few days.

The color was returning to her cheeks, a light was reignited in her soul. She laughed at crabs scuttling nonsensically in the sand, and stopped to smell strange flowers on the wayside. She was intoxicatingly affectionate at times, hugging his arm and entwining their legs at night. It was wonderful, a better heaven he could not have fashioned himself, and it worried Sandor. Underneath his brutal exterior, the Hound was frightened. Will she tire of me? Will the inside repulse her? Sansa’s presence constantly brought painful questions to the forefront of his mind.

Showing Sansa the image of Joria made him doubtful, and even worse, it made him contemplate the past and present. How well did they truly know each other? They had never honestly spoke of each other’s memories, families and histories. Obviously, Sansa was attached. Sandor would have to be blind not to see her blushes, deaf not to hear the affection in her voice, and completely unfeeling not to notice her touches and the soft kiss she would bestow on him before they fell asleep. These affections he had never experienced before, and he was afraid to grow used to them. It was clear, Sansa held him in high regard. She listened when he spoke, like no one listened before. She sought his opinions and demonstrated a desire to cooperate with him. A better partner he could not have imagined.

If Sandor was hesitant to travel with his Little Bird at first, he no longer had any doubts. Sansa had never traveled roughly before, he knew this. But despite her gentle upbringing, his Little Bird had proven her adaptability in the past twelve days. It only took a day or two before his lady began to find her niche in their daily schedule. She started by unloading the bed rolls, now she fetched water, started the fire, chopped vegetables, and picked berries, leaving Sandor to hunt (which took a great amount of time and patience) and tend to his pernicious warhorse. Best of all, she did these tasks with a smile, and a pretty chirp.

Traveling through the rocky, sometimes sandy landscape, Sandor knew his Little bird was easily the most beautiful sight in leagues, even if she was dressed in rags with shorn hair. Day by day, she brightened the world.

Sandor’s thoughts turned to the ring he kept on his twine necklace. He hadn’t known why he grabbed it, it just occurred to him that he might need it, and he had always carried the small token wherever he went. It hung heavy around his neck. The metal was weighted with all it carried: hope, love, happiness, certainly, but also indecision, fear, anxiety, and helplessness. Sandor doubted he could even bring himself to ask. After all, he’d only taken it because of a passing whimsical thought. No, I couldn’t possibly.

Sandor contemplated simply giving it to her. He knew this was his last chance at... love, and the ring would never go to any other lady. Doesn't the ring belong with it’s proper owner? What would Joria, or his mother want?

Sandor pushed those thought away violently, feeling almost ill. He had not thought of those voices, those faces, those kind hands in so long. Pull yourself together, Hound.

The past days had been a mixture of bliss and torture. It was heavenly, and all too surreal, to eat with Sansa, to sit with her, lie next to her at night, and hold simple conversations. Their evening routine had become familiar and comfortable, a domestic dance that frightened him with it’s familiarity. Just last night, when Sansa poured him a bowl of rabbit stew, she knew to set it down to cool because he hated hot food. When did she become so close? When did she begin to see beyond the scars?

The thought of losing her was terrifying. Sandor had never been close to any woman other than his sister, and he had no knowledge of how to behave. He had known whores in the past, but those
interactions were based on business, not the affairs of the heart. Sansa deserved better. Someone with a beautiful face, not a twisted mass of flesh. She was young and beautiful, and he was ten years her senior. Eight and ten today... I am a lovesick fool.

Shaking his head, Sandor spied some daylilies far in the distance. He set a small trap in the sand, an old trap he stolen from the standing army of Tywin Lannister, and went to pick the most well formed blossoms. Content with his selection, Sandor returned to his trap, only to find more damned crabs. He had hoped for a sable, squirrel or rabbit, running from the brush, but it would have to do.

Sandor walked quietly into camp, hoping to catch Sansa unawares. The Little Bird faced away from him, watching the sun set. Her short hair tangled and untangled in the wind, highlighting her fine cheekbones, her delicate jaw, and the rosy color of her lips. A beautiful site he did not deserve to witness. A pit had been dug for the fire, and the furs were laid out for the night. Sansa had even managed to unsaddle Stranger and was now patting the horse’s flank. Creeping lightly on his feet, Sandor snaked an arm around Sansa’s waist and unceremoniously shoved the flowers under her face. Sansa smiled, her mouth formed a small “o”, and she thanked him with a light kiss on the cheek, blushing.

Setting down the crabs, Sandor watched Sansa out of the corner of his eye. The Little Bird instantly began weaving the flowers and their stems into a makeshift crown. Satisfied that she was truly happy with his insignificant gift, he turned to dinner. A few crabs snapped their claws angrily at him, affronted. Sandor felt a twinge of pity that he shoved away. I am truly becoming soft.

“Sandor,” Sansa paused, her fingers hovered over a bent stem. Blue eyes locked with his, and his heart stuttered. The way she said his name...“When is your name day?”

“Why? Are you going to make me a crown of flowers?” Sandor dropped the caught crabs into the boiling water, ignoring their shrieks.

“No,” Sansa placed the laurel atop her head and tapped her chin. Sandor’s breath caught at the sight of her. “I would find a good gift for you. Something that suits you. I don’t think flowers suit you, Sandor.”

Sandor couldn’t help but smile at her simple, declarative statement. There were several gifts from Sansa he might enjoy, but he could never ask. Unbidden, they came to his mind. Lie with me, wear my ring, stay forever. All these would be good gifts. Sandor saw Sansa still watching him, waiting for an answer.

“My name day falls on the fifth of Strontius, there is no need to find me a gift.”

Sansa sighed and shook her head. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her rise to her feet. The sand from her tunic and breeches fell away from her frame, and Sandor pretended to watch the progress of each grain, but instead his eyes followed the soft curve of her hip. It took a great amount of willpower to rein in his licentious thoughts. Sandor struggled every day with the desire to move their relationship forward, into something more physical, more confirming. He had never thought himself as a cretin, or even particularly lustful.

In the past, he might have visited one of Baelish’s establishments. But those days were long gone. The Hound rarely frequented the whorehouses in King’s Landing. His desire for the pleasures of the flesh had faded somewhat since he passed twenty and five. In his youth, when he first discovered a woman’s touch and what it could do, he had been rather… enthusiastic with what gold could purchase. Over time, he realized the disgust was still there, but whores could hide it better when they needed to eat the next morning.
Older now, he wanted what Sansa might offer: intimacy. What would it feel like, to be with a woman who wanted to be with him? Sansa was never disgusted by his burns. When she looked at his face, it was as if she could see straight through his eyes and into his soul. What would it be like then? Would she look him in the eye during the act? Would it be slow and languid, as opposed to the rushed, frenzied couplings he had before? Would she lie with him afterwards and dream the night away in his arms?

Sandor had not pushed physical contact between them, but he feared he might break soon, and consume her entirely. He needed to know she felt the same, he craved the ultimate act of devotion. For the first time in his life, he wished to know a woman’s thoughts. Before, he could sense the judgement and criticism of the ladies of the court. They hated him, despised him for his name and the mangled flesh on his face. Sansa was different though. There was nothing Sandor desired more than a peek into her mind and heart. To know that she was his, and he was hers...

Sandor shook his head to dispel these tangential thoughts, and felt her hands fall on his shoulders. They ran over his chest and wrapped around his neck. Sandor sat up straighter, acutely aware of her touch and proximity. No one else would ever dare caress the Hound in such a manner, but Sansa was not just anyone. He felt the warmth of her body pressing against his back, and his shoulders tensed involuntarily, as if to protect his heart.

The embrace brought Sansa’s mouth to his good ear and she whispered, “I’m sure I can think of one gift you might appreciate.”

Sandor swallowed heavily, any words he had prepared caught in his throat. Hadn’t he just been thinking of such acts? Sansa traced a circular design over his tunic, dipping down to lightly brush the top of his stomach. All coherent thoughts fled his mind, and he was reduced to a quivering simpleton. Sandor’s muscles clenched and unclenched. Hoping to bring some clarity to his head, he inhaled sharply through his nose.

This was not the first time she had grown so bold. Three nights ago, as they lay down to sleep, Sansa and Sandor had shared a heated kiss, and her hands had wandered to the hem of his shirt. The feel of her cold fingers pressed against his waist made him jump, and the kiss broke off suddenly. Sansa had stammered an apology, blushed red as a tomato, and turned away from him. Sandor might have thought her embarrassment was adorable, if he hadn’t been cursing himself throughout the night. Since then, her hands had been roaming curiously, mapping the shape of his arm. Sometimes during the day, she would run a hand over his chest, or touch the nape of his neck. Sandor both loved and hated Sansa’s new hobby. If only he knew whether or not to touch back.

“Sandor…”

His name brought him back to the present. Sansa pressed her lips to his neck, underneath his good ear. A shiver ran down his spine, which she must have sense, because he could felt smirking against his skin. By now, Sansa had discovered the immobilizing power she held over him. A dangerous discovery that he would have liked to keep secret a little while longer. At least until he could acclimate himself to her singular presence in the wild.

“Sansa…” Sandor closed his eyes, reveling in the warmth and affection. He could feel the rise and fall of her chest, her breasts against his back, the light pressure of her fingers as she continued to draw idly on his body.

“The pot is boiling over.”

“I… what?” Sandor jumped and grabbed the pot with a rag, yelping as some hot water hit his hands.
The crabs inside were good and dead. Sansa laughed as he poured some water onto the sand and replaced the pot, scowling lightly. Sandor dried his hands on his breeches and gave her a mild glare.

“Distracted?” Sansa giggled in mirth. She crossed her long legs and smiled teasingly. As usual, she looked glorious.

“I… No, I…” Sandor coughed, rubbing the back of his head. “You are bold.”

“How old will you be?” Sansa asked, changing the subject, perhaps for his sake. She patted the ground next to her, silently bidding him to sit. Sandor complied and sprawled out on the ground next to her, leaning on his elbows. “On the fifth day of Strontius?”

Back to name days, then. “Nine and two,” Sandor begrudgingly admitted, cringing inwardly.

“We are less years apart than my mother was to my father,” Sansa’s eyes grew distant, and a hand fell on his knee. Sandor watched her thumb stroke his leg, momentarily mesmerized. “They were twelve years apart.”

Sandor did not know what to say to that. “My mother was twenty years younger than my father. He was grey by the time I was born.”

“Than we are not that far apart,” Sansa rested her head against his shoulder. Sandor stood shock still, so as not to disturb her. At times like these, he felt he was a beast, and she a delicate butterfly. Sansa’s affections were the most erotic experiences of his life, and he did not want to break the spell. Resting like this, in complete privacy, was heady and exhilarating. But years of tragedy and heartbreak had trained Sandor never to hope. He could not shake the feeling that the Sansa might vanish at any moment.

The silence stretched on, comfortable and familiar. Once the crabs were cooked, Sandor and Sansa broke the shells and ate the meat voraciously. It was sunset by the time they finished licking their fingers and the two stretched out contentedly on their joined furs. Sandor kicked some sand into their makeshift firepit. Dousing the fire until it was only a small, flickering flame. Sansa glowed in the dying light. Like an angel of the Seven.

Before he went to bed that night, Sandor clutched the ring around his neck, and prayed to the Warrior for strength. Then, thinking better of it, he prayed to the Mother.

“Sandor?” Sansa asked, wondering if he was still awake.

The two were resting on their joined furs. The dying fire popped and crackled, as it fought against the chill of the evening. Stranger was grazing in the distance, tail swishing back and forth. The moonlight illuminated the beach grass around them, silver reeds standing silent vigil over the couple. The only sound was from the constant whoosh of waves breaking against distant rocks.

Sansa felt warm and safe, in Sandor’s arms underneath their furs, but her thoughts ran away from her, making her restless. Earlier that day, Sansa celebrated her eight and tenth name day. It was her first without another Stark.

I am not entirely without family though, Sansa thought, when Sandor’s arm tightened around her waist.

In the past twelve days, Sansa had contemplated the nature of her relationship with her non-knight,
over and over again. There was naught much else to do, but walk and think, and walk and think. Sansa and Sandor... it could not be considered friendship, their interactions were too amorous, nor were they husband or wife, or even full fledged lovers, because they were not truly bound to each other. No words had been said to cement the bond between them, and Sansa mulled the situation over and over again in her mind, revisiting past memories.

Sandor had won her heart, time and time again, in just a few short years. When she was younger, she had always fantasized about the knight in shining armor who would earn her love. Sandor shattered all those fantasies, and if she let him, he would build her a different dream. A life of honesty, trust... hard work and purpose. After so long, in the corrupt, dark corridors of the Red Keep, Sandor was a breath of fresh air, and hope blossomed in her chest. Hope for normalcy in her life again.

*I have not wanted to be Queen for so long.* Sansa thought, turning on her other side. *I do not desire gold, I do not desire wealth. I only want a home again.*

The situation with her family disturbed her. If Robb won the war, would Sansa return to Winterfell? What is she was bound to Sandor? Would her family force her to cast him aside? *I would never,* thought Sansa. *It is my life. It is my choice.* Underneath her conscious thought, Sansa knew people spent their whole lives searching for an honest love, like the one she had with Sandor. Who was she to throw it aside? *My rescuer, my white knight who is not a knight.*

*I would stay with him.* The thought occurred to her the other day, and Sansa was slowly becoming more used to the idea. *A life with Sandor. Safe, and loved for who I am, not my title.*

*Does he want what I want?* Sansa wondered. *If so, why does he hold back?* Sansa could feel the tension in neck and shoulder, whenever he restrained himself from an embrace. *I am not glass, I am not a child,* Sansa would fume later. Does he have doubts? Yet, she knew after hearing the sad fate of his mother and sister, that he did not recoil because of anything Sansa had done. The fault laid with his brother, the Lannisters. All the cruel people who had withheld love from him, and hardened his heart.

*“Sandor?”* she asked again with bated breath.

Sandor hummed in response, to let her know he was awake and listening.

Sansa sat upright and looked down on him. Sandor’s eyes were still closed, and his hand fell from her waist, to the ground with a thump. *“Do you remember Joffrey’s name day?”*

*“Aye,”* Sandor opened his eyes, she could sense his mood darken at the mention of the King. He blinked blearily at her, *“What of it?”*

*“Do you remember Ser Dontos?”*

Sandor pinched his nose and nodded his head, so Sansa continued, *“How he appeared before the King, drunk? I lied and said it was bad luck to kill a man on his name day, and you agreed. You lied for me, because I wanted to spare that poor fool’s life.”*

*“... Aye.”* Sandor agreed, not sure why she wanted to talk of about that incident. Sandor recalled that day vividly. He had seen the look of panic on Sansa’s face, and rushed to defend her story, false as it was.

*“I never got the chance to thank you,”* her eyes fell to his lips and and she started to trace her strange design on his chest again. *“You always tell the truth, but you lied for me.”*

*“I’d tell a thousand lies for you, Little Bird.”* Sandor hadn’t meant to say that. He had thought it, but
didn’t know he would actually say it. Sansa was pleased with his words though, and a genuine smile blossomed over her face. Sandor pushed a strand of her short hair behind her ear, so he could look into her eyes. In turn, Sansa’s hand cupped his cheek.

“I know,” she whispered, “you keep me safe.”

Sansa’s breath hitched when Sandor inevitably leaned into her palms. It was so sweet, how he fell prey to the simplest affections. Sansa lightly traced the line of his jaw, both the burnt and the unburnt. Sandor’s eyes fluttered shut and his mouth twitched, as if he was fighting a smile.

“Why me?” Sandor whispered gruffly, an anguished expression fought against his happiness. “Am I your plaything? An amusement? I don’t understand.”

Sansa paused and thought for a moment. It pleased her to no end, that he would ask such a probing question. Why Sandor Clegane? Why the Hound?

“Because you are honest,” Sansa smiled and pressed a light kiss to his brow, “you are strong,” she kissed his cheek, “you don’t care about my title, you care for me.” Sansa lightly brushed a kiss against his lips. Sandor sat upright and gripped her waist. Sansa was pleased to discover he was less restrained in his sleepy state, in both his questions and his actions.

Heads close together, foreheads touching, Sansa could see his breathing was labored. Something in his grey eyes. A vulnerability, a sensitivity that spoke to her. Sansa was suddenly aware of how close he truly was, and how easy it would be to crawl into his lap, to bridge the final barrier. For the first time in her life, she felt a deep yearning for physical contact, the same yearning she felt frequently in this past week. Sansa wanted to be loved in a way that no one had ever loved her. She wanted to carve in stone, her devotion.

“Sandor--”

Without any warning, Sandor pitched forward and cut off her words with a kiss. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her roughly back against him, until she sat in the exact spot between his long legs she had contemplated. Sansa sighed against his mouth when she felt their chests press together. Her fingers clutched the soft fabric of his tunic.

His kiss was rough, unyielding, and in the back of her mind Sansa thought briefly that he must be starved for affection. Shivering at the thought, she brought her hands up to caress his face, both the burnt and the unburnt side. She succumbed to the embrace, flattening against him, melding the contours of their bodies. Sansa could feel his chest, rising and falling rapidly with each heavy breath. She rubbed against him, suddenly desperate for his affection, for a deeper touch.

Sandor groaned, a deep and throaty roar of approval, before running his tongue over her lips. Sansa opened her mouth, partially out of shock, and Sandor took the opportunity to explore her mouth. They both fell into a heated kiss, lost in the moment, oblivious to everything around them. The strength of his embrace was driving her to madness.

Sansa could sense all of his tightly restrained power, captive in his muscles. Tension oozed from his arms and shoulders, into his grip. His fingers pinched her hip bones, his thumbs rubbed against the rough fabric of her tunic, sending a wave of pleasure over her body, but they never drifted higher or lower. Sansa was caught between wanting to maintain a chaste kiss, and desperately desiring for him to unleash his passion, to reach the ultimate closeness.

Sansa gasped when, a moment later, his hands trailed down to her hips and over her thighs, just as she’d imagine, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. Sandor broke the kiss, and Sansa had only a
second to breathe before he grasped both her legs behind the knees and pulled her on top of him.

A hurricane of nerves assaulted her when Sansa realized the precariousness of her position. Hips connected, Sandor’s manhood was pressed against the apex of her thighs, the size and shape of which she could feel through the fabric of their clothes. Sandor’s hands rushed back up her sides, thumbs brushing over her breasts, sending a flurry of sensations across her body. Sansa arched her back at the sudden, and unexpectedly intimate contact. *I can barely think*… Sansa’s body buzzed, but her own shortness of breath was beginning to frighten her.

“Sandor--”

“Sansa,” his mouth fell onto her neck and jawbone.

Sansa gasped at this new, tantalizing form of kissing. Her hands reflexively gripped the hair at the nape of his neck. Fingers clenched black locks. Sansa jumped when his teeth grazed across her pulse point, the movement only served to rub herself against the rock beneath her. That last action caused Sandor to jerk, sending a rush of heat to her womanhood and her eyes snapped open.

“Sandor, too fast,” she gasped, her head was spinning.

Registering her words, Sandor froze, his hands still clenched on her hips. Exhaling slowly, he retracted his lips from her skin and pulled back. The fire popped from behind her, and Sandor’s eyes were black and lustful.

Sansa was flushed, energy thrumming from her core to her fingertips. Lifting her shaking hands, she slid gently out of his lap and pulled back. The fire popped from behind her, and Sandor’s eyes were black and lustful.

Sandor ran an unsteady hand through his tangled hair and glanced at her nervously. Sansa recognized the look of self-loathing and guilt. *He is punishing himself already*… Once she was seated, far enough away to reduce temptation, she reached for his hand. Sansa stroked his arm and pressed her lips against his palm, wrist, knuckles and fingers.

“All is well, Sandor,” she whispered. “I want to be with you. I would not have left with you if I felt differently.” Sansa bit her lip, “next time… maybe a little slower?”

Sandor raised his head at the mention of a “next time” and his lips twitched, as if fighting a small smile at the thought. Sansa’s heart soared when he nodded.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, unused to apologies. His captive hand twisted and wiggled until their fingers were entwined. “I forgot… I forgot you were a maiden. I forgot everything. I think I even forgot who I was.”

Sansa blushed, imagining herself seated in his lap and… “I forgot too, I suppose. Was that a proper kiss?”

“No, that was me being a selfish ass,” he grinned cockily and laughed outright when he caught sight of her mussed up hair and flushed skin. “You look like you’ve just had a tumble in the hay.”

“I can imagine,” Sansa must have looked a mess, but she felt like she was glowing. “I think I like your improper kisses.”

Sandor nodded mutely in response. They fell into a comfortable silence, Sansa was caught between wanting more from Sandor, and her own confusion. In King’s Landing, these moments were few
and far between. Here, in the wild, they were free to love and Sansa didn’t know how to love another, or to what extent. How to refuse, or how to continue... Am I a lady or a wanton?

Then, there was the added question of her maidenhead. The symbol of her innocence and purity. If taken from her, Sansa's status as a highborn maiden would change irrevocably. Her family expected her to remain chaste, but if Sandor asked, would she give freely? Without a yellow and black cloak around her shoulders? Sansa was caught in a storm of uncertainty.

The hand with the cleaved pinky reached to smooth her hair. “No worries, Little Bird.” Sandor intoned in a low voice that went straight to her womanhood. It only made her flush worse, and her heart pound painfully. Those hands... “Who is here to say what is right and wrong?”

Sansa couldn’t argue that point, so she lay back down on the cold ground, and pressed her face into his chest, inhaling the scent that could only be Sandor.

“You’re right…” she mumbled and turned her cheek against him to watch the fire. Sandor stretched out and pulled the furs back over them, encasing their bodies in warmth.

Sansa was lulled into feelings of love and safety by the soothing rise and fall of Sandor’s chest, and the familiar heart beating in her ear. Her non-knight ran a hand through her hair, fingers scraped lightly on her scalp, as he'd done in the past. The comforting gesture made her eyes flutter close.

“Excuse me,” a voice came from the darkness.

In a flash, their furs were thrown back and Sandor was on his feet with his longsword drawn. Sansa took a few seconds longer to react, because she was certain she had not heard a voice. A whisper, the blowing of the wind. Her eyes swiveled to the edge of the dying circle of light around their encampment, and focused on an unfamiliar pair of boots peeking out of the brush. A wave of cold air assaulted Sansa's body, waking her to the potential danger that might be lurking in the night.

The silver of Sandor's blade reflected in the moonlight, reminding her that they were not defenseless. Sansa leapt to her feet only a moment later, knowing she needed to do something, but lacking Sandor's military experience, she fumbled for the dragonbone blade from the Godswood. Pulling the short sword from it’s sheath, she realized with despair that the blackened bone was dull and needed sharpening.

A shadow stepped into the light. Sansa had the sense to kick a log into the pit, and the fire caught, illuminating the mysterious man further.

“I am sorry to bother you, but I saw your campfire from afar, and thought I could offer my services,” the strange man held up a string of three caught fish, fat and wriggling. “I caught fish.”

Sandor looked over the man’s shoulder at Stranger, the notoriously violent warhorse in the distance. Stranger pulled up his head, mouth full of long grass, and munched slowly. The stallion looked questioningly at his master, as if completely indifferent to the mysterious man's presence. Sandor shook his head ruefully. Clearly, Stranger was losing his touch. Then, he turned on the man. At least this midnight visitor was fool enough to approach them alone.

“Who the fuck are you?”

Sandor cursed himself internally for growing so distracted as to not notice the man approach, and Sansa shakily held up her dragonbone sword next to him. Sandor noted she needed to learn proper stance and footwork at sometime. She clearly did not know the basics of how to grip the hilt. Although it was unusual, she may need the skill later.
The tall man bowed and raised his hands in a gesture of peace. “I am a brother of the Seven. The Elder Brother they call me, and an experienced healer. I am journeying from the Riverlands back to the Quiet Isle. I came upon your encampment by accident. I only thought we might keep each other company in these dark and dangerous times.”

Sansa lowered her sword at the mention of the Faith and looked the brother up and down. The Elder Brother, as he was called, had a square face and honest expression. He was tall and muscular, born with a fighter’s build, and from beneath a heavy set brow, intelligent eyes peered at her. His black hair stuck at odd angles off his face, making him appear young, but Sansa could see the wrinkles around his eyes the bespoke a great age.

“You are a woman,” the monk’s eyes widened, but he quickly corrected himself by lowering his head in respect. Sansa was caught between curtseying or stepping behind Sandor’s large form to hide from the Elder Brother. Steeling herself, and sticking up her chin, she settled on giving the man a sharp nod.

“And what of it?” Sandor prowled forward threateningly, pressing the flat of his blade against the brother’s throat.

“San..” Sansa stopped herself. “Samson! Do not hurt a brother of the Faith.”

The Elder Brother’s gaze flickered back and forth between them. “I meant no disrespect. Brothers of the Faith have sworn not to indulge in pleasures of the flesh. It is quite intelligent for you to disguise your female companion as a boy. Especially in these tumultuous times. I have journeyed from the Quiet Isle to discover the truth of these rumors of war, only to find them to be all too true. Saltpans is in a ruins. It is dangerous land you travel.”

“She’s my wife, don’t you look at her.” The lie came easily, too easily. Sandor snarled and the Elder Brother nodded plaintively.

“I assumed so, considering your… earlier position.”

“You were spying on us??” Sansa squeaked, turning a deep shade of red. Sandor almost cut the man in half, right then and there. The grip on the hilt of his longsword became white-knuckled, and the Hound reared his ugly head. How dare this groveling fool…?

“I did not intend to,” the monk shook his head, realizing his grievous error. He held up his hands again, and the fish as he did so. “I saw your fire from afar and meant to speak to you, but happened across at an… inopportune moment. I went away and decided to catch some fish for us to share, so that we might feast in the light of the Seven, and you would know my genuine intentions. I do not wish to disturb a husband and wife.”

Sandor’s grip slacked. “You went to investigate the war,” his lip curled. “What is the brother’s opinion on these matters?”

Perhaps he’s heard something concerning Robb and Mother… Sansa thought. Then, a darker thought occurred to her. What if he sympathized with the Lannisters? What if this monk is loyal to the crown?

“All war is evil,” the monk’s eyes grew sad. So far, the Elder Brother seemed entirely unconcerned with the sword pointed at his jugular. A telling sign that this was not his first interrogation.

“I once was a knight. My father was a knight, my brothers were all knights. I fought for Prince Rhaegar at the Trident, and at the Trident I fell. The only true kings are the Gods. That is what I
know. No war fought, apart from their glory, has any justification.”

“A pretty answer for a simple monk,” Sandor lowered his sword to the ground. The wood had caught fire now, and Sandor could see the man more clearly. His expression was sincere and genuine, but feeling threatened, Sandor fell back into the mindset of the Hound.

“Why do you carry that longknife?”

The brother was dressed plainly, in the traditional brown garb of his order. There was a silver chain he used as a belt, and a seven pointed talisman hanging from his neck. The silver weapon at his waist was nestled in a simple leather sheath. Sansa felt no reason to fear a holy man sworn to the Seven, but she could understand Sandor’s hesitance. Sandor was not very religious, feeling spurned by the Gods, and would not easily accept anyone, regardless of their devotion to the Seven. Sansa also had their doubts, but did not think this ragged man held any threat. They were bound to encounter other travelers eventually.

“For defense,” the monk stated plainly. “I do not wish to die.”

“Sa… Samson,” Sansa placed a hand on his arm. “Perhaps we should share our fire with this holy man, and he might bless us. It would be good, to have the favor of the Seven. And.. hear news from the outside world. We have been traveling alone for quite some time,” she added aloud so the monk might hear.

Elder Brother nodded and Sandor gestured for him to come closer. However, he did not sheath his sword. Instead, Sandor leaned it gently against a rocky outcrop nearby, in case he needed the steel. The Elder Brother handed the fish to Sansa, which she made a show of inspecting. If they’d been poisoned though, they’d have no way of knowing.

In a tense silence, Sandor stripped the scales for the fish and prepared a second dinner. Sansa’s mouth watered at the thought of another meal. It would be glorious to fall asleep full and satiated for once.

“Sara,” Sandor gestured for her to relight the fire. Sansa did so without a word and then sat down on their furs. Sandor gestured for the holy man to sit on a large rock, and proceeded to cook their dinner without the Elder Brother’s help.

Sara and Samson, good names for their disguises. Sansa hoped she could remember them come daylight. The Elder Brother sat a respectable distance from the two, and crossed his legs. Sansa watched the monk carefully, but the holy man made no move to do anything but sit. The Elder Brother even seemed to be smiling lightly, and fiddling with the seven pointed star around his neck. His lips moved silently. Praying, Sansa realized, he is praying over the food.

“What do you wish to know?” the monk suddenly said, when he had finished his prayers.

“The war,” Sandor placed the fish in the pot, a loud sizzling sound emitted. The smell made Sansa’s stomach clench. That small amount of crab meat earlier had not satisfied her in the slightest. Ever since leaving King’s landing, her appetite had returned full force. Sandor believed it was because she was no longer living with constant storm and stress caused by the Lannisters.

“Ah, I have heard many stories. Do you have family involved? I can tell you what I’ve heard of both sides?”

“My brother,” Sansa spoke softly, “he fights for the North.”

Sandor and her shared a meaningful glance. It would be easier to stick to a lie, that was closer to the
truth.

“Ah,” the monk sighed heavily. “I do not have good news.”

Sansa’s heart thudded heavily in her ears. Her throat constricted and she wished she could hide the panic that threatened overwhelmed her. She sat up, fingers clenched in the fur around her. “What? What is it?

“You haven not heard of the Red Wedding then?”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait!
The Quiet Isle

Chapter Summary

Sansa and Sandor arrive at the Quiet Isle under the false names of Sara and Samson, a married couple fleeing from the war. Their lie ends up complicating things in a way neither of them imagined.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sandor watched Sansa with concern. Her head hung low, and she dragged her feet along their sandy road.

“Only one more league now…” the Elder Brother’s brown sleeves rippled in the wind. “Then we shall find passage across, using the Path of Faith… Septon Meribald shall be on duty today, to help shepard us across. Though I dare say, I could walk the path in my sleep by now.”

Sandor had to admit, the Elder Brother was a blessing come in disguise. With experienced hands, he had washed and rebandaged Sandor’s arm, and applied some sort of foul smelling ointment to stave off the rot. The stiffness in his forearm eased throughout the day, and Sandor begrudgingly respected the man as a skilled healer.

But more importantly, and more significantly, the Elder Brother had proposed to shelter Samson and Sara, for the time being at the Quiet Isle. The holy man brokered a deal with Sandor. Shelter for hard labor. The Quiet Isle was less trafficked in war, and with the decrease in pilgrimages, the monastery was suffering from a lack of volunteers.

“The gardens need tending, buildings need repair, the roads could be resealed, and of course there are more graves to be dug as the bodies wash up from the Saltpans. There is work to be done, certainly,” the Elder Brother nodded his head gravely. Sandor readily agreed, but the Little Bird said nothing, only chirped sadly that she would be glad to see a garden again.

Sandor was at a loss. Sansa took the news of her brother’s and mother’s fate very badly. She cried the first night, sobbing and clinging to his chest, and in the darkness, she was beset with foul nightmares that had her shaking in his arms. Sandor was tired, frustrated and desperate to console her.

His eyes fell to the glistening jewel on her left hand. The sun’s light refracted in the gems. “That was poorly done, also,” he bitterly mumbled to himself.

Fearing that the Elder Brother might discover their lie, Sandor had pulled his Little Bird aside the morning after she found out about the death of her family, snapped the twine necklace around his neck, and crudely shoved the ring on her finger.

It did stop her tears, however briefly, when she looked down in wonder at the gold ring, set with onyx and yellow beryl. Sandor had hoped she would smile, but then his Little Bird walked away, with tears in her eyes, and refused to look at him the rest of the day. Poorly done indeed.
The Elder Brother was acting as a (surprisingly willing) buffer between the two. Sandor was indebted to the man, and overall, found him to be good company. Although he was a retired knight, Sandor could glimpse true honor in the Elder Brother’s actions. He treated Sansa with distant respect, sparred and smoked with Sandor, and never asked for more than was expected. Their new monk friend was also a talented fisherman, whose bait caught more than a few fat Brave fish. A long, spiny breed with a sweet layer of fat underneath their rocky exterior.

Though they ate well, had an extra man on watch, and finally had a safe destination in mind, Sandor worried each night over his Little Bird. She barely spoke, consumed by grief. A few nights past, when the fire was dying, Sansa turned to him and started to tell a story about her brother, when he was younger. But, once she caught sight of the Elder Brother returning from relieving himself, she clamped her mouth shut and refused to speak anymore. Sandor wanted to throw a handful of sand in the monk’s face.

“Here we are.”

Sandor’s pulled Stranger to a stop and looked around. Sand flats, intertidal waves, and a few too many starfish dying in the sun. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Sansa’s head shot up at the sudden stop, and she turned a questioning gaze toward the Elder Brother.

“What exactly are we meant to be seeing?” Sandor asked, rubbing the growing beard on his face. The hair itched fiercely at the junction where scar tissue met unburnt skin.

“Ah, there he is.”

Sandor and Sansa followed the path of Elder Brother’s finger and spotted a figure in the distance, walking through the water. He seemed to be following an unseen maze underneath the surface of the tide. Septon Meribald, as the Elder Brother hailed him, waved merrily and then navigated through the deeper parts of the bay. Again, following some unknown path that only he seemed to know. The Septon’s face was screwed up tight in concentration, and as he grew nearer, Sandor could see his mouth counting paces.

_Ah, there is a path underneath the water, Sandor thought. Like the Spider’s path through the Red Keep._

Septon Meribald reached the “married” couple and the Elder Brother. Meribald would have been a very tall man, if not for the pronounced hunch in his back. He had large hands, a weathered face, grey-white whiskers lining his face, and a congenial smile upon meeting the new inhabitants of the Quiet Isle.

Beside him, a shaggy creature barked and wagged its tail happily.

“Oh!” Sansa exclaimed when the dog jumped and began to lick her face voraciously.

“Dog!” Meribald called, exchanging pleasantries with both the Elder Brother, and shaking Sandor’s hand eagerly. “Down!”

The dog must have weighed at least ten stone, and had a comical, droll appearance. Dog’s eyes were curtained by his overgrown hair, and his pink tongue lolled out from the side of his mouth, reminding Sandor of an unkempt, hyperactive child. Dog’s brown, shaggy fur matched the brown of the two monk’s robes. When Dog finally turned from Sansa to Sandor, he raised himself high on his hind legs and gave the burnt side of his face a good sniff. Teetering on his back paws, Dog nearly reached Sandor’s height.
“Dog! Don’t be rude!” Meribald called again, grasping the dog by his leather collar, and tugging. Dog gave Sandor one last, long, sniff, before jumping down and nuzzling the non-knight’s hand.

“Woof!”

Sandor ruffled the dog’s bedraggled fur and laughed shortly, “‘tis no matter.”

Meribald gave him a grateful look and then began to extoll Dog’s many virtues. Dog was the most intelligent of dogs that Septon Meribald had ever met. Dog had killed as many as ten wolves, over twenty ferociously mean raccoons, and was an extremely skilled navigator.

Sandor spied the numerous scars around Dog’s muzzle, the muscle on the dog’s chest and legs, and could not deny the beast was a fine specimen.

“Into the water than, the mudflats await!” Meribald gestured for the group to follow him. “Try not to stray, at any moment you may be one step away from falling off an ocean cliff. When in doubt, follow Dog! He knows the way as well as I… if only he’d tell me his true name. Keep close. Keep close! Follow me. I’ve traveled all over the Riverlands you know, not my first time through these parts. True, Dog?”

“Woof!”

The Elder Brother shook his head and grinned endearingly at the back of Meribald’s head. Whispering all the while in Sandor ear about the Septon’s old age, and gullible tendencies.

While Sandor and the Elder Brother walked side by side, Sandor risked a glance over his shoulder. Sansa easily coaxed Stranger onto the sandy shores with a few apples, and a sweet word. Ever since the news of her brothers’ and mother’s death, the Little Bird had clung to the surly black charger. Sandor supposed the animal offered some sort of comfort that Sandor could not. Sandor knew the feeling all to well. After receiving his burns, there was nothing like the unconditional love and non-judgment of a good hound, or a fierce warhorse.

“No, no, not my first time at all. The lands I’ve seen as a Septon. I know all the backroads around this county. I know the entire Seven-Pointed Star by memory, and I can even recite it with voices, to entertain young children. Now, my brother… Owen…”

Meribald continued in this fashion for sometimes. The Septon shared details of his life with the couple, all the while navigating through the mudflats with ease, occasionally faltering in his stories to continue counting his paces, or to point out an oddly colored crab. Meribald took them first toward the deeper part of the bay, away from the looming island in the distance.

The Path of Faith was counterintuitive. When one expected to turn right, Meribald turned left. When one expected to move forward, Meribald and Dog would retreat from the Isle, and loop around the sandy shores. The path was maddeningly confusing.

Against his better instincts, Sandor gave Sansa the space to navigate the path on her own. Sansa seemed to need space lately. But, Sandor could not stop himself from reflexively looking over his shoulder at every turn, to watch her progress. Her feet faltered in the sand every so often, which caused his heart to jump into his throat. Those beautiful blue eyes haunted him. Sandor had never before wanted so badly, so wretchedly, to take another’s pain onto himself. Sansa… If I could...

At one point, Sansa stumbled and clung to his arm for support. His heart soared at the touch. She looked up at him, so sweetly and trustingly, and murmured a small apology. It reminded him of old times, when she was shy to touch him. Inevitably, the path became narrower, and she released him,
leaving Sandor to pull along a reluctant Stranger.

Eventually, the Quiet Isle stretched before them. When they reached the sandy shore definitively, Dog took off barking toward a cluster of wooden houses ahead. Meribald fell into step with the Elder Brother, revealing the details of his latest excursion in the Riverlands, complete with hand gestures and impersonations.

Sandor slowed his pace, until Sansa was at his side. The Elder Brother and Septon Meribald walked twenty paces in front of them, along a dirt path toward the distant lights and the wooden buildings. When Sandor was certain the two monks were out of hearing range, he stepped closer.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sandor cautiously observed Sansa's slight, shivering figure. With care, he extended an arm and wrapped his Little Bird in a half hug. Sansa tensed and then relaxed into the embrace.

“Not mad, are you?” Sandor muttered lowly, into her ear, so that the men ahead of them could not hear.

Sansa shook her head against his chest and he sighed in relief. It was selfish of him to think only of himself, and his status in her eyes. But, Sandor’s thoughts had been preoccupied with worries over their relationship… and whether or not his sloppy “proposal” had dissolved the bond between them.

“No,” Sansa whispered, her head fell heavily against him. “I just want to rest. I want to go home.”

Sandor hesitated before he nodded, and ran a comforting arm over her side. Her whole countenance spoke of exhaustion. Home. What was home anymore, for either of them? There was a time when Sandor called Clegane Keep home, when he called Casterly Rock, and King’s Landing home… There was a time when Sansa called Winterfell home.

“We’re almost there,” he managed. Sansa seemed to sag a little in relief, resting her weight against him.

True enough, the dirt path transformed into a pebbled walkway. They passed underneath an archway of tree branches. Apple trees, Sandor realized, heavy with autumn’s pickings. Stranger snorted and merrily craned his head, to pluck a ripe apple from a nearby branch with his teeth. The grove was wide and long, and led to a large wooden hall that Sandor recognized as the stable.

Here, Sandor led Stranger into a vacant stall. It was not difficult to find one. The stables were mostly empty. The Elder Brother had been telling the truth then, there truly was a lack of pilgrims coming to the Quiet Isle. Sandor unsaddled the great black warhorse, and Septon Meribald fitted the stallion with a large bale of hay. Stranger was left with a small barrel of apples, nickering contentedly.

Sandor was loath to give Sansa any bag to carry, and thankfully the Elder Brother took Sansa’s belongings, with a knowing look. Sandor tried to give the dragonbone sword to the monk, but Sansa’s hand shot out and grasped the black hilt tightly.

“No, I will take it.” Sansa whispered. “I took it from the Godswood.”

Sandor nodded and handed her the blade. She fumbled to hold the sheath, to prevent the sword from sliding away, and eventually secured it in her arms.

The Elder Brother directed them through the stables and onto the Brow of the Hill, as it was called. Their monk friend gestured to the stone wall surrounding the small cluster of establishments, and explained each structure to Sandor and Sansa, as they passed. The buildings of the Quiet Isle were modest and simple, compared to the grandiose style of the Red Keep, but Sandor thought he had
never seen any place so welcoming.

A large windmill dominated the horizon, it creaked with age as it’s sails spun and caught in the ocean wind. The windmill was easily the largest building on the Island, although the Sept came in a close second.

The Sept’s wide, wooden doors were carved in the likeness of the Mother and Father, these door’s also creaked ominously when opened. Several monks poured from it’s door, after their evening meditation, and paused to gawk at the new set of faces. Septon Meribald quickly abandoned their small company to greet his fellow brothers, all the while gesticulating wildly behind him, toward Sandor and Sansa, no doubt explaining the arrival of Samson and Sara, the newlyweds.

“Not to worry, not to worry. Dog approves of them. Especially the surly looking one… for some reason…” Sandor heard him say, as they were walking away.

The Common Hall and the Cloisters were the most unremarkable buildings. The Common Hall, the Elder Brother explained, was where they’d take their meals. And where they would report in the morning, for assignments and tasks. Sandor nodded his thanks when Elder Brother explained that the Common Hall may not have the best meals, but food was available at all times of day and night.

The Cloisters were the next, and final stop. These small buildings were located past the Sept, and the Sept’s gardens.

Here, the brother’s slept on soft pallets, and traditionally roomed three or four to a hut. However, with a recent decline in population, the Quiet Isle had a variety of space to offer. Sandor choose a small hut for them both, in the back of the Cloisters and away from prying eyes. The Elder Brother nodded approvingly, but warned that the back window of this particular hut was prone to collapse, when a fierce wind blew from the south.

Sansa was expressionless as the Elder Brother unlocked the door and ushered them inside, lighting a small lamp that hung from the ceiling. Two small pallets were pushed into the corner, and a dusty hearth lay in the center of the room. A clay surface, supported by two wooden legs, hung over the hearth, for cooking. A small rickety table and two chairs were shoved into the far corner, underneath the window overlooking the sea. The hut had no mirror, no changing curtain, no rugs, and none of the fine niceties of King’s Landing.

“I hope you shall find this establishment to your liking,” the Elder Brother closed the door behind them and swept his hands over the doorframe, shaking some dust from the walls. “Here, at the Quiet Isle, we are dedicated to faith, and do not indulge in many frivolities. As I explained earlier, by agreeing to accept the shelter we offer, you agree to accept out way of living. A simple life, but fraught with hardship. Do you fully accept these changes?”

The Elder Brother fixed them both with a hard look. Underneath the swinging lantern and the setting sun, his face glowed ominously. Sandor swallowed dryly, looking to Sansa for guidance. Sansa pursed her lips in thought, but nodded quickly.

“Aye,” Sandor intoned. “We accept.”

“Good, good,” the Elder Brother’s countenance lifted, “then I hope you shall indulge me once more. I understand your wife, Sara, is from the North.”

Sandor did not like the inflection the Elder brother put on Sansa’s name, as if he did not believe their false identities, but nodded all the same.
“Aye, the North. What of it?”

“And you, Samson, whereabouts do you hail?” the Elder Brother crossed his arms.

“The Westerlands,” Sandor took a note from Sansa’s book. It will be easier to stick to a lie closer to the truth. “The plainslands, to be more exact. Rural area.”

The Elder brother nodded and rubbed his chin uncomfortably.

“And you are married, are you not?”

“Aye…” Sandor raised an eyebrow again, wondering where this line of questioning was headed.

“Yes,” Sansa chimed in. Sandor almost jumped at the sound of her timid voice. Sansa was running her hand over the worn surface of the small table, almost fondly. A queer look in her eye.

“Yes, well,” the Elder Brother coughed uncomfortably, “I was hoping you might indulge us once more, for the sake of my brother’s in faith. A small wedding ceremony, in the Sept.”

Sansa accidentally knocked over a clay jug on the table. It clattered to the ground and she stuttered a string of apologies. Sansa refused to meet Sandor’s eye.

The Elder Brother quickly raised his hands at Sandor’s expression of indignation.

“Now, we won’t ask for a penny, not for the usual wedding fee.” The monk mistook their shock as an unwillingness to be cheated. “We do not accept greed here, at the Quiet Isle. Only for the peace of mind of my fellow brother’s. You must understand, they may not accept your living circumstances otherwise. Different genders are strictly segregated in the Cloisters.”

Sansa nodded and looked down at the table, tracing her strange patterns across it’s surface. Sandor recalled fondly the nights she traced a similar design across his chest.

“Yes,” Sansa whispered, then louder, “yes. Of course, we are happy to indulge you in this, Elder Brother. What wife, or bride, gets the opportunity to revisit her wedding day, the happiest day of her life?”

Somehow, Sandor doubted the sincerity of Sansa’s statement. To him, his Little Bird sounded almost apathetic to the idea, but the Elder Brother seemed pleased, and so Sandor nodded his assent.

“I am glad,” the Elder Brother clapped his hands. “My brother’s shall be glad. It will unburden their minds. I thank thee. But we shall talk more of this matter, on the morrow or when you are settled. For now, I am tired. And I am sure you are tired.”

The Elder Brother danced his way toward the door, lightly on his feet, tip toeing around Sandor’s large frame.

“May the Seven bless you, and watch over you as you sleep,” the monk quickly made the sign of the Seven. His hands were a mere blur, as he repeated the familiar gesture over their heads, and then over the door.

“On the morrow, the Common Hall,” he reminded them again.

Then the door clicked shut, and the lamp swung silently on the ceiling.

They were alone.
Five days later....

Sansa tugged on a deeply rooted weed, wrenching it from the Earth. The Sept’s gardens were growing colder, but were warmed by the glass siding surrounding the foliage, which cause Sansa to sweat while she toiled. Wiping at her brow, Sansa flexed her sore fingers and eyed the weed disdainfully.

“It will take a few days to get used to…” the Elder Brother had told her, with a compassionate pat on the arm.

Sansa suspected the Elder Brother simply did not know what to do with a woman on the Quiet Isle. Most of the monks were men, it was a brotherhood, after all, and Sansa was the only female on the small island. A fact that hadn’t slipped her notice.

Sansa spied another weed and quickly yanked it free, with her right hand. The force of her own strength sent her toppling. From a distance, Septon Gascon’s head popped out from behind the lemon tree, and he shook his head admonishingly. Gascon was a kindly old monk who tended to the gardens, but admittedly, he was a bit neurotic.

For the past sixty years, Grego Gascon had kept track of the various types of plants and flowers cultivated in the gardens of the Quiet Isle, and was a bit… obsessive about his research into pea plants. More often than not, he could be found pouring over numbers and graphs in his study, mumbling to himself. Sansa thought he was kind, but a bit odd, and kept her distance. After all, the man knit little socks to put over the flowers in the springtime, to prevent them from crossbreeding without his consent. Strange.

Sansa righted herself and waved off the curious Septon. She sighed, and although her hands and knees were quite sore, went back to de-weeding the flower benches. *I have never done such labor in my life, Sansa thought, wiping her sweaty brow, yet again. It is a blessing and a curse.*

It was a curse, because Sansa would soon curse her sore muscles. In the dining hall, with Sandor, she would complain of her aching arms and legs, and he would equally speak his displeasure about tending to the roads and digging grave after grave. It was tedious work at the Quiet Isle, but tedious work was fulfilling in it’s own right.

When the Elder Brother first came to them, with a long list of tasks and demands, Sansa almost expected Sandor to put up a fight. To protest. Sandor was a skilled sword, not some common laborer. But her non-knight had agreed, with a sharp nod, to do whatever it took to earn their keep.

*I have never earned my keep,* Sansa thought, a little ashamed. *Everywhere I have ever been... the world has expected me to be pretty and polite. I have learned to chirp prettily and never done a day of work. Here, I am measured by the product of my labor, instead of the make of my gown, or the paint on my face. It is refreshing.*

Work was also a blessing. It kept Sansa distracted. Work stopped Sansa from thinking about the past, and her lost family. And sometimes, while she worked, she felt free to think whatever she liked. Even if it was dark or angry. The first few night on the Quiet Isle were hell, Sansa had to admit. Thinking back, she felt some pity for Sandor, who was obviously out of his element dealing with a grieving maiden. Sansa felt the loss most acutely, before falling asleep in their small cabin. Each night, he kept her warm and safe in his arms, and she cried for all that was, and all that was lost.

Sandor never questioned her tears, for which she was eternally grateful. At the same time, Sansa and
Sandor never spoke about the upcoming wedding, or the circumstances that led them to this point.

*What are we going to do? What does Sandor think? Of us? Together?* Sansa viciously attacked the next weed she came across, cursing under her breath as she did so. Work was indeed a blessing.

It was a simple enough lie at first. Man and wife, traveling the road. Sandor had said that Sansa could never have passed for a boy. The lie only made sense. Sansa was too old to be his daughter, and being his wife protected her in many ways. At first, Sansa applauded Sandor’s quick thinking. It was a plausible explanation and a fantasy she was willing to act out, but Sansa never thought it would lead them to an actual alter, and so soon.

Of course, she had mused and imagined her life as Sansa Clegane, but those were childish fantasies that she had sworn to abandon. The name of the game was survival. Life wasn’t a song, or a dream, and now Sandor was all she had left. If the relationship was ruined by a quick marriage…

Before their escape, Sansa believed Sandor to be dead. She already experienced what it was like to lose Sandor in the physical realm. If she lost him emotionally, if she lost his support, it would break her heart into a thousand pieces.

First, Sandor gave her that ring. Sansa didn’t know where he purchased it, or if it was given to him, but nonetheless, a shiny new ring glistened on her left ring finger. A part of her wanted to ask, why did he have it? Was he saving it for some occasion? She suspected it might be a family ring, set with black and yellow gems. An homage to his house colors. The thought thrilled and terrified her.

As a little girl, Sansa had dreamt of a wedding to a handsome knight. An honorable man. This… this wedding was not like that. The only witnesses to their wedding would be holy brothers. The wedding would not take place in front of a Heart Tree. And finally, and most importantly, her family would be absent… she would no longer be a Stark, at the end of the ceremony, but she would have liked to embrace her mother and father, one last time.

The Elder Brother had not pushed the issue, but Sansa could tell he was uneasy. Sandor admitted to Elder Brother that they’d married in the way of the Old Gods, in front of a heart tree, as was the tradition of the North. Sansa thought that might have satisfied the holy man, but the Elder Brother was even more adamant afterwards. The other brothers would not stand for such blasphemy, apparently, which forced Sandor and Sansa to agree to a small and private wedding ceremony… within the week.

*If only he would ask properly…* Sansa thought wistfully, washing her hands in the small pond. Ever since the Red Wedding, Sandor had walked on eggshells around her. Afraid to speak his mind or approach her. Sansa could sense his trepidation each night, when he hesitated before wrapping her in his embrace.

The bell rang from the Common Hall, signaling that food was ready to be served. Probably hot soup and bread again. Septon Gascon waved her a merry goodbye, and she strolled out of the gardens, tired and preoccupied by her thoughts about the wedding and the possibility of marriage to Sandor.

*And what might happen afterwards… in the marriage bed?* Sansa dared to think, blushing. Sandor’s bare chest and flexing muscles flashed through her mind. The sight of Sandor laying a stone foundation just that morning, in nothing but a pair of worn breeches, had been tantalizing. Sansa might have stared for ages, except that Dog ruined the moment, by barking and alerting Sandor to her presence, causing her to blush and hurry away.

Before the news of the Red Wedding, and the hurried proposal, Sansa would have been exhilarated at the thought of time along with Sandor as lovers.
During the course of their journey, Sansa had grown significantly more confident with her…
woman’s weapon, as the Queen might have put it. Sansa would always look back fondly on those
twelve days of solitude, alone in the wild. Days of sunshine, good conversation and laughter. A
freedom in the air that was intoxicating to them both. And the night, oh the nights… Sansa blushed a
deep red while she walked toward the Common Hall.

The nights she spent with Sandor, wrapped in his arms, she had never felt so cherished and safe.
And each night, Sansa could feel herself growing bolder. She learned the contours of her arms and
the mold of his chest. Sansa remembered how her heart had hammered, when she first slipped her
fingers inside his tunic, to brush the light dusting of hair on his stomach. Sandor had jumped in
surprise at the touch of her cold fingers, and she was reduced to a babbling fool once she realized
what she’d done, but it had felt so dangerous. Sansa was tempted to try again and again.

Each night a hazy fog of lust would steal over her body, daring her to act wanton. It tickled her
fancy, that Sandor always held himself in such strict control. The shameless side of Sansa wanted to
push her non-knight over the edge, to break his stern resolve until he unleashed the primal power
behind the muscles she’d come to admire.

To her equal pleasure and displeasure, Sandor never behaved in a way that would tarnish her honor,
but neither did he have the willpower to refuse her, especially when she lavished affection on him.

*It would have only been a matter of time, before…* Sansa could not finish the thought.

Right before the Elder Brother stumbled upon them, Sansa was certain something important was
going to happen, Sandor had been close to unhinged. Sansa put a stop to anything that might have
happened between them, it was a little too soon, but Sansa still wondered where that night had been
heading… and what might have happened the next night?

When she was younger, her Septa had warned her against the sins of lust. Sansa was told never to
touch herself *down there*, as her Septa said, because it was a sin against the Gods. Sansa was a
highborn lady and as such, it was to remain pure for her husband. Whenever Sansa had questions
about… that… her Septa only told her to lie back, endure, and do her duty when the time came. It
was a satisfactory response for the younger Sansa, but woefully inadequate now.

More than ever, Sansa wished her mother was alive and well. Sansa knew she wouldn't approve of
the match that the Seven had made for her, but at the very least, Catelyn Stark might have more to
say than “lie back and endure”. After all, her mother had five children. Lady Stark might have advice
about how to talk to Sandor. Sansa remembered when her father fell into a foul mood, it only took a
conversation between husband and wife for him to return to his duties with a smile. Or… perhaps it
wasn't a conversation...? Sansa cringed and shook her head.

Entering the Common Hall, Sansa spotted Sandor drinking a flagon of water (wine or other alcohol
was not permitted on the Isle for non-medicinal purposes). Sandor’s eyes widened when he caught
sight of her dirty appearance, and Sansa could see his mouth twitching with unrestrained mirth. It
was like this every evening, after she worked the gardens.

Sandor looked glorious, Sansa realized, swallowing heavily.

Strong and manly, in a simple peasant’s tunic and brown breeches, Sandor’s muscles practically
bulged from his body. Years of swordplay toned his long frame into something out of a young
maiden’s dream, overlooking the burned side of his face, of course. Not that Sansa really minded
anymore. In some aspects, it made him look dangerous and uncouth. A tall, dark and mysterious
character, shrouded in shadow, awaiting a maiden to sweep her off her feet--
Seven Gods, what am I thinking? Have I been standing here?

Sansa almost tripped over the wood bench and blushed when Sandor caught her arm.

“Watch yourself, Little Bird,” he muttered softly.

Sansa nodded, thinking that Sandor’s deep voice was one of his most redeeming qualities. Sandor had a slight rasp, soft like sand, but he could also be deep and gravelly when he needed to be.

Sansa lowered herself into the seat next to him gracefully, and Sandor fetched them two hot bowls of soup, honey bread, and toasted pumpkin seeds. A simple affair, but far better than they experienced in the wild.

Sandor handed a bowl in front of her, and Sansa smiled up at him. Sandor was caught off guard by her gaze, and smiled hesitantly back.

“Good day?” he asked quietly, ladling his soup quickly. Sandor always wolfed down his food. He was polite, but ate quickly and insatiably, whenever her had the chance.

“Yes,” Sansa nodded, “I think Septon Gascon has developed a bit of a soft spot for me. He only looked at me strangely once today, and didn’t yell when I dropped the watering can. Although, I am still not allowed to talk to the plants in case they conspire together…”

Sandor snorted and shook his head. “A bizarre old man, for certain,” he paused and then added, “if he gives you trouble, just let me know. I won’t stand for it.”

Sansa nodded, and turned back to her food, grinning at Sandor’s obvious concern. Sandor had always been protective, but Sansa had always attributed it to his sense of honor, and his affection for her. This time, Sansa couldn’t tell. Does he say such things, because he feels love for me? Or is it because he is my pretend husband, and it is expected of him? Sansa sipped her soup and observed his countenance from underneath her eyelashes.

Sandor looked decidedly out of place, in the Common Hall, surrounded by hunched over monks and the older, feeble Brothers of the Faith. The burned half of his face was ominously shadowed by the hanging chandeliers. Sansa’s heart beat wildly as he reached past her, his forearm flexed as he grabbed a roll of sweetbread. The sleeve of his tunic had been pushed back, revealing the contours of his bare arm, a few scars, and the soft dark hair she loved to stroke.

Growing up, sheltered, as a high lady, Sansa had never had these opportunities to observe a man’s body before. The first time had been with Sandor, at the little dock behind the Godwood. At the back of her mind, Sansa wondered just when, exactly, had Sandor stopped being the fearsome Hound, and become a man in her eyes... The man who has saved my life multiple times. The man who rescued me from death and misery King’s Landing. Sandor caught her eye.

“What is it?” he furrowed his brow, and looked behind him.

Sansa blushed and lowered her head to her bowl. Hopefully, he wouldn’t noticed anything out of place, or he would attribute her actions to her recent bout of depression. Thankfully, Sandor didn’t press the issue.

A shadow fell over the two of them. Sansa looked up to find the Elder Brother, beaming happily above them.

“Sara,” he bowed slightly, “Samson,” the monk gave a sharp nod of respect.
Lately, Sandor and the Elder Brother had been spending a lot of time together. The two sparred with wooden swords in the evening, in the clearing behind the cloisters, after dinner. After all, the older men were both trained in combat, and Sandor wanted to stay skilled with his longsword. Sansa suspected that Sandor also spent time with the Elder Brother, partially to avoid talking with Sansa, about pressing issues… like the wedding.

Sansa thought the Elder Brother might want initiate another sparring session, so she began to stack their plates.

“No, no,” the Elder Brother waved over Septon Tripold, who took their dirty utensils with a sour, pinched face. “Do stay, Sara, I have been meaning to speak with you both about your upcoming nuptials.”

With those words, Sansa could feel tension building in the air. She stopped breathing for a moment, the atmosphere changed so drastically. A few younger monks leaned over in their seats, to better eavesdrop on the conversation. Sansa and Sandor appeared at ease, to the unseeing eye, but Sansa was afraid to even look at him. Afraid that the perfect image would dissolve with a wrong glance.

“Yes?” Sansa managed, smiling pleasantly, and for good measure, wrapped a hand around Sandor’s arm and squeezed.

The action jolted Sandor back into the present and he raised an eyebrow at the Elder Brother.

“The chapel is free the day after tomorrow,” Elder Brother folded his sleeves and peered down at them curiously, as if judging their reactions. Though Sansa thought she might be feeling paranoid, the Elder Brother appeared to be observing them more acutely than normal. “...if that is to your convenience. I would have liked to wed you tomorrow, on the seventh day of the week, since it would have been most holy. Unfortunately, the chapel will be occupied by our biweekly debate on the Metaphysical Influence of the Seven and the Transmundane Discernment of the Seven Gods by Baelor the Blessed--”

Sansa and Sandor nodded dumbly.

“--at any rate. I hope you shall find the date most holy indeed, the Seventh of Marchosi. Not the seventh of the seventh month, but alas, it cannot be helped. I thank thee again for thy good graces, and willingness to replicate such a ceremony. It certainly does put the mind of the erm…” the Elder Brother coughed and leaned down close, so his sleeves touched the floor, “... older monks at ease. I appreciate your understanding.”

The Elder Brother straightened abruptly, the silver pointed star hanging from his neck bounced and refracted the candlelight in the room into her eyes. Sansa was momentarily blinded. “Are we in agreement?”

The silence stretched on a second too long. Sandor sat stiff and upright beside her, his fists clenched in his lap.

“Aye,” Sandor rumbled, and Sansa nodded her head shortly afterward. Neither of them could bear to look at one another. “We are in agreement.”

“Seven bless you!” the Elder Brother bowed and back away, into the crowd of brown robes. “I will call upon you that evening. For now, I have some correspondents I must address. I am sorry, my good friend Samson, but I cannot spar with you tonight. I have put off this work long enough…”

Sandor raised his glass of water in understanding, and the Elder Brother disappeared into the night.
The quiet mutter of the Common Hall returned, and the watchful eyes shifted away from Sansa and Sandor.

Sansa’s heartbeat raced. *No sparring… he will have to escort me to our quarters, stay and undress… we will crawl into bed and be unable to fall asleep. A wedding in two days…. how can we not speak of this?* Sansa’s mind was abuzz with the thought of finally revealing her feelings, and she nervously fingered the ring that Sandor had given her. The black and yellow stones sparkled in the candlelight, as if rejoicing in the good news.

*Seven Gods, I am to be married! And we’ve never spoken of it?! This has gone on long enough,* Sansa thought. She took a deep breath, steeling herself to break the ice--

Sandor stood, almost knocking back the bench and offered her his hand. His sudden movement froze the breath in her lungs. Sansa mutely took his outstretched hand, and Sandor nearly pulled her out of the hall. The brother’s watched them with mild interest and Sansa smiled cheerfully at Septon Gascon as they passed.

Sandor quit tugging on her hand, once they exited the Common Hall, and the cold night air enveloped them. Sansa hung back, slowing their walk to a calm stroll. Sandor looked like he was tempted to plow ahead, but Sansa directed them near the back of the Sept, and their walk took them through the garden’s winding paths.

Neither party said a word.

Sansa sighed heavily through her nostrils as they approached their little cabin. Sandor reached inside his tunic and drew out the leather twine hung around his neck. Sandor kept the key to their humble abode close his heart.

The door creaked open. Sandor snuck inside, instantly busying himself by lighting the lamp and throwing a few logs into the hearth. Sansa unclasped the cloak around her shoulders and hung it on the knob next to the door. Rays of moonlight illuminated the room from the back window.

The Cloisters were cramped, but cozy. In the past five days, Sansa had done her best to brighten their small living space. The portrait of Sandor's sister was hung above the heart, and Sansa had caught Sandor looking fondly upon it a few time. Sansa had created some makeshift curtains and hung them over the back window, to block the sunlight during the day, and afford them some privacy. Sandor had compiled their traveling furs and strung together the pallets the Elder Brother had granted them, to create a large, comfortable bed in the corner. They brought in their traveling goods and equipped the hut with a few glasses, and bowl of apples, candles and pots in case either of them had a craving for tea.

Sansa never felt more at ease. The Quiet Isle and the Cloisters were a home away from home. Sansa would miss it dearly should they ever leave.

Sandor knelt on the floor a pair of flint and steel. The small objects look awkward and out of place in his large hands. Her non-knight made a few sad attempts to start a blaze, but the wood never caught fire because at the last second, Sandor would recoil from the hearth in fear, sending the spark in scattered directions.

Sansa was tempted to roll her eyes. For the past several days, and the entire journey to the Quiet Isle, Sansa started the fires. Why would tonight be any different?

Sansa stomped over and took the flint and steel from his hands. With one confident stroke, she produced a spark that turned to flame and Sandor jumped back. He looked at her sheepishly from
where he stood, before turning away and unbuckling his boots.

Sansa tossed the flint and steel noisily. Silence again.

*Very well,* Sansa fumed, *I can play this game too.* She angrily tore at the laces of her bodice and washed for the night. It was tense and uncomfortable. Sansa constantly turned to glare at her false husband, and waited for him to say something. Sandor opened his mouth once or twice, like a fish, and then snapped his jaw shut and turned to face the corner when Sansa moved to change into one of Sandor's large tunics that she used as a sleeping shift.

They both readied for bed as if nothing was afoot. Except, the topic hung thick and heavy in the air.

Sansa flopped down on the furs, her blood boiling, ready to cry or scream. *How can we continue like this?* She turned sharply on her side, away from him, and faced the wall. The wood absorbed her frustration poorly.

Sandor lay down next to her and moved to pull her close, as he had every other night. However, for the past two nights, Sandor snuck into the cabin after a long spar with the Elder Brother, and well past the Hour of the Wolf. In the middle of the night, Sansa was sleepy and curled into his embrace without a second thought. Here, after dinner, they were both still fully conscious and alert… and thinking about the “wedding”.

Sandor’s hand hovered over her waist. Sansa saw it out of the corner of her eye. It shook slightly. Without a word, Sandor’s hand clenched and he withdrew his fist. It broke Sansa’s fragile resolve.

“Sandor, I cannot believe you haven’t even asked--”

“Sansa, I don’t mean to force you into--”

They both cut off at the same time. Sandor’s quite, remorseful tone was like a bucket of water on the fire of her anger. Sansa twisted on the furs until she faced her non-knight.

Sandor cleared his throat awkwardly. The fire was starting to warm the room’s stale, cold air, and the flames cast Sandor and Sansa in a warm glow. The unburnt half of his face held an expression of honest contrition. One hand, the hand with the cleaved pinky, ran anxiously through his hair, and the other fist was clenched in the furs.

“Sansa,” he started again, looking anywhere but her. “All I wanted was to keep us safe. I never thought… I didn’t know…” his hands flew in the air, and fell down to smack his face and over his eyes.

“I thought I might be able to talk him out of it,” he murmured. “Chat him up like a soldier, reaffirm him of our devotion to one another. I thought I might be able to delay, but anytime, anytime I mentioned anything in the slightest,” Sandor growled and his hands came down and hit the floor, revealing his anguished expression.

Sansa felt the anger die completely, at the sight of so much emotion from her unshakeable Hound. He looked truly lost.

“It’s as if he knew, and I only made him more suspicious. I don’t know… I don’t know what to do…”

“What…” he searched for the words, eyes riveted to the ceiling. “Little Bird, what do you want me to do…?”
Gascon is loosely based off of a famous historical figure. Anybody know who?
Sansa and Sandor have a much needed discussion about the past, present and future.

“Ask.”

Sansa’s voice sounded small and faint in the cramped hut. The dying flame in the heart cast them in a warm red light.

Lying on two straw pallets and their furs, Sansa watched a multitude of emotions fight for dominance in Sandor’s eyes. Hope, anger, confusion… until finally they widened in revelation.

“Ask me,” Sansa implored again.

Sandor’s brow raised and he stared at her in disbelief, his mouth agape in surprise. If Sansa had not been desperate for a response, she would have found his stunned expression to be comical. Sansa’s hand reached to curl around his bicep, drawing a response from him.

“I thought,” Sandor choked on his words, his eyes flickering back and forth between hers. An anguished look crossed his face, and Sansa stroked her fingers upward, to the crook of his neck where his pulse thudded quickly.

Sandor swallowed visibly and shuddered, leaning into her hand when he cupped his cheek.

“You thought…?” Sansa urged him to continue with her eyes.

“I thought… I still think you would say no,” Sandor said softly. So softly, Sansa thought she might have imagined it.

“Maybe,” Sansa licked her lips nervously, “maybe I would have. If you asked me a week ago.”

Sansa watched as Sandor’s eyes closed painfully, and his fists clenched in the furs. “Sansa,” he growled in frustration, throwing back his furs and sitting up against the wall. Sansa raised herself to a seated position and moved to speak again, but he held a hand up to show he had more to say.

“In… in King’s Landing…” Sandor spat out the name of the city with disgust. Then he paused, unsure of whether or not to truly speak his mind. Sansa nodded him onward.

“Joffrey,” he said, with more revulsion, “... that boy did not see the treasure you are, the woman you are. They would have used you, manipulated you and hurt you, to get what they wanted.”

Sandor was speaking passionately now, an angry glint in his eye. “Baelish would have forced himself on you, until you were a dried husk of what you once were. I took you… I asked you to come with me… because in part, I couldn’t bear to see them ruin you. Joffrey or Baelish. They would not have just ruined your body, but you Sansa. All that you are… gone.”

Sandor fumbled at those disturbing thoughts. A Hound will die for you, and never lie to you… Sansa recalled the Sandor’s cryptic words.
“I thought so too, for the longest time I thought that I might rot in that small room.” Sansa whispered to herself. Sandor heard, and jerked his head downward in shame.

“I should have stopped it.”

They sat in silence, both immensely relieved to be away from King’s Landing. The oppression in the air, the cruelty, and the violence.

“You did not take me, as you put it, Sandor. I came with you, willingly. Do not forget my part in our escape.”

Sansa paused, and her eyes cut to his, “I’m sorry if I’ve been distant lately. The death of my… brother and mother,” she swallowed heavily. “It was a shock. I did not want to talk about it. I did not want to breath, when they would never breath again. Murdered, so mercilessly. Butchered like cattle. I thought being happy and content, here on the Quiet Isle, was irreverent to their memory.”

Sandor exhaled sharply, and pulled her roughly into a one-armed hug. Sansa’s nose was pressed into his shirt, and she inhaled deeply, taking in the familiar and comforting scent of her non-knight.

“I felt the same after my sister died,” he whispered into her hair, “like living was a crime, when all that was good in the world had passed away.”

Sansa finally allowed herself to cry. Hiding her sadness from Sandor was crippling, and now that she’d spoken of the horror that was inflicted on her family, it was as if a great weight had been from her chest.

“I know how difficult a time this must be. I cannot imagine your pain, but I have felt life’s cruelty. The Red Wedding reminds me of the day this,” he gestured to his scar, “happened. Only you will bear scars of a different kind.”

For the time being, no more needed to be said. The grief was tangible in the air, but at least it had been addressed. Sansa’s tears eventually dried, leaving a trail of sticky salt water down her cheeks. After the sobs subsided, she simply leaned against his warm body, basking in the feeling of companionship. No one knows me like Sandor, Sansa realized. No one knows my pain as well as him. Not even my own family knew me so well.

It was a strange thought, and it reverberated in her mind. Sandor knows my secrets. Alone in the hut, alone on the Quiet Isle, alone in Westeros, Sansa felt they only had each other.

“I am so glad for you, Sandor,” Sansa’s voice was muffled against his chest. “I would be lost without you. You were my solace in King’s Landing.”

“I was a Hound,” Sandor rasped roughly. “I should have done more. I could have done more.”

“And you would have died,” Sansa scoffed, “like my Father. I prefer that you remain alive. I needed you… I still need you. Those swimming lessons,” Sansa paused, weighing her words, “gave me a distraction and a purpose when I had none. The walks at night, your hand on my back, the lies you told to keep me alive. For all these reasons I--I am just happy we are together.”

Sandor sighed heavily and pinched his nose. “As am I, Little Bird, as am I. Yet, I must confess... I also asked you to come with me because... I wanted you,” he rasped softly, hanging his head low. “I wanted you, just you. I am guilty for many things, Sansa, but I am most guilty for that.”

“At first, I was less than kind to you. I thought you were simple…” Sandor ran a nervous hand over his face, “and...vapid. I was wrong. Sansa, you are...” he struggled for a moment, unable to conjure
the right words, “... kind. You are kind to everyone, each and every person. You have even been kind to Joffrey in a strange way.”

“I remember… I remember when you tried to push him over the Red Keep’s auxilliary causeway. You wanted to kill him. Everyone wants to kill someone. And you would have given him a clean fall to his death, as opposed to the royal gutting he’s going to get when one of these false kings claims the throne. Or Tywin lannister arrives. Whichever. You even tried to spare that fool’s life, Dontos.”

“Despite the hell that has been unleashed around you. After King’s Landing, you must think this is some ploy I have masterminded to force you into a marriage… and believe me, I’m not smart enough to have concocted a plan like this. Let’s be honest, you’re going to have to be the brains of our pair.”

Sansa laughed out loud and clapped a hand over her mouth, Sandor grinned wearily at her and then his expression turned serious. It appeared that he was struggling for the right words. He opened and closed his mouth blindly and the scars on his face twitched horribly under the conflicting emotions. Sansa’s heart beat madly, but she dared not interrupt, as the Hound poured his soul onto the floor in front of her.

“You know my family,” Sandor’s eyes turned to molten steel at the thought of his brother, “and what happened to my sister… Everyone I ever loved died at the hands of a monster. I have not had a family in years. I haven’t dared. I have not allowed myself to hope.”

Sansa played with a thread on his tunic, and chose her words carefully. Sandor’s words seemed so final, so resigned. It tore at her heart.

“Sandor, when we first met… I did not think the best of you either. I thought you were a brute, in all honesty.”

Sandor snorted and jerked his head in a single nod. Sansa could almost hear his thoughts. Sandor did think of himself as a brute. A Hound.

“Living with Joffrey… the Lannisters. Made me realize how foolish I was, for so many years. My head was filled with nonsense tales of white knights and pretty princes. You have true honor, the honor the knight’s of King’s Landing never had. You always tell me the truth, and you rescued me from the capital, at great risk to yourself.”

“For selfish reasons,” Sandor shook his head wearily and cast his gaze away from her, “I wanted you to see the world as I saw it. I desired you, and I wanted you to desire me.”

“You have been true to me,” Sansa protested, “in a way no man ever has… you have weathered through my father’s death, the death of my family and sometimes,” Sansa swallowed, “sometimes it takes something intense to show you it can all be over in the blink of the eye. We have both suffered so much. Don’t we deserve to be happy? Sandor, I…”

Sansa decided perhaps it was best to take a page out of Sandor’s book and speak with her actions, as well as with words.

Sansa left the warmth of Sandor’s arm and pushed away her furs. Clad only in Sandor’s old tunic, she threw a leg around Sandor’s waist and seated herself on top of him. Sandor’s hands reflexively came to grip her hips and his eyes widened.

“Sandor… I love you. I am yours, will you be mine?”

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For a moment, Sandor believed he was dreaming. He could see the words on her lips and he could hear the sound of her voice, but it could not be.

“What?” he asked dumbly.

Sansa’s serious expression broke and a small giggle escaped her lips. Soft, feminine hands came to rest on his chest. Sansa’s fingers traced her strange pattern on top of where his heart beat erratically.

_A hound_… Sandor finally realized. _Sansa has been tracing my sigil, on me, the furs, the table… everywhere we go._ For some reason, that thought made his heart explode with adoration.

Sansa bit her lip. “Sandor, I would not have left King’s Landing with you, if I did not desire you also.”

Sansa, sitting on his lap, in their little hut. Alone, tracing hounds on his chest, saying she loved him… her bright, blue eyes locked with his, showing no fear, no horror directed at his scars. Sandor could feel himself rapidly losing control of his thoughts. Sansa declaring her love, and Sandor knew it was no lie.

“Sansa,” he whispered softly, leaning in close, until their foreheads touched. The movement brought her hands up and over his shoulders until they linked behind his neck. Sandor hovered over her lips, pink and plump, and she licked them in anticipation.

“Sandor,” she closed her eyes, “please.”

It was so, so sweet, to close the gap between them. Sansa made a soft, high pitched noise of pleasure in the back of her throat when his lips pressed against hers, and her hands tightened around his neck, sending a shock down his spine. They had not kissed since that day on the beach.

_It has been a long time_, he thought. _Too long._

_She smells so good_, Sandor thought as he inhaled the flowery scent that was Sansa. The kiss was sweet and innocent at first, as they each tested the waters of their physical relationship. Sandor held back the almost uncontrollable urge to flip her on her back and take her for his own.

Sansa whimpered in a maddening way when he released his grip on her hips and decided instead to trail the length of her arms. Sandor had never allowed himself to indulge in these fantasies before. In King’s Landing, in the Red Keep, he had dreamt of Sansa often. Dreamt of her room, her bed, unclothed bodies, skin on skin… the real thing was beyond imagination.

Sansa was… smooth and soft, and so reactive to every small touch. Sandor trailed his fingertips from her wrists, over her elbow and upper arms, and back down again, relishing in the constant shivers he could draw from his Little Bird. _Joffrey never touched her like this. No one has ever touched her like this._ Sandor thought triumphantly, grinning against her mouth.

Sansa retracted when she felt him smile, a question on her lips. Sandor cut off any conversation with another kiss, this time to the crook of her neck.

Sansa’s head tilted backwards, her eyes closed and her mouth opened slightly as she let out a small noise of pleasure that went straight to his groin.

“Do you like this?” Sandor asked, trailing his hands down her arm again.

Sansa could only nod and gasp when his hands jumped from her arms to her sides, and slid down her thigh and ankles. Sandor reveled in the tiny quivers and nervous twitches of Sansa’s body. Reaching
the curve of her calf, Sandor began the ascent again, slower, brushing his thumbs against the inside of her thighs. All the while, kissing her neck.

Sansa was breathing heavily now, her hands fluttering across his chest, uncertain what to do. She experimentally lifted up the edge of his shirt to lay her hands on the hard stomach underneath. Sandor had never felt a touch so light and heavenly. He jerked in surprise at the sudden contact of her cold hands on his stomach. Against her mouth, he groaned and nodded. *We should stop, but I don’t really care to,* he thought.

*Don’t we deserve to be happy?* Sansa’s sweet question echoed in his mind.

Sansa grew bolder, raising the fabric of his tunic up so that she could explore the lines of each muscle on his abdomen and upper chest. Sansa’s curiosity drew her down, down, down until her hands reached the hair that disappeared under his breeches. Sandor felt himself growing hard with each passing moment. Sansa must have felt the evidence of his arousal, because her legs tightened experimentally around his waist, eliciting another groan from Sandor.

“Tell me to stop,” he told her, “or I will not.”

Steel grey eyes locked with Tully blue, and Sansa shook her head.

“I don’t want to wait anymore…” she said, laying her lips on his neck in return. Sandor shuttered, feeling her lips brush against his pulse, the scruff of his beard, the lobe of his ear…. “I am yours and you are mine, my love” she whispered there, her breath tickling the side of his face.

Sandor froze for a moment, unused to those words. Her kisses followed the path of his jaw, until she pressed her lips against his, and then moved onto the burnt side of his face. Sandor almost pulled away, but Sansa laced her fingers in his hair and held him still. Sansa kissed every crack and crevice of his melted flesh. His sense of touch was dull and muted along the scar, so her kisses tickled strangely and felt foreign. No one, man or woman, had ever dared to do such a thing. The action was intimate and unexpected, rendering Sandor incapable of thought.

“Do you love me?” Sansa asked, kissing around the hole that was his right ear.

“Little Bird,” he exhaled roughly, “I have loved you from afar.”

Sandor grasped the back of her head, laced his fingers in her hair, and his mouth fell on hers once more. He lifted her up and laid her on the furs, relishing in the erotic and powerful feeling that looming over her body evoked. Sansa’s hands grasped his shoulders for support. The thought of her, clinging to him, sent his hands into a flurry of motion.

He caressed her legs again, and realized the action was soon becoming his favorite caress. The fabric of his old tunic rode up to reveal her smallclothes. Sansa let loose a pretty whine when his hands brushed against her breasts.

“Say it,” Sansa demanded quietly, boldly tugging at the end of his shirt in askance.

Smirking, Sandor lifted his tunic up and over his head, and discarded the tunic on the floor. Sansa’s eyes riveted to his chest, and Sandor felt a brief flicker of pride for his physique. *At least I am not ugly in this respect…* Sansa’s fingers curled in the hair of his chest, and her eyes scanned the breadth of his upper body in wonder.

“I’ve never been good with words, Little Bird,” he said, hovering over her reclined form, watching in amusement as she leaned back, smiling nervously. “But if you like, I can show you my love instead. Be mine.”
Sandor’s heart skipped a beat when his Little Bird’s face blossomed into a happy grin.

“Yes,” she cupped his face, “yes.”

Sandor pulled her back into a rough kiss, intense and desperate. My lady, my Little Bird, my Sansa, echoed in his mind. My wife, a traitorous voice said victoriously.

Sandor pressed a knee between Sansa’s legs, parting them, and wrapped his arms around her, finally pressing their chests together. The feel of her knees, tentatively rising up to press against his sides, made him feel as if he was in one of the Seven Heavens. Don’t we deserve to be happy?

Knock.

Sansa jumped beneath him, and Sandor groaned in frustration against her mouth. “Seven Hells,” he muttered against her mouth, “I will run my sword through whoever is on the other side of that door.”

“If we stay still, perhaps they will go away,” Sansa whispered conspiratorially and with a breathless tone. Sandor almost groaned out loud when she bit his lower lip. He drew his head back down to kiss her again when--

Knock.

“Samson!” the Elder Brother’s voice drifted through the door, and Sandor sighed, laying his head against Sansa’s shoulder. Inwardly, he cursed the Elder Brother vehemently. Sansa laughed lightly, and ran her hands through his hair soothingly, whispering in his ear that perhaps they’d better answer.

“Samson!” the Elder Brother’s voice sounded urgent. “Wake quickly! Septon Tripoldi has trapped his leg underneath a fallen tree. Your assistance is required!”

“A moment!”

Sandor looked apologetically down at Sansa.

“Perhaps it is for the best,” his Little Bird smiled and pushed against his chest lightly. “We will be married in a few days and…”

And you would prefer if your husband took your maidenhead… Sandor finished in his head. Sansa misread his disappointment and her face fell.

“Well, I only meant… I…” Sansa stammered, righting herself on the furs and adjusting his shirt over her legs.

“Only a few days,” Sandor cut her off, “I’ve waited this long.”

Sandor rose to his feet and quickly located his boots, while Sansa tugged down the fabric where his old tunic had ridden up and tried to untangle the part of her hair that he’d gripped. Sandor took in her flushed appearance, disheveled hair, swollen lips, and grinned.

“You look beautiful,” Sandor told her, pulling his shirt back over his head.

“Will it take long?” Sansa’s eyes flickered to the door. She absent-mindedly twirled a lock of her lightened red hair, which was growing longer each passing day. Sandor didn’t think she knew just how damned desirable she looked, laying on the furs in the dim light, garbed only in his old shirt.

“Not too long, but it’ll be a long day tomorrow. Get some rest, Little Bird.”
Before opening the door, he hesitated. Turning, Sandor couldn’t resist pulling Sansa into another embrace. They stood, leaning against each other, for a few seconds, drowning in one another’s presence. Sandor wanted nothing more than to open the door, tell the Elder Brother to bugger off, and return to bed with Sansa. However, it seemed it was not to be this night. And the physical labor might prove to be a useful distraction.

“Tomorrow, and then...” Sandor left the thought unfinished. Sansa nodded and raised herself up on her tip toes, to brush her lips against his.

“I look forward to sleeping in the arms of my betrothed tonight,” she whispered against his lips, when they broke away from each other.

“Only sleeping?” he joked.

“Samson!” the Elder Brother banged against the door again.

Sandor left her with a heated gaze, and smart pat on her bum, that made Sansa jump and laugh lightly.

The last image Sandor had before shutting the door, was Sansa spinning on her toes and collapsing on the furs, smiling. Sandor could barely keep a smile off his own face. It was nice to see her happy again. The Elder Brother looked at him strangely, apologized for the interruption, and ushered him down the road, all the while explaining how Septon Tripoldi was attempting to meditate in a canopy of branches when a large Owl Hawk frightened him.

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Waking the next day, Sansa found herself in Sandor’s tight embrace.

By the time her betrothed returned last night, Sansa was fast asleep, dreaming about hounds, wolves and little birds playing in the Sept’s Gardens. Stretching and yawning, Sansa wished she could stay in his warm embrace forever, but knew there was still work to be done. Shaking off the remnants of sleep, Sansa started a kettle of tea over the fire.

Sandor woke moments later, and they enjoyed a private breakfast of honey rolls, fruit and boiled eggs. The atmosphere of their little hut was intimate and comfortable. Sansa found herself blushing constantly whenever their hands would touch, and Sandor’s eyes would travel over her body, lingering on her breasts or hips. How much has changed in one night...

Sansa thought back to the last two weeks.

“I do like when you cook,” he whispered in her ear, when he pulled her down on her lap. Sansa could feel his manhood pressed against her backside and gasped, “my little wife.”

“Not yet,” Sansa reminded him, shivering under the heat of his gaze.

“Soon,” Sandor replied, placing hot kisses against her exposed shoulder.

The bell sounded from the Common Hall, signaling the end of the breakfast hours. Sansa untangled herself from Sandor’s arms, blushing, and dressed as quickly as she possibly could, although Sandor provided an ample amount of distracting kisses and caresses that made the simple task take much longer than it should have. All the while, Sansa was in awe over the sudden changes. No awkward moments, no stress or tension. Just happiness, exuding from each of them.

By the time they exited the Cloisters, it was a half hour past when she was expected to arrive in the gardens. Sandor walked her to the Sept, arm in arm, and kissed her lightly on the forehead before...
they parted ways.

Sansa wistfully watched his tall frame grow more and more distant, before turning to walk through the garden entrance. Gascon sat in his lean-to study, hunched over stacks of papers and surrounded by charts and graphs made in the older man’s cramped script.

“Ah, Sara! I did not expect you!” the Septon mumbled, caught between addressing the woman in his study and returning to marking his graphs. “I heard the news that your wedding will be held tomorrow! I thought you might be doing… er… whatever it is that maidens do before such events. Of course, it isn’t your first wedding, so I suppose… hmm, but haven’t you need for cloaks?”

“Cloaks?” Sansa furrowed her brow.

“Cloaks, yes!” the old man returned to staring at his ledgers and distractedly carried on the conversation with Sansa. “I’ve performed weddings before, I am a Septon, you know. The cloaks are exchanged and vows are said. Yes… you’ll need cloaks… I will need more measuring tape… Oh, we all need different things in life… green over yellow again, curious…”

“My maiden’s cloak!” Sansa realized, eyes wide.

*Of course, how could I forget? I will need a maiden’s cloak and Sandor would need a cloak too, to bear his sigil. Yet, we cannot divulge the truth of our pasts, without putting ourselves in unnecessary danger.*

“You haven’t got any?” Gascon raised a furry white eyebrow in her direction, “pity. There is fabric here. Somewhere. I’ve a multitude of it. For knitting socks to go over the flowers, as you know. I try to be festive during the holidays but the plants never seem to appreciate it…”

“Oh yes!” Sansa exclaimed and grasped Gascon’s hand in appreciation, “I do need the fabric!”

“Oh,” Gascon coughed uncomfortably and quickly retracted his hands, muttering to himself, “it’s here somewhere... somewhere.”

Sansa and the Septon spent several minutes cleaning off the shelves. Sansa pulled book after book of ledgers and graphs, and uncovered a particularly nasty looking jar of dried toadstool, before she managed to locate several large spools of fabric stacked near the ceiling.

“Careful… careful you don’t disturb the graphs…” Gascon warned as Sansa balanced precariously on his rickety chair, reaching for the yellow fabric.

Sansa managed to gather enough fabric for her own cloak, Sandor’s cloak, and a nice hat for Gascon and the Elder Brother. The old monk then steered her forcibly toward the door, wishing to return to his work in peace and quiet. Sansa thanked him profusely, but he only waved her off, stating that he’d never use those colors anyway.

Free from any obligations, Sansa gathered up whatever sewing supplies she could find around the Quiet Isle. It was easier than she suspected. Sara was a welcome face among the Holy Brothers, and the monks had a charitable nature.

Septon Bael, who tended to the sick, had a spare needle, which he assured her had never touched human blood. Septon Frosk, the local craftsman, willingly exchanged her a pair of scissors, if she allowed him to trim her hair so that it might be an even length for the ceremony. Finally, Septon Ygor lent her his chalk and pencils, if she promised to pray for his cousin, Ygros, who was ill with yellow fever.
Sansa spent the next several hours alone in the hut, sewing madly in an attempt to finish the cloaks before morning. In an effort to remain honest before the Gods, Sansa sewed their respective sigils on the inside of each cloak.

* A secret, between us and the Gods… *
Sandor and Sansa are wedded in the Sept at the Quiet Isle. Soon after, however, they decide to reveal the truth of their identities to the Elder Brother.

Sansa and Sandor’s wedding was unusual in many ways.

For one, they woke in the morning, arms and legs entwined in an intimate embrace that Sansa was certain no other bride experienced on the morning of her wedding.

For two, they dressed and groomed together, in their small living space. Sharing forbidden glances whenever the other disrobed. Sansa almost knocked over the water jug while she combed her hair because Sandor had stripped off his breeches suddenly to change into a nicer pair, and Sandor’s jaw tensed horribly when he laced up her blue gown, but otherwise it seemed like just another day for the pair.

Sansa had made some minor alterations the night before, to a blue dress gifted to her by the Elder Brother. The cut was more feminine, and Sansa added lace to the sleeves and hem, to mark the occasion. She had never worn it before, and judging from Sandor’s reverent look when she first turned around, he liked it very much.

For three, they supped together with the other Holy Brothers in the Common Hall. Sandor’s light armor, longsword, and the dragonbone sword, drew quite a few stares, and Sansa received quite a few compliments on her appearance from the Brothers. Sandor did not seem pleased with the attention she garnered, and insisted she place her cloak on her shoulders after the third brother approached them to say that Sansa’s eyes shone brighter than the water’s of the Sapphire Isle.

Sansa barely ate any breakfast, except for the sweets Sandor placed carefully in front of her. Septon Gascon visited their small table briefly, and informed Sansa he would attend the wedding to see how she used the fabric he gave her. “If the work is good, I might put you in charge of knitting the socks for the upcoming winter. Very exciting.”

Finally, Elder Brother joined them, and Sansa knew it was time.

The three strolled casually to the Sept. Elder Brother chatted amicably about the winter squash the brothers were able to harvest recently. The conversation fell mostly on Sandor’s shoulders. Sansa was so consumed in her own thoughts, she doubted she’d have been able to speak intelligibly anyway.

Sansa thought she might have felt nervous, jittery, or anxious for her wedding. And although there were some butterflies in her stomach, the circumstances and the entire experience mostly felt surreal. As if she was in a dream, and soon she might wake up.

If Father was still alive, if the war had been different. I might have married a lord from a far away land, for land and titles. If I was still held hostage at the Red Keep, I might have married Joffrey. Sansa shuddered at the thought, and pulled her maiden’s cloaks tightly around her. She glanced up, at Sandor’s tall frame. Instead, I can marry for love. How many high born maidens can make such a
Inside the Sept, Sansa felt the mood shift from casual to devout. She could almost hear the thousands of prayers that had been uttered at this holy sight. It smelled of old wood, oil, and incense. Small alcoves, about the size of a thumb, had been carved into the wooden columns and the wooden walls. Within each tiny nook, a small candle and a silver pointed star were placed, such that the candle illuminated the star from behind. Only a few of these stars were lit, where the shadows were darkest.

Muted sunlight streamed in from a line a narrow, small windows that lined the top of the wall. The space was largely illuminated by a great glass mosaic at the head of the Sept. Colored glass depicted a scene from the life of Hugor of the Hill. Hugor knelt, praying beneath a tree, crowned with Seven Stars. In the distance, the Maid held the hand of a sweet, doe eyed girl. The girl would become Hugor’s wife and bear him forty four sons.

Was she nervous to marry Hugor? Sansa wondered. Or calm, because she knew it was the will of the Gods?

The wedding of Sansa Stark, Heir of Winterfell, and Sandor Clegane, the Hound, might have ushered in onlookers by the hundreds. Each one craning to catch a glimpse of the beautiful bride or the gruesome Hound.

However, the wedding of Sara and Samson, refugees of the Riverlands, only brought in a few friends and acquaintances. After all, their second wedding was only a formality, and they had only been residents of the Quiet Isle for only a week.

Sansa and Sandor were asked to kneel in front of the domed altar of the Seven. Each god was equally represented in small windows of the altar, where small idols of the Mother, Father, Crone, Maiden, Smith, Warrior and Stranger, were placed reverently. A candle burned behind each of these statues, leaving layers and layers of wax on the surface of the marble.

Sansa’s hands were shaking slightly as they approached. Sandor glanced at her out of the corner of his good eye, questioningly. When they knelt, the cold from the chilled marble permeated her dress and made her shiver.

“Little Bird,” Sandor whispered, when the Elder Brother left to gather some ribbon to bind their hands, “if your heart has changed--”

“No,” Sansa shook her head, staring resolutely ahead at the statue of the Maiden. “I have decided.”

Her words silenced Sandor, who still looked hesitant and uncertain. Yet, he did nothing to stop the ceremony, as she feared he might. Instead, he stayed quietly kneeling, one hand on the pomme of his sword. On his knees, in his armor and with a sword, Sandor looked prepared to battle the Gods themselves for Sansa’s hand.

To Sandor’s disgruntlement, and Sansa’s amusement, the Holy Brothers drew sticks to see who would perform the ceremony.

“They should not be jesting so,” Sandor protested, whispering in her ear. He looked grim and serious. “What if fate deals us Gascon? He might forget the ceremony in the midst of it, and we’d have to start anew.”

Septon Bael won the draw, to the relief of Sandor and much to the displeasure of Septon Frosk, who complained he hadn’t performed a good wedding in at least twenty five years and if he didn’t get any practice soon, he might forget the words altogether. Elder Brother shushed him quickly, and the
Brother’s knelt to observe the ceremony.

Sansa had seen only a handful of wedding in her lifetime. In her time at King’s Landing, she had the pleasure to attend several very rich, formal affairs. As a child in Winterfell, she witnessed the marriages of lords and ladies, knights and hedge knights, but she never had the privilege of seeing a marriage performed between common folk. Weddings at Winterfell and King’s Landing were full of pomp and circumstance, tradition and silent observation.

Beyond the basic words, the handfasting, and a chaste kiss, Sansa thought the wedding was quite simple and straightforward. Yet, somehow less austere than she imagined it. In King’s Landing, she was afraid to sneeze the wrong way. Here, in the privacy of the Sept with Sandor, she felt relaxed and alert. Welcome and loved.

When it came time for Sandor to place a ring on Sansa’s finger, he first had to remove the ring. Sliding off the gold metal, he hesitated to replace it.

“Sara,” Sandor said, although his eyes spoke ‘Sansa’, “as you already know, this ring was my sister’s. It was given to her by my mother, and it was her mother’s. I ask that you treasure it, because it holds special significance for my family and for my heart.”

With those words, and when he slipped the band onto her finger, Sansa had to try very hard not to cry. She could not imagine the great lengths Sandor had to go through, to hide that ring from his monstrous brother. *This ring is all he has left of his mother and sister…* she dazedly observed it glistening on her left hand. *And he has given it to me.* The gesture meant more to her than he would ever know.

Next, the cloaks were exchanged. Sandor’s hands shook slightly as he fumbled with the clasp around her neck. Their eyes locked, and he silently asked her permission again. Sansa smiled at him in adoration and nodded resolutely. The clasps loosened and Sandor folded the grey cloak with care, setting it aside to be gathered later.

Sansa blinked, and in one fell swoop, she was cloaked in yellow and black. Sandor’s cloak was heavier than hers, because he was wider and taller. The fabric touched the ground, and Sansa knew, in the back of her mind, that three hounds now ran across her back. *My new sigil.*

*It is done,* she realized in a daze. *I am no longer a Stark.*

The now married couple was asked to kneel again, and Sansa did so slowly, careful not to trip over the yellow cloak.

The only thing left, naturally, was a small kiss to seal the bond. Sansa saw Sandor lean in, and hover over her lips. He wavered, as if waiting for her to finally declare the wedding a sham. Sansa reacted and closed the distance quickly, raising herself onto the tip of her toes and planting her lips firmly on his. Sandor inhaled sharply, almost in shock, but soon pressed back and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close and deepening the kiss. Sansa felt the Sept and the Brother’s disappear, and suddenly the world was only Sandor’s kiss, Sandor’s beard, Sandor’s hands on her waist--

Septon Bael broke the two apart with a sharp clap of his hands. “By the Gods,” he muttered, “why do all the young people insist on prolonging that tradition..?”

Sansa could hear Septon Frosk and Gascon laughing lightly in the background and blushed from her toes to her ears. Elder Brother coughed uncomfortably, but smiled mischievously at the two.

“A proper kiss,” Sandor reminded her, “I did promise.”
Sansa burrowed her head into her husband’s chest, inhaling the scent that was uniquely Sandor. “I think I like those,” she whispered back, “but I might like them more in private.”

The only evidence that Sandor had heard her, was a slight darkening in the eyes and a squeeze on the hip. Sansa blushed under his intense gaze and looked nervously around the room, at the still present Holy Brothers.

“Worry not, Little Bird,” Sandor whispered in her ear, when Septon Bael stepped off of his platform and moved to congratulate the couple “these Septon’s have probably seen much worse.”

“Indeed,” Bael intoned, catching the tail of of his words. “I once performed a wedding in the Reach, where a smith and a seamstress attempted to consummate in front of me.”

Sansa’s mouth dropped in shock, and Sandor’s thundering laughter echoed in the Sept’s rafters.

“I had to throw holy water on the pair…” Bael said, turning on his heel, and walking away, “… I should keep a bucket nearby, for future weddings…”

Elder Brother approached them afterwards with open arms, smiling congenially. First he embraced Sandor, who returned the hug by awkwardly patting the monk on his back. The Elder Brother then turned to Sansa. The reformed knight held her gently and properly, and Sansa took the opportunity to whisper her thanks in his ear.

“Tis no trouble, my dear Sara,” the Elder Brother said. His brown eyes flickered to the Sept’s door as the last of the wedding guests slipped away. “As I said before, only a married man and woman can stay in the Cloisters. This is a place of sanctity, and all our residents must abide by the laws of the Seven--”

“And we agreed to those terms,” Sandor interjected, somewhat rudely. Sansa raised her eyebrows at his suspicious tone.

“And now, you live by those terms.”

Sansa gasped audibly, her heart leapt into her throat. He knows, she thought. He knows we are not who we say we are.

The Elder Brother’s countenance remained calm, unperturbed by the figurative hell he had just unleashed on the newlywed couple. Sandor growled out loud and gripped his longsword. With one hand, he pushed Sansa behind him and she fearfully closed her eyes. The sound of steel being drawn rang in her ears.

I am wanted by the crown. Would these Holy Brothers sell me for a bounty? Will I be returned to Joffrey? Have they already sent word?


Panic fueled her actions. Sansa spied the dragonbone sword and quickly drew it from Sandor’s hip. She mimicked Sandor’s grip on it’s hilt, and held the blade close to her body. Being armed made her feel much more powerful and in control. No wonder Sandor practiced with blades all day.

Thankfully, the Sept was now empty. Otherwise, Sansa wasn’t sure what the Holy Brother’s might do.
“I believe this is the second time you have held a sword at my neck,” the Elder Brother remarked casually, with Sandor's blade pressed menacingly to his neck. “I, the man who has clothed you, fed you, and provided you with shelter in these troubled times.”

“Speak what you know,” Sandor threatened, drawing a drop of blood from the Elder Brother’s neck.

“Nothing, only that you are not refugees.”

“Do you know who I am?” Sansa found her voice.

“A noble lady,” the Elder Brother tilted his head, “that much is evident. What I do not know, is who you are, and why you are here.”

“Why do you care who we are?” Sandor questioned, his scar twisted fiercely with each word. “I have done your labor, as has my lady. We have done all you have asked.”

“Even marry, curious…” the Elder Brother raised his eyebrows.

“Is this some sick jest?” Sansa trembled with unrestrained emotion. Who is this man? What is his purpose here? The comfort and safety she had felt these past few weeks quickly evaporated. Suddenly, it was as if the very walls of the Red Keep were closing in around her. Joffrey loomed in the shadows of the Sept’s wooden columns, pointing and laughing.

_You thought you were safe_, the boy King sneered.

_Stupid little dove_, Cersei whispered in her ear.

The dragonbone sword shook in her hands, but Sansa kept it up. “Let me explain,” Elder Brother gestured for them to sit in the aisles. Sansa and Sandor stood resolutely.

“I assure you, I am a devout and holy man, there is no need to be afraid. Judging from your reaction, the world outside has been a place of fear and mistrust for you. I left the Quiet Isle to investigate the war, as you know. One month before my departure, I had a dream. The Faith Militant marched again across Westeros. Their silver armor gleamed in the sun. In the Capital, I saw an evil shadow, and a flock of crows circled overhead. In the midst of this vision, I saw myself tending the apple trees of the Quiet Isle. Only I carried a heavy statue of the Maid on my back. It hurt, and I put the statue down to reach for an apple to eat.”

“While I reached for the sweet fruit, a lion appeared in the brush and spoke. The lion offered the Faith Militant to me. I thought of all the great deeds I could do with an army, all the people I could help. In exchange for this great gift, I would have to renounce my vows and return to knighthood. I recalled the horrors I witnessed in war, and I rejected the lion’s offer.”

“The lion attacked. I cowered, covering my face from the fury of it’s claws. To my surprise, a great dog leapt from the brushes and battled the golden beast, toe for toe. When I woke the next day, I traveled to the capitol to tell the High Septon of all that I had seen. The High Septon was not available, but I was able to speak with the Most Devout and a few old friends of what I had seen. On my return, I stumbled upon your camp. That is when I remembered one crucial detail of my dream, I had forgotten.”

“The dog had a scar,” the Elder Brother pointed at Sandor’s face, “just like that.”

Sandor’s grip had not relaxed, but Sansa’s will wavered. The Elder Brother appeared to be telling the truth.
“You have not told anyone of our arrival here?” Sansa questioned.

“I wrote a sparrow brother, a trusted friend, of the appearance of the dog from my dreams,” Elder Brother furrowed his brow, “I felt no need to speak of the woman he traveled with. Although you greatly puzzle me, and I am deeply curious. I will not press you for details of your private life. All our lives begin anew at the Quiet Isle.”

“All our lives,” the Elder Brother’s gaze returned to Sandor.

“A dream?” Sandor questioned with a scathing tone.

“Those who are not faithful, fail to understand the mysteries of the Seven. I saw you and knew. The Gods have sent you to us for a reason. The truth will be revealed in time.”

“Why marry us?” Sansa shook her head. “What purpose does that serve?”

“It is unholy for men and women to share a bed, as you have, without the grace of the Seven. The Gods deemed it necessary. I knew you were not married. I have known many married men and women,” the Elder Brother leaned in conspiratorially, “but as a witness to your mutual love for one another, I gave you the benefit of the doubt. And I do like weddings.”

“Now,” Elder Brother clapped his hands, “I have told you my secrets. Perhaps you ought to tell me yours.”

Sandor looked to Sansa, distrust written on his face.

Elder Brother folded his hands in the sleeves of his brown robe, and waited patiently. The Elder Brother has only ever helped us… she argued with herself.

“First of all,” Sansa said slowly. “My name is Sansa. Sansa Stark.”
Sansa and Sandor spend two months on the Quiet Isle in wedded bliss, but their peace is soon to be interrupted.

Warning: adult content! It definitely got hot and steamy in this chapter, but I think these two characters definitely deserve a small vacation.

Sandor closed the door behind them with a great sigh of relief and rolled his neck.

“At least that’s over,” he grumbled and moved past her to light the hearth. Sansa shivered and huddled close to the fire, drawing Sandor’s yellow and black cloak around her body. Sandor glanced down and winced. Sunlight from the window highlighted the mild despair painted on her face.

“Elder Brother has agreed to shelter us as long as we’d like,” Sandor said lightly, warming his hands. “We have food, a home, safety and all I must do is answer when the High Septon calls for me.”

“Elder Brother does not like the thought of me,” Sansa replied quietly, “I could tell by the tone of his voice. He thinks I will bring war to the Quiet Isle. I do not like the idea of anyone knowing our whereabouts. We were safer as Sara and Samson.”

“We were,” he agreed, a dark look crossing his face, “but there is nothing that can be done now. The High Septon will know within a week. The crown might know soon thereafter. We will face the consequences sooner or later.”

“But Elder Brother swore no one would know of our whereabouts!” Sansa protested, finding it difficult to believe that the Elder Brother would betray their confidence so quickly.

“Aye, but every highborn marriage is approved by the Triple Crown. The High Septon will want to know that you’ve traded your wolves for my hounds. Nothing can be done now that the marriage is performed, but each union of the Houses of Westeros is recorded by the High Septon in the Book of Lineages. If someone looks too closely, the evidence is there.”

“The Queen will know,” Sansa realized with horror, her eyes widened and she looked at Sandor fearfully.

“Not necessarily,” Sandor rumbled, taking her hands in his and caressing the back of her palm gently. “Remember what the Elder Brother said, this new High Septon is not a pawn to be played.”

Sansa still felt absolutely awful. Silence fell over the newly wed couple, a dark silence. Sansa thought about the day’s events, the month’s events, the year’s events... while Sandor unbuckled his armor and sword. Truly, this will be a grand adventure to tell one day. We escaped from the city,
found the Quiet Isle, the last of my family is dead, we married under false names, and…

“I cannot believe that Joffrey is dead,” Sansa mused.

Sandor snorted and a light smile played on his face as he lay down on the furs, stretching. Sansa never thought she’d be so glad to hear of someone’s death, but both her and Sandor agreed, it was only justice.

“Aye, the one bit of good news. The capital is in complete disarray. It will take Lord Lannister weeks to clean up the mess Joffrey left behind, and catching us is no immediate concern of his,” opening one eye, he looked at Sansa, “be happy that he is dead.”

Sansa nodded, “I am.”

The sun’s dying rays filtered in through the window, and Sandor raised himself to shut the makeshift curtains Sansa had placed there a few days past, for privacy. Sansa’s mind was abuzz with the thoughts of the wedding, the news from Westeros, the long conversation with the Elder Brother where the past was revealed in excruciating detail. It had been difficult to talk about King’s Landing, and even more difficult for Sandor to discuss his life as the Hound.

Sensing the pattern of her thoughts, he lowered himself down next to Sansa and tentatively drew her underneath his arm.

“No one will hurt you,” Sandor whispered in her hair, his warm breath ghosted across her ear. Sansa shivered, this time due to his proximity. She kicked off her shoes and leaned against Sandor’s side, immensely grateful for his company. “I will keep you safe. I cloaked you in my colors.”

Sandor fingered the edge of the yellow fabric that swathed Sansa. His tone was almost… reverential. Sansa felt her heart warm and her anxieties ease slightly. Here, in their small home, it was easy to forget the worries of the outside world, at least for a little while.

“You kept me safe long before that,” Sansa nudged his side, smiling. You truly did, Sandor.

“Yet now, we are bound by the Gods,” he took Sansa’s smaller hand in his, the hand with his mother’s ring. Sandor’s calloused thumb shook slightly as he traced the jewels. His face held ill disguised emotion.

“I am honored to wear it,” Sansa remarked. “I had no idea… it’s significance.”

“It pleases me to see it adorn your finger,” Sandor rasped lightly, his gentle grip around her shoulder tightened, “pleases me greatly, Little Bird.”

Sansa heart stutted at his small confession, “It pleases me to please my husband,” she said teasingly, twisting her hand so that their fingers might entwine.

Sandor’s eyebrows rose, and Sansa blushed, realizing the implication of what she said. Sandor’s scar twitched horribly, and she knew he was fighting a smile. The inadvertent joke lightened the gloomy atmosphere, and Sansa’s mind was temporarily distracted from any more worrisome thoughts, as she imagined Sandor’s thumbs brushing other things.

It suddenly occurred to Sansa, that they were a married man and woman alone in their quarters on their wedding night. The thought brought forth a flurry of nerves and she jerked her hand back to smooth her skirts anxiously. She avoided Sandor’s eyes, knowing she must look like foolish, recoiling from his touch when they had committed much more intimate acts than holding hands.

"You truly did, Sandor."
Sansa looked up at Sandor’s very serious tone, and she was caught in the gaze of his stormy grey eyes.

“Would you like me to fetch us some food?”

Sansa’s stomach rumbled in response, and Sandor took that as his cue to put on his boots again and exit the hut. As soon as the door closed, Sansa sighed. She licked her suddenly dry lips and ran a shaky hand over her face. Gather yourself, Sansa. It was irrational to suddenly feel so nervous. I’ve been alone with Sandor many times. They’d fallen asleep in each other's arms every night, these past few weeks. Now, we are bound by the Gods, Sandor’s baritone echoed in her mind.

Certainly, as a man, he was expecting something from her. Sansa swallowed heavily. An onslaught of insecurity welled in her chest. Sansa was always told she was pretty, but was she beautiful? No man had ever seen her naked form before, outside of the family, and that was before she became a woman. What if there was something unusual about her body?

Sandor had laid his hands on her before, but they hadn’t gone any further than caresses. Twice now, they had almost crossed the point of no return, but fate had intervened both times to prevent their union. Sandor had obviously lain with other women, he was older than her, and a military man besides, but perhaps he was used to more experienced women? What if he did not know how to be gentle? What if the act was painful and she never wanted to lay with him again? What if he found her lacking?

Why couldn't my mother, why couldn't my Septa have told me something useful! Sansa fumed silently.

Sansa sat and wrung her hands until Sandor returned carrying a tray full of vegetable barley soup, bread, cinnamon apple sweet cakes and a chocolate torte courtesy of Brother Frascero.

“... fool wouldn’t let me go without shaking my hand a hundred times… wishing wedded bliss and all that nonsense,” he set the tray on their small table and dragged it close to the furs. Finally noting her distress, Sandor paused in his mumbling.

“All is well, Sansa?”

“Yes!” Sansa quickly took a sweet cake and stuffed it in her mouth to prevent further conversation. “I was just thinking how glad I am that we have each other,” she said after swallowing a mouthful.

“I am glad to have you too, Little Bird,” Sandor replied slowly, his eyes gleamed with suspicion.

The pair turned to their food. Sansa ate and fretted over the event to come, debating whether or not to speak to Sandor about her concerns. The room was growing warmer, from the fire or her constant blushes, Sansa couldn’t tell, as she thought of the various ways they might consummate their marriage. Sandor seemed all to happy not to discuss anything, having grown tired of talking since they spoke, in lengths, about the past to Elder Brother.

“Sandor…?” Sansa said, once he had pushed aside his food and sighed contentedly. Sandor's scars faced her, which prevented Sansa from reading his expression.

“Hmm?” her non-knight replied. My husband, Sansa corrected herself. My Sandor, my Hound. I can trust him with my life, why can't I trust him with my thoughts?

“I thought we might take a nap,” Sandor said, once she’d managed to open and close her mouth a
few times.

“A… nap?”

“Aye,” Sandor’s eyes were lit with humor, “something one does when tired. It involves closing the eyes and resting for a short period of time.”

Sansa smacked his arm, it always amused her when Sandor jested. Sandor threw his head back and laughed, pulling her close with one arm. Sansa yelped and fell into his chest. Strong arms embraced her and held her close.

“Rest, Sansa. You, of all people, deserve a reprieve from this world.”

Sansa sighed and snuggled closer to Sandor’s warmth. She thought she’d never be able to calm her thoughts long enough to fall asleep, but soon her eyes were drifting closed. The feeling of safety and love permeated the hut, lulling her into a dreamless sleep.

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Sansa woke two hours late, groggy and well rested. A rustling sound nearby the door, and Sandor’s absence next to her signalled that he had woken first. “Sandor?” Sansa called, blinking blearily. Night had fallen sometime while they napped, and Sandor had not bothered to light the hearth again. The moonlight was dim tonight. Sansa could barely her newly made spouse in the darkness.

“Here,” Sandor voice sounded in the space next to her and Sansa jumped. Sandor slid into the furs, and wrapped his muscled arms around her waist, pulling her back into his embrace.

Sansa turned on her side, so she faced him in the dark. Tentatively, she placed a hand on his neck and felt the corded muscles there flex and tense. Fully awake now, the day’s events came flooding back to her. The wedding, the Elder Brother, Sandor’s insistence that she rest. Looking back now, she realized it was just another instance of Sandor acting out of his own personal sense of honor. Sandor would not force them to immediately consummate the marriage, when she was in such a state of distress. Sansa felt aglow with affection for her non-knight, now husband.

“Sansa,” he whispered.

That was all, just her name spoken like a prayer, and Sansa realized that he would wait for her to make the first move.

“Sandor,” she brushed one thumb across his jaw, across both burnt and unburnt skin. Sandor’s breathing grew shallow and one hand moved to curl in her hair. “I love you.”

Sandor lips descended on hers, and soon Sansa found herself pushed onto her back with Sandor hovering over her, supported by his arms on either side of her body. The smell of him, leather, wood, steel, and musk, surrounded her. Without her eyesight, she was forced to rely on her other four senses for direction, which made the experience all the more real.

Fingers scraped her scalp and tilted her head back to allow Sandor better access. Their lips fell into a dangerously deep and intoxicating rhythm and Sansa thought she might faint when Sandor finally licked her lips and begged entrance to her mouth. Sansa ran her hands down Sandor’s back, feeling each muscle through the fabric of his tunic. Despite the wild passion of their kiss, Sandor continued to hover over her, never allowing the lower halves of their bodies to touch.

“Sandor,” she broke away gasping, in the dark, she could not see his expression but thought she might have heard a groan. “I’m nervous.”
“I would never hurt you, Sansa,” he responded, sounding just as breathless as she felt, “trust me.”

And she did trust him. Sansa’s eyes finally adjusted to the darkness at the same time Sandor pulled her gently to her knees. With one swift movement, Sandor divested himself of his tunic, and Sansa could faintly see the outline of his chest and stomach. His mouth fell on her neck and she gasped at the sensations his kiss drew there.

Her hands explored the contours of his upper body, pausing to tangle in the hair of his chest. Sandor’s kiss traveled up her neck and to her lips again, and they engaged in a forbidden game of licking and biting. Hands stroked her arms, up and down. At times, his touch jumped from her arms to her legs, or torso, inciting shivers and nervous jumps whenever he travelled too close to her breasts or her sex.

A tug on her back was the only indication Sandor was working on the ties of her dress. Sansa’s felt hot and heavy when he started to slip the fabric off her shoulders, revealing the chemise hidden underneath. Sansa took over when Sandor could no longer push the dress past her hips, and rid herself of the garment. Her hands shook and Sandor noticed.

“Relax,” Sandor’s deep voice went straight to her womanhood and he backed her down onto the furs again. The kiss began anew, but at a more inhibited pace. Sandor’s hands touched her ankles, moved up her calves and he pushed the fabric of her underclothes until he brushed skin of her thighs.

Sansa’s heart beat erratically, and by now she could barely think but for the buzzing in her head and all over her body. Sandor’s touch left a trail of fire everywhere, and when he finally gripped her breasts she moaned in surprise.

“Touch me,” he demanded more than asked, but Sansa was suddenly glad for the instruction. Sandor’s touches made her limbs feel like jelly and her brain didn’t seem to be working properly. Sansa’s hands fluttered across his chest, the patchwork of scars and burns there, and curiously toward the hardness of his manhood. When her hands traced the shape of him, Sandor’s head fell onto her shoulder and he sighed in relieved ecstasy. Sansa felt him straining against his breeches, and it gave Sansa a small sense of satisfaction that she had this effect on him.

Sansa grew bolder, and decided to slip a finger underneath his waistband, but she could only reach so far and her curiosity was nowhere near sated. Making a split second decision, and summoning her courage, she started to work on the ties at his groin. Taking the cue, Sandor shifted to the side and quickly undressed his legs. Once the breeches were gone, Sansa’s hands curiously felt his thigh next to her and the nerves returned when he pulled her hand up to grip his manhood.

The skin was smooth, softer than she thought, but Sandor was large in all respects and the thought of coupling with him began to feel intimidating again. Sandor did nothing for a while, just laid his head back down and allowed her to explore his sex with the curiosity of a virgin. A few moments later, Sandor’s hands drifted to her hips and she felt a tug on her chemise.

Sansa raised her arms out of habit, and the fabric was lifted over her head. “You’re beautiful,” Sandor murmured reverently when she came into view. Sansa covered her breasts for the sake of her modesty but he quickly grabbed her hands and gently pushed them away and leaned over to kiss her shoulder, “…exquisite.” Sansa shivered and moaned lightly when he kissed one of her breasts and fondled the other. Sansa threw her head back and panted with abandon, undone by his attention.

Once he was satisfied that she had forgotten all about her self-consciousness. Sandor reached for her small clothes. Sansa’s legs clamped instinctively together, and he rubbed her hips soothingly. “Trust me,” he repeated again, pulling down the fabric lightly.
Once she heard her smallclothes land on the floor, Sansa momentarily panicked when Sandor came to loom over her and she gripped his muscular shoulders, “Remember to be gentle!” she whispered hurriedly.

Sandor nodded in the dark, close enough that she could see his head move. “No rush, Sansa,” she heard him say softly and he kissed her lips lightly. Sansa felt his hand travel from her breast, down her hip and to where he cupped her sex. Sansa gasped and her hips bucked against the contact of his fingers with her feminine folds. He rubbed gently at the bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs.

Sansa quickly forgot everything her mother and her Septa taught her about propriety as her body rapidly succumbed to the fire Sandor was stoking with his fingers. Unable to rein herself in any longer, she whimpered and moaned with an abandon she didn’t think she possessed. A wetness pooled in her legs, and Sansa wondered if that was normal before Sandor dipped his finger in it and continued his ministrations. Sansa could feel Sandor smiling triumphantly against her shoulder. He kissed her neck once, twice, and then brought his attention to her breasts again once more, to administer his unique brand of torture there.

Then his hand was gone and his legs were between hers. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he whispered in her ear. Then, after a ragged breath, “I love you.”

Sansa heart might have exploded with joy. She laughed and placed kiss after kiss on his face, over his scar, his nose, his eyes, until she decided to place her hands on his waist and tug his hips closer to hers. Their chests met and the feel of skin on skin was intoxication. Sansa felt his manhood brush against her thigh and finally rub against her folds, making her hips jerk upward against him. Sandor moaned lightly at the contact.

“Sansa, I need your help,” he placed her hand on his manhood. Sansa regained her senses long enough to look at him curiously, “Where?”

With some uncertainty, she guided him toward her entrance and released her hand when she felt him press inward. There was a tense moment when Sansa seized with panic at the thought that she was too small, and he would not fit, but then the tip of him slid into her and she felt an uncomfortable fullness there. Sandor groaned deeply and his head fell on her shoulder. His hands lifted her hips slightly and he pressed again. Sansa cried out in surprise when she felt a sharp pain.

Sandor froze, his hips and hands stilled. Sansa closed her eyes and gripped his shoulders. It’s done, it’s over, she thought and relief washed over her. Sandor has taken my maidenhead. No one else can.

“Sansa?” he questioned. Another moment and then, “I am sorry.”

“I’m alright,” she whispered, slowly growing accustomed to the invasion. “Do not move yet,” she added a moment later. Sansa felt him nod and he rested the weight of his body against her, covering her in warmth. “Am I crushing you?” he whispered and lightly lifted his weight onto his arms again. “No,” Sansa pulled him back down.

When the painful throb dimmed, she moved against him experimentally and Sandor seemed to understand. His manhood retracted slightly, and then he pushed himself back inward eliciting a small gasp from Sansa. Sandor froze again.

“No, don’t stop,” she managed. Seven Gods, I’ll die if you stop now... The dull pain had faded to pleasure, and Sansa was awed by the feeling of warm fullness. Sandor groaned and repeated the same motion, retreating and then plunging back in, deeper than before. He brushed against the bundle of nerves he’d played with earlier and Sansa felt a spark of pleasure building.
Sandor pulled back and sheathed inside her again. He steadily slid in and out of her in a slow rhythm. Sansa could feel the muscles of his back tense, the tightness of his jaw as he held himself back. Some unknown instinct urged her to wrap her legs around his waist, drawing him closer. She moved her hips to match his, reveling in the feeling of him stroking her womanhood again and again. Sansa couldn’t stop the small whimpers and moans that came with every stroke.

Sandor slowly became undone, the steady rhythm he built started to disintegrate with every sound she made. Again and again, harder and faster until he moaned her name. Sansa’s nails scraped against his neck when the pace grew frantic. The heat between them was growing unbearable.

“Sansa,” he she felt a thrill of satisfaction at how unhinged he sounded. Sansa heard a sharp intake of his breath and then he ground into her hard, before his body tensed and he gasped. Sansa felt him fall against her, whispering her name and his love over and over again, “Sansa, I love you, Sansa, Sansa… Sansa.”

Sansa stroked his hair, mesmerized by the raw tone of his voice, her legs still wrapped around his waist, basking in contentment. She felt like a cat who’d just caught a mouse. Her body felt warm and tingly, and her womanhood was throbbing pleasantly. Sansa kissed his burnt ear, cheek and nose until Sandor met her lips lazily.

“I’ve wanted you for so long,” he confessed, sliding out of her and then collapsing on his side, drawing her into his arms. Sansa felt one of his hands knead her breast fondly, and she rested her head against his other arm. Sleep beckoned her, and she felt inclined to obey, safe Sandor’s arms.

“I’ve loved you since King’s Landing,” she admitted to the darkness, her eyes growing heavier by the second. All her muscles had turned to liquid in the aftermath of their lovemaking. She heard him sigh and nod against her neck.

“My sweet wife,” he said sleepily. “Sansa… I will never let anything happen to you. I will keep you safe… Sansa…”

And they both succumbed to their dreams.

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Two months later, Sansa found herself face down in the dirt.

Two months, two glorious months. Two months of peace and growth. Two months of domestic days and passionate nights. A life without secrets or ulterior motives in the darkness.

*If Mother could see me now…* Sansa might have laughed if she wasn’t afraid to open her mouth and swallow mud. *Father always thought Arya would be the problem child.*

“Sansa!” Sansa heard Sandor cried in alarm, and he rushed toward her. The wooden practice sword he had been using tumbled to the ground. Strong hands lifted her up and onto her feet, and her husband of eight weeks brushed the dirt off her trousers and tunic. “Damn, are you alright?”

“Yes, yes. I am fine, Sandor. You cannot keep stopping and picking me up like a baby. I was under the impression that swordplay was a bruising sport.” Sansa pushed away his hands and straightened herself independently, trying to rekindle some dignity.

“Swordplay is a dying sport,” Sandor jested darkly. His arms encircled her from behind and his foot corrected her stance. “Remember, a wider stance is more stable, and your left hands goes here,” Sandor adjusted her grip with care, “to help support the weight.”
Sansa and Sandor reinitiated their play bout. It was a cold, but sunny day on the Quiet Isle, perfect for a training session. Sandor was enjoying teaching Sansa to wield the dragonbone sword, and the couple enjoyed the activity together because it normally ended in a different type of play. Like before, Sansa was disarmed in one or two moves easily by her training partner, and afterwards he always had a tip or criticism that might help keep the wooden sword in her hand a few seconds longer. By the time Sandor called for a close to the day, Sansa was sweating and panting from the physical exertion.

“Oh, I wish I could knock it out of your hands just once,” Sansa took a long drink of water from Sandor’s offered skin. The married couple rested against the large wooden fence that surrounded the abandoned dirt pen they sparred in. Sandor through his head back and laughed. The only other noise was the sound of seagulls in the distance.

“I’ve had a sword in my hands for over fifteen years, San,” Sansa almost swooned over the affectionate diminutive to her name, “you can’t be knighted instantly.”

“Yes, well,” Sansa smirked and tugged at the collar to Sandor’s shirt. The sweat covered his body attractively, and made the fabric of his shirt adhere to his skin. Although Sansa never thought she’d be aroused at the thought of a sweaty man when she was younger, she found she didn’t mind Sandor’s rugged ways so much. “I expected better from the infamous Hound.”

“Oh,” Sandor’s eyes darkened mischievously, “did you, Little Bird?”

“Absolutely,” Sansa sidestepped Sandor’s hand when he reached for her, “I thought the Hound would have worked some miracle by now, seeing as how he is a genius with the sword.”

Sandor grinned darkly and grabbed for her waist, but Sansa, invigorated from their earlier bouts, quickly leapt over the fence and out of his reach. The two faced each other on opposite sides of the fence, trading determined looks and daring the other to move. Sansa stuck her hands on her hips, in a manner that used to infuriate her, whenever Arya did it.

“It seems I was incorrect in my assumptions about your physical prowess, good Ser Hound, I shall have to seek instruction elsewhere,” Sansa turned on her heel and walked away in a manner she’d seen whores do in King’s Landing, feeling Sandor’s gaze hot on her backside.

“Now you’ve done it,” Sandor leapt over the fence and Sansa yelped, breaking into a sprint. The chase took them through the gardens, Sansa’s legs were much faster than the warrior’s, but she tired quickly, while Sandor had the endurance of a man who’d exercised every day since childhood. Sansa only hoped to outrun him to their small homestead, but she was caught near the Cloisters and hoisted onto his shoulder. Sandor wasn’t even out of breath, she noted with mild annoyance.

“It seems to me,” Sandor said with a sharp swat on her butt, “that my lady wife should be more grateful to her brave rescuer.”

“Sandor!” Sansa’s hips were bouncing on his shoulder, and her head swung back and forth. Red hair dangled in front of her, so she was oblivious to anyone witnessing her shame. Watching the ground, however, she was able to tell that Sandor was taking her toward their small home. “Perhaps I could show my gratitude, if my feet were solidly planted on the ground.”

“Why would I do that?” Sandor said as they passed underneath the wooden entrance to the hut, “I have such a fine view here.”

Regardless of his own personal preference, Sandor placed Sansa gently on the ground soon after, and she quickly found herself in a tight embrace again, this time on foot. Curling her fingers at the
nape of Sandor's neck, Sansa felt him place a protective kiss on her brow. “Whatever can I do,” she whispered when he rested his forehead against hers, “to express my thanks, noble hero?”

“You’ve done enough,” Sandor said thickly, his grip tightened around her waist. “More than enough.”

A knock on the door interrupted the private moment between lovers. The Elder Brother called out from behind the wooden frame. Sandor sat down and took the proffered cloth from Sansa to wipe the sweat from his brow and Sansa took the opportunity to trail her fingers across Sandor’s chest as she passed to answer the door, a small promise for later.

Sansa rejoiced inwardly when she noticed a small shiver from the warrior. She would never tire of using her womanly powers to unravel Sandor’s strict control.

The Elder Brother serious face greeted her and Sansa instantly knew something was wrong.

“Lady Sansa,” he nodded respectfully and bowed his cowled head toward the large warrior, “Sandor.”

After learning of Sansa and Sandor’s true identity, he had insisted on calling Sansa by her proper title. Sana wished he wouldn’t, and thought about correcting him many times. There was nothing she longed for more at the moment, than a simpler life with no titles and worries.

Both Sansa and Sandor knew they would eventually have to face their pasts. The world would not wait forever, and Westeros would undoubtedly call eventually. The Elder Brother seemed to be under the impression that his prophetic dream was connected to Sandor. Elder Brother had gone as far to predict that Sandor would soon fight for, and be a Champion of the Faith. Sandor was less convinced, but Sansa’s well being was his priority and the Quiet Isle was safe for the time being.

“If I must fight for the Gods that scorned me, so be it, Little Bird,” he said to her one night not long past, when they lay down for bed.

“Do you truly believe they abandoned you, Sandor?” Sansa had replied, wrapping his arms around her. “After all your suffering, have the Gods not granted you peace? Have they not granted you love? Me?”

Sandor had nothing nothing to say after that, and Sansa lay awake that night thinking. The thought of Sandor as a Champion of the Faith disturbed her deeply. Sandor had been used as a sword before, used and abused, and Sansa worried that returning to that life would stress his body and soul. She’d expressed these fears to the Elder Brother, but he only begged her to remember the will of the Seven.

Sansa’s mind was brought back to the present by Sandor’s heavy hand on her shoulder.

“How can we assist you, Elder Brother?” Sansa remembered her courtesies, as always.

“There is a visitor,” Elder Brother sighed and gestured behind him.

In the distance, along the dirt road that lead to the Sept, a tall figure stood. The stranger was garbed head to toe in armor, and Sansa could see two longswords strapped to their hip. A boy, possibly a squire, stood in the man’s shadow. Sansa could see no sigil, or other identifying information, but fear instantly grabbed at her heart.

“Who are they?” Sansa whispered, edging back into the hut and closer to Sandor. From the corner of her eye, she could see Sandor’s grip on the door with white knuckles.
“She claims to have been sent by Lady Catelyn Stark.”
Sansa meets Lady Brienne, and finds in her an unexpected ally.

Sandor, Sansa, Elder Brother, and the mysterious Lady Brienne sat facing one another at a small table in the corner of the Elder Brother’s living quarters. The leader of the holy order built his home into the mountainside, a place where Hugo of the Hill was once said to have rested. The Elder Brother’s dwelling was half house half cave, and naturally heated against the cold. Sandor would have preferred to meet this woman in the open, where there weren’t so many valuables that could potentially be smashed, but the Quiet Isle was a place of peace and negotiation.

Who is this woman, who thinks she can spirit Sansa away? Sandor felt the Hound rising to the challenge. Not in Seven lifetimes.

Sansa sat with her hands folded, like a proper lady, delicately sipping from a cracked tea cup. The rest of the pot remained untouched by the remaining company. Sandor never liked tea, and apparently neither did the large knight-woman.

Brienne of Tarth towered over his petite wife, and truth be told, the Tarth woman disquieted Sandor. Few people stood eye-to-eye with the Hound, and Lady Brienne was glaring at him from across the table as if he’d just killed her puppy and dragged it’s body through the mud.

Brienne was an ugly woman. There was no mincing words there. She had watery blue eyes, hair like straw, and a pudgy, pocked face. Yet, she looked strong enough to drag a wagon across the countryside. Sandor sized her up when she crossed the threshold to the Elder Brother's hom, and he had no doubt that the Maiden of Tarth could best many of the finest knights.

Sansa politely ignored Brienne’s glares, and gave Sandor a covert nudge on the knee. She left her leg there and Sandor could feel the warmth of her skin through the fabric of his breeches. A small sign of support, but it warmed his heart. Gods, I’m going soft, Sandor thought. At least Sansa does not think I am a monster. Unlike this woman.

The very sight of Lady Brienne set Sandor on edge. The Maiden of Tarth was a nightmare come to life. A knight come to steal his Little Bird. Of course, Sansa had shown her devotion time and time again. After a long journey, they were finally wed, and at night, after coupling, Sandor stared down at her red hair and whispered a thousand thanks to the Gods. Yet still, when Brienne appeared, he feared Sansa might declare the wedding a sham and take Lady Brienne’s offer.

Look at her, Sandor sneered internally. Right now she’s plotting to steal Sansa in the night. She probably believes I threatened the Little Bird, coerced her into marrying me.

The first thing Sandor noticed was the woman’s steel armor. Steel was no cheap metal. Someone funded the lady-knight, and it wasn’t the deceased Lady Stark. No small lord could afford the gold filigree on the breastplate, and the polished longsword at her side rippled like Valyrian steel. Sandor knew from the brief history lessons he’d received as a child, Lord Tarth has no ancestral Valyrian sword. Someone with deep pockets was funding this woman, and she didn’t need to speak for Sandor to know who it was.
“I carry with me a letter signed by King Tommen,” Lady Brienne produced a missive from within her sleeve and handed it over to the Elder Brother.

Elder Brother looked between Lady Brienne and Sansa, and broke the seal to the missive. With a glance, Sandor could see the scribbled cursive of his old charge. Tommen was always a messy writer, but the finer print he also recognized. Jaime Lannister’s neat script detailed the King’s demand for the safe return of Sansa and Arya Stark to the capital. Elder Brother passed it wordlessly to Sansa.

His beautiful wife read the missive calmly, pausing only once to take a sip of tea. When she reached the end of the King’s proclamation, she handed the parchment to Sandor and smiled. Sandor could not begin to understand why Sansa might be amused, but thought she must have some secret stashed up her sleeve.

*To all LORDS and LADIES of Westeros, Noble KNIGHTS and good people,*

*By the order of KING TOMMEN BARATHEON, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, LADY BRIENNE OF TARTH is hereby charged with the investigation and imminent retrieval of the presumed missing LADIES SANSA AND ARYA STARK.*

*The CROWN claims responsibilities for all DEBTS and DAMAGES incurred during this investigation and wishes for a SAFE and SPEEDY recovery of its noble people. Any person found guilty of IMPEDING the due process of this SEARCH and RESCUE mission shall be charged with TREASON and promptly brought to JUSTICE.*

King Tommen Baratheon  
*The First of His Name*  
*Lord of the Seven Kingdoms*  
*Protector of the Realm*

Jaime Lannister  
*Lord Commander of the Kingsguard*

Sandor picked at the royal seal, hoping to find some evidence of falsehood, but could detect nothing. The woman even had Tommen’s true signature. Sandor’s mind was turning the situation over again and again. The Elder Brother had not betrayed them, of that Sandor was positive. Sandor and the retired knight had grown close in the past few months. How did Brienne of Tarth find them? Or, was this a lucky guess?

Sandor recognized the startled look of recognition when Brienne first laid eyes on Sansa. Perhaps she hadn’t expected to be successful in her pursuit. All of Westeros likely thought the two Stark sisters dead. Upon seeing Sansa, Lady Brienne had fallen to one knee with a look of determination, and declared her intent to shepherd Lady Sansa to safety. Of course, once she caught sight of the Hound at her side, a look of stunned dismay crossed her face.

If Lady Brienne had truly been sent by Catelyn Stark, why did she carry the King’s seal? What was her connection to the Lannisters?

Sandor eyed Lady Brienne again from across the rickety wooden table. Tall, lean, muscled, but most likely not as experienced as himself. In a true fight, Sandor might be able to overpower her, but the Elder Brother and the other Holy Brothers would never forgive him for spilling blood on the Quiet Isle. Sansa and Sandor would be exiled from their sanctuary.

Yet, if Sandor allowed her to leave… to send word to King’s Landing. Tywin Lannister might send
a hundred knights to reclaim the Heir to Winterfell and Sansa would once again, be in the lion’s clutches. Will they even want her? Now that the Hound had taken her maidenhead? Tywin Lannister will want his head, of that Sandor was certain. Sansa would then be widowed and sold to the highest bidder. Or worse.

Sandor brought a hand to his temple, where he felt a headache forming. With his other hand, he slid the missive back over to Lady Brienne.

“I would like to take Lady Sansa back with me to King’s Landing.”

Well, the woman was honest, at least. Yet, the thought of losing Sansa ripped at his heart, and the Hound in him reared it’s ugly head.

“Over my dead body,” he practically growled.

Lady Brienne turned chin up and looked down on him with her pale blue eyes. Sandor wanted to leap across the table and rip that smug expression off her face with his bare hands, but both Sansa and the Elder Brother made a grab for his arms. The Elder Brother gave him a compassionate, knowing look, but it was Sansa’s soft pat of reassurance, that ultimately subdued him.

“I am afraid you are mistaken, Lady Brienne,” Sansa's melodic voice temporarily soothed his nerves. “This missive does not take into account recent events, my change in status, and the circumstances surrounding my departure from the capital.”

Brienne turned her curious gaze on Sansa, and her expression of disdain softened to a heightened regard. Sandor hoped Sansa had a plan, or they wouldn’t be able to talk themselves out of this.

“For one,” Sansa held up a finger and pointed to the ground, “we are not within the Seven Kingdoms. The Quiet Isle was granted to the Faith by Baelor the Blessed in year 173 after Aegon’s Landing. Thus, the Quiet Isle does not fall under the reign and authority of King Tommen.”

Lady Brienne’s mouth opened and closed and she looked prepared to argue, but no words came out of her mouth. She looked like a puffer fish that had been deflated. Obviously, the Maiden of Tarth expected Lady Stark’s daughter to be in dire need of rescuing. Taking in Lady Brienne’s shocked and flabbergasted expression, Sandor felt a weight lifted off his chest.

"By the Gods, Sansa, perhaps you can talk us out of this trap. Across the table, the Elder Brother nodded his head, confirming Sansa’s statement. The Quiet Isle did belong to the Faith.

“Secondly,” Sansa continued. “This writ says Lady Sansa Stark and that is not I. I recently married and have taken my husband’s name. I require an updated statement from the King once he considers my change in status. Furthermore, the King cannot disjoin what has been united by the Gods. If you return with a proclamation for Lady Sansa Clegane, I would be willing to discuss a return to the capital only after the King has spoken with the High Septon.”

Lady Brienne’s eyes flickered between Sansa and himself, realization dawning on her face. Sandor could almost hear her thoughts. Sweet, innocent Sansa Stark married to the Hound, a vicious murderer, an evil brute. He knew what the lady-knight was thinking, because he often thought those things himself. At times, he could not believe his own good fortune, and didn’t expect anyone else to believe it either. Brienne’s eyes darkened with fury and her fists shook. Sandor stared back evenly with folded arms.

“The HOUND forced you?!?” the lady-knight shouted, and rose to her feet.

Sandor rose across from her and placed a hand on the back of Sansa’s chair, prepared to draw her
backwards if this stupid woman dared to draw steel. The Elder Brother held up his hands in a universal gesture of peace.

“There will be no blood spilt here,” the Elder Brother spoke loudly, “this is a place of tranquility and meditation. Calm yourself, Lady Brienne, or you shall be asked to leave and never return.”

Brienne looked thoroughly chastised. Her hand released its grip on her sword and she lowered herself slowly back down, all the while watching the Hound like a hawk. Sansa gestured for Sandor to sit, and he did so begrudgingly, wishing he had a sword or a shield.

“THIRDLY,” Sansa drew the attention back to her. “I escaped from King’s Landing, with the assistance of Sandor Clegane, of my own free will. Now you have learned the truth of the matter, and I do believe your investigation is complete.”

Brienne of Tarth’s nostrils flared as she looked between Sansa and the Hound. Her knuckles fisted on the table and her blue eyes were wide and murderous. Sandor felt positively gleeful at her lack of response. The Lady Knight climbed to the highest window of the tallest tower to save the fair maiden from a foul beast, and ‘twas the maiden who shoved her back down.

Finally, Brienne of Tarth’s eyes turned to the Elder Brother for assistance. “I would like to speak with Lady Stark alone.”

“No alone,” Sandor said through gritted teeth.

“I will stay,” the Elder Brother offered. “I believe this matter concerns the safety of the Quiet Isle, and I would be glad to monitor the discussion.”

Sandor wanted to sigh and throw a fit, but thought it best to concede this point. There was no one better to convince Lady Brienne, than Sansa herself. The Hound recognized the way Brienne looked at his wife. It was the same expression Sansa wore when she first laid eyes on Joffrey, the same look women gave Ser Jaime and Ser Loras, the same look he’d had when he first met Ser Barriston Selmy. A look of adoration and hero worship.

Sandor stood and nodded to the Elder Brother and Sansa. Before leaving, he looked over his shoulder. Sansa smiled confidently, with love in her eyes, and he couldn’t find a reason to linger any longer.

Sandor shut the door behind him and went to retrieve his sword and armor. It wouldn’t hurt to be prepared.

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Sansa folded her hands primly and adjusted her skirts. To her immediate right, sat the tall and strong Lady Brienne. She was truly a sight to behold, all bedecked in arms and armor, ready to carry Sansa away to safety. Sansa’s mind was working furiously to unravel the puzzle of her sudden appearance. Brienne claimed to have been sent by her dead mother, but carried the seal of King Tommen.

*I wonder how long she has been searching for me?* Months, years? *Would Lady Brienne have been my knight in shining armor, if I had stayed in King’s Landing?* Would this strong woman have saved me from Joffrey’s wrath? No, a voice in the back of her mind responded, Lady Brienne arrived far too late.

*How can I trust her?* Sansa wondered. *And if I must, how can I fool her?*

Lady Brienne looked distrustfully at the door, and then looked equally suspicious of the Elder
Brother. The older monk looked quite undisturbed by her scrutiny and folded his hands in the sleeves of his robes, smiling plaintively.

“Might I ask, Lady Brienne, how you came to know my mother, Lady Catelyn Stark?”

Brienne had not been expecting Sansa to speak first, and straightened when she was addressed. Sansa was reminded of the young soldiers at Winterfell, who would have fallen over themselves to impress the great Lord Stark.

“Yes, my lady,” Brienne’s voice was deeper than most women’s, but clear and strong. Sansa listened for any hints that she might be lying. “I met Lady Catelyn during the War of Five King’s. I served King Renly in his Rainbow Guard and had the honor of meeting your mother when she served as the Northern Envoy for your brother, King Robb. Your mother, in her infinite kindness, assisted me in a... dire situation and I pledged by sword and service to her, in the eyes of the Old Gods and the New.”

Sansa wondered what this “dire situation” was, but Lady Brienne glossed over the subject quickly, looking upset. Sansa tried her best to probe for any signs of deception, but Lady Brienne sounded honest. Her eyes bespoke her sincerity and she sounded so reverent when she mentioned Sansa’s mother, Sansa was not certain what to believe.

“We returned to the North and to your brother King Robb. Your mother charged me with returning Ser Jaime Lannister to King’s Landing, but I was thwarted by Lord Bolton’s bannerman. I formed an alliance with Ser Jaime, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and when we escaped from Harrenhall, he entrusted me with this armor, Oathkeeper,” here, she patted the shining sword at her hip, “and granted me the royal seal of King Tommen to assist me in my search.”

Sansa blanched at the thought of Jaime Lannister, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, conspiring with Lady Brienne. An image of a naked Cersei, whispering in Ser Jaime’s ear, came unbidden to her and she shivered with disgust.

“I swore to her, my lady. I swore I would find you, I would die finding you. I would give up my honor, my life, my dreams, to ensure your safety. And I have found you, my lady, and I never thought I would fail so miserably.”

Lady Brienne looked so distraught, Sansa reached a hand out to pat the lady-knight’s hand. Brienne’s head shot up and she looked mildly surprised.

“You comfort me, but it is I who should comfort you!” Brienne’s brow furrowed and her expression was confused, “the Hound spirited you away from the Red Keep and now you are his wife and prisoner.”

Sansa couldn’t stop an amused laugh from escaping her mouth. Lady Brienne sounded so affronted and anguished, Sansa knew she should correct her immediately, but not before she understood Brienne’s motivations completely.

“I am sorry, Lady Brienne, but I do not believe I understand your intentions clearly. Who, exactly, do you serve?”

Brienne looked confused for a moment as well, and Sansa could see her working over her story in her mind, teasing out the details.

“I apologize, I did not make myself clear. I serve you, Lady Sansa.”

Sansa was floored. “Me, you serve me? You just confessed to conspiring with the Kingslayer--”
“Ser Jaime,” Brienne corrected and then realized her mistake when Sansa’s face grew red. “No, yes! I mean— Ser Jaime entrusted me with Oathkeeper, made from your father’s Valyrian sword, Ice—”

“He melted down my father’s sword?!”

“No! Lord Tywin did! Ser Jaime knew nothing of that crime. I assure you. He entrusted me with the sword and your safety. He begged me to keep you safe from the Queen—”

“Margaery is a friend,” Sansa said stiffly, knowing the lie as soon as it left her lip. “If you truly serve me, than you have been hoodwinked by a clever man. Queen Margaery would not see me harmed.”

“Not Queen Margaery, who has yet to be crowned,” Lady Brienne ran a hand through her tousled stringy hair and sighed raggedly. Each miscommunication drew an exasperated sigh from her mouth. “The Queen Regent, Cersei Lannister. Ser Jaime bid me keep you safe from his sister, the Queen,” she emphasized. “We both swore to honor your mother’s last request.”

Sansa mind whirled, “But Ser Jaime has no honor…”

“Nay!” Brienne’s hands slammed down on the table.

Until that point, the Elder Brother had been calmly observing the conversation between the two ladies, content to not interfere. When Brienne violent protest shook the table, he stood and levelled her with a disappointed look. Brienne quelled and sat back down, apologizing profusely.

“Ser Jaime is a man of great honor, I would trust him with my life,” Lady Brienne said confidently, with her head held high. Sansa wondered at the affection hidden in the lady-knight’s words.

“I find that hard to believe,” Sansa said slowly and crossed her legs. Lady Brienne looked prepared to retort, but Sansa held up a hand. To Sansa’s mild surprise, Brienne was silenced. Perhaps she does truly serve me. “However, I have known men to be monsters, and monsters to be men. You are entitled to your opinion, and I am entitled to mine. I will accept what you have said… for now. Please continue.”

Lady Brienne nodded sharply, “I left King’s Landing and traveled with only faint rumors and my instincts for weeks. I won’t bore you with the details of my journey, needless to say, I lost hope that I would find you alive. I followed a lead given to me by a poor sellsword, and Septon Maribald guided my passage to the Quiet Isle. I did not think to truly find you here, my lady. Although I am glad that I came when I did.”

Sansa ignored that last part, “And the boy?”

“My squire,” Brienne eyes took on a distant and fond, yet amused look. “Podrick Payne.”

“A relation to Ser Ilyn Payne…?” Sansa felt sick. Ilyn Payne was the mute knight who beheaded her father at the Great Sept of Baelor. She could still hear the blade whistling through the air and the dull thump of his head striking the stone. Sansa swallowed heavily when Brienne nodded.

“An unfortunate relation,” Brienne admitted, “Pod does not seem fond of his Uncle. They do not speak, nor will they in the future.”

Sansa nodded thankfully and took a deep breath to clear her head. She couldn’t get emotional now, of all times.

“Lady Sansa,” Lady Brienne looked to be seated on the edge of her seat, and anxiously glanced at the door. The tall woman dropped her voice to a whisper and glanced at the Elder Brother. “We can
leave in the night. Ser Jaime and I can keep you safe from the Hound--"

Sansa waved a hand and shook her head, “No, no need to worry. You are mistaken, Lady Brienne. I married Sandor Clegane for love, not because I was forced to.”

Brienne glanced at the Elder Brother again and the monk raised his eyebrows.

“Elder Brother,” Sansa saw no other option, “perhaps you might allow us to speak even more privately. Lady Brienne has recently entered my service, and we have much to discuss.”

“I did recently receive a raven I have not had the opportunity to read and respond to,” the Elder Brother rose and without another word, disappeared into some dark room in the back of his cavelike home.

Sansa waited until the sound of Elder Brother’s footsteps faded before turning to Lady Brienne. The lady looked prepared to speak but Sansa stopped her with a hand again.

“Lady Brienne, there is much you do not know,” Sansa began, but then paused, uncertain how to proceed. What can I say that will make her believe the Hound does not have me under his thumb? Then, the answer hit her, but not before Lady Brienne put in her two cents.

“If there is a child, I know a way of relieving that burden,” Lady Brienne said without hesitation. Sansa gawked and then Brienne added, “or if you’d prefer to keep the babe, I can help protect the child.”

“No!” Sansa gasped and shook her head. It occurred to Sansa that Brienne must think she married the Hound for the sake of a baby, it would explain her unexpected loyalty to Sandor. “No, there is no child… at the moment. You are mistaken again. Lady Brienne I do not know how to explain.”

Sansa took a steadying breath and prepared herself to divulge the truth. “When I lived in the Red Keep, I was a prisoner… of King Joffrey’s. I was treated very poorly. I trusted the wrong people, and it cost my father his life, and me, my dignity. After my father was killed, Joffrey took me to see his head, tarred and mutilated, on a spike next to my dead Septa. When I refused to look, he had me struck by the Kingsguard. I was beaten routinely after that. Whenever my brother Robb won a battle, I was abused. Joffrey played with me as a cat plays with a mouse before devouring it. I lived in terror.”

Lady Brienne looked mollified and she looked down at the floor in shame, “I had heard tales of King Joffrey’s cruelty… I did not know you were subjected to his madness. Your mother greatly feared you would be mistreated. It seemed she feared rightly.”

Sansa nodded and fought the onslaught of tears that threatened to fall. I will not cry in front of this woman, this stranger. Regardless, Sansa could not prevent her eyes from growing red and puffy, and tears threatened to burst forth.

“The Hound beat you,” Lady Brienne’s face contorted with loathing, aware of her distrust. “You fear him. I shall sever his head from his body!”

If Lady Brienne wasn’t so mistaken, Sansa might have applauded her bravado. It felt good, after all these years, to finally have someone (besides Sandor) on her side. Believing her. Ready to die for her. In that moment, Sansa started to sincerely consider Brienne as an ally.

“No, Sandor Clegane never beat me, he refused,” Sansa managed to say. “I established a tentative friendship with the Hound before my father’s death, that carried over to my imprisonment. He saved my life twice. When Joffrey stripped me before the court, the Hound covered me with his cloak.
When the mob had me on my back, Sandor defied his King’s order and went back to rescue me from a gang of rapists. He was my constant companion back then. I think I would have gone mad without his company.”

“The Hound?” Brienne protested, a look of disbelief written all over her face, but more calmly than before. Her hands gesticulated wildly, “but he’s a murderer. Joffrey’s dog! Tywin Lannister’s pet! The Mountain’s brother! The man has no honor.”

“Neither does Ser Jaime, according to most,” Sansa pointed out, satisfied with the click of Brienne’s jaw as it snapped shut, “and besides, no one loathes the Mountain as much as my husband. He is Gregor Clegane’s sworn enemy. Perhaps you might recall the Hand’s tourney. The Hound fought the Mountain without hesitation, for King and country.”

“Yes.. but…” Brienne struggled for words. “My lady, may I speak my mind?”

“Of course,” Sansa smiled genuinely and almost laughed, “I enjoy honesty, Lady Brienne. I have lived long enough with lies.”

“Lady Sansa, you are so beautiful and kind. The scars… his reputation…?”

“We do not choose who we love, Lady Brienne, I have learned to look past appearances, have you not?” Sansa made show of looking the lady-knight up and down.

Something in her words struck Lady Brienne because she fell mute. A tense silence filled the air and Sansa found herself wondering what Sandor might be doing, or thinking. Was he standing outside the door, sword in hand, ready to charge in and defend her honor? Lady Brienne was deep in thought, a distant look on her face.

A minute or two later, Lady Brienne bit her lip and spoke slowly, “No, I suppose we do not choose who we love.”

Then Brienne stood and knelt at her feet, “Lady Sansa Clegane, I will not abuse your trust and confidence. I will carry your secrets and protect your family. Your word and your will are now my sword and shield. I pledge my service to you, in the eyes of the Old Gods and the New.”
The High Septon's Call

Chapter Summary

The Elder Brother receives a raven from the High Septon. Sandor and Sansa discover the High Septon's request offers them both a unique opportunity for justice, and they agree to leave the Quiet Isle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sandor stood underneath a tall apple tree, leaning against it’s thick trunk. The cool bark provided a stark contrast to the patch of sunlight warming his lower body. In a rare show of anxiety, Sandor’s leg tapped against a gnarly root, keeping time with his racing heart. Moments ago, he’d left Sansa alone in the Elder Brother’s home with Lady Brienne of Tarth, the lady-knight who’d come to rescue the Heir to Winterfell from his iron clutches.

After he closed the door behind him, Sandor raced for his sword and light armor. He leapt over the wooden fence surrounding the Cloisters and burst into the tiny abode that Sandor and Sansa shared together. His trusty longsword was shoved into the corner of the room, along with his armor. Sandor coughed when he picked it up, as the sword had gathered dust from disuse. It’s weight was both familiar and unfamiliar. Two months of peace… I’ve had more need for shovels than swords here, Sandor thought to himself.

With frantic hands, he strapped the sword to his hip, and braced his arms and legs with the leather guards he’d taken from the Red Keep those many weeks ago. In the midst of these hurried movements, Sandor fought a small waves of panic.

The very thought that Sansa might willingly leave, or be taken by this strange woman, made his heart stutter and stop.

Sandor ran a frazzled hand over his face and through his hair. He forced himself to walk calmly back to the Elder Brother’s home, measuring his breaths to quell his anger. The apple tree seemed a good enough place to gather his thoughts. Or wait in ambush, depending on the circumstances.

For the first time in a long time, Sandor felt threatened by forces beyond his control. Lords and ladies had toyed with his life before, used him as a catspaw in their malicious games and Sandor had given up hope for a better life. The Hound sold his soul to Tywin Lannister… and the horrors he’d seen. He couldn’t return to that life. Not now that he’d experienced another way of living.

The fresh air of the Quiet Isle made him feel like his own man. Free and hopeful. These past several weeks, Sandor dreamt of things he never dared to dream before. He dreamt of home and family. Dreams he wouldn’t dare speak out loud, in case they vanished. At night, those hopes manifested themselves in a dreamscape where all things were possible. Sometimes he dreamt of houses with thatched roofs, brown and white spotted dogs, and Sansa in his bed or at his table. Other times, he dreamt of little boys and girls with blue eyes and black hair. Those dreams drove him particularly mad, because when he woke, he could not shake the sound of their childish giggles.

One thing was for certain, he wasn’t going to give up Sansa without a fight.
Pacing underneath the shade of the apple tree, Sandor watched the Elder Brother’s rounded door. The entrance to the Elder Brother’s cave was built into Quiet Isle’s only hillside. A carving of the Seven Gods on it’s wooden surface glaringly mocked his storm and stress. The Gods abandoned Sandor long ago, would they taunt and tease him with a marriage to the woman of his dreams, only to wretch her away? After he’d tasted her love?

_Marriages can be dissolved_, Sandor reminded himself. _You are not safe until you are safe._

The door creaked and snapped shut, rousing Sandor from his thoughts. Shielding his eyes from the rays of the late afternoon sun, Sandor squinted in the light. The Elder Brother exited his hole and strode confidently toward the apple grove, with a grim and serious expression. Sandor left the trees and ran to meet him halfway down the path. He came to a sliding stop in front of the Elder Brother, anxiously looking over the monk’s shoulder for Sansa’s red hair.

She wasn’t there, and Sandor’s heart thudded. A rushing filled his ears.

“What are you doing?” Sandor shouted, “Where is she?!”

“Calm yourself,” Elder Brother put a hand on Sandor’s shoulder but the warrior shrugged it off. The wooden door with the faces of the Seven Gods remained ominously closed.

“I am calm!” Sandor growled. The Elder Brother folded his arms and furrowed his square head disbelievingly. “As calm as I am going to be, what news? Has this Brienne woman conceded her point? Will she leave us alone?”

“Lady Sansa and Lady Brienne have come to an agreement. The lady-knight now serves your wife. However, I have other news of import that must be discussed. Immediately.”

The Elder Brother waved a scroll of parchment in front of his face and Sandor snatched it from the air. It was small, like all messages carried by raven. Turning the parchment over in his hands, Sandor recognized the seal of the Triple Crown and the blood froze in his veins.

“Is this…?” Sandor hesitated, speechless, and the Elder Brother nodded once. The sender’s name did not need to be spoken aloud. Sandor looked down at the scroll, so innocent and unassuming. Such a small piece of paper, with such large ramifications. He held the parchment delicately between his thumb and forefinger and handed it back to the Elder Brother.

Did the Gods choose today of all days, to pull the strings of fate connecting his life? First, Lady Brienne appeared without warning, to shatter the peace of the Quiet Isle. To choke what hope he had, and carry his love away. And now, the High Septon finally sent word. After two months of waiting, the raven arrived today of all days?

“I will explain all,” the Elder Brother said and gestured for Sandor to walk with him. Used to marching in time, Sandor’s feet moved of their own accord, while his mind reeled with the possibilities.

What could the High Septon want? What task has he concocted for the Hound? What evil foe might I face? Westeros was at war, he too often forgot. Who did the Faith support? The Lannisters, the Tyrells, the Dragon Queen…?

Sandor was reminded of the starry night the Elder Brother stumbled upon their camp, when Sandor and Sansa were still fleeing the city. In the dim firelight, Sandor could recall the holy man’s cryptic words about war. _The only true kings are the Gods. That is what I know. No war fought, apart from their glory, has any justification._ Did the new High Septon, the Sparrow, feel the same? Or was the
Hound once again, a bloody sword to be directed at the enemies of whatever lord held his leash?

What have I gotten myself into? Sandor asked himself, when he crossed the threshold of the Elder Brother’s home.

To Sandor’s relief, Sansa was seated in the exact same position, her legs gracefully crossed. She appeared to be completely undisturbed. Sandor fought down the wave of utter possessiveness he felt at the sight of her, *his wife*. Lately, her hair had grown long enough to braid, and Sansa had taken to weaving small flowers into her red strands. The white petal of a daisy brushed her cheek, right next to his favorite cluster of freckles. After so many hours of studying her face, he could trace the pattern of each brown dot with his eyes closed.

The Little Bird’s blue eyes found his, and she smiled beautifully. For a second, Sandor forgot all about Lady Brienne and the High Septon, and he felt himself smiling back. Then, the Elder Brother brushed past him and showed the seal to Sansa, shattering the illusion.

“The High Septon,” Sansa breathed and Sandor seated himself next to her. Sansa’s face fell and she looked at the Elder Brother for confirmation.

The Elder Brother nodded solemnly and Lady Brienne looked confused, but said nothing.

Whatever conversation occurred between the two ladies, since Sandor left the room, was very effective. Lady Brienne was still present, but something in her manner had changed. She was more relaxed. Less on guard. Sandor felt the lady-knight’s eyes follow his every move, but the malice that once inhabited her face was gone. Instead, she was curiously watching the space between Sandor and Sansa, her brow furrowed, as if trying to decipher a difficult puzzle.

Sansa unconsciously reached for his arm and gripped the fabric of his tunic. Elegant fingers wrapped around his wrist, and Sandor felt an almost uncontrollable urge to embrace her, but resisted, all too aware of who was present in the room.

“No,” Sansa whispered, her eyes were wide with horror, “not yet. Elder Brother said it could be months… years before a raven arrived! We’ve barely had enough time… not enough time has passed.”

Sandor could only agree. Not enough time had passed. The Gods were generous in some aspects, and inexcusably cheap in others.

Sansa’s distraught expression tore at his heart and Sandor glanced at the Maiden of Tarth, silently hating her presence. If they were alone, Sandor could make her forget all about the bloody High Septon and his ravens. Sandor would tell her that they needn’t bend to this Sparrow King.

“We don’t know what he wants yet, Little Bird. Once we hear the High Septon’s offer, we’ll discuss our options.”

“What choice do we have?” Sansa said softly, more to herself than anyone else. Sandor couldn’t resist leaning close, and whispering in her ear.

“We always have a choice.”

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Sansa sat, riveted to her seat, as the Elder Brother revealed the recent events that occurred in the capital to the room of rapt listeners. It was almost unbelievable, how much the world could change in a few short months.
Tywin Lannister was dead, killed by his dwarf son in the middle of the night. The rumor was that he’d been shot through the bowels with a crossbow, and the Great Sept had stunk for weeks after his funeral. More unbelievably, the Queen Regent had been taken prisoner by the Faith, who held her under various counts of promiscuity and infidelity. The High Septon had a very strong case against Cersei, especially with the damning testimonies of Osmund Kettleblack and Ser Lancel Lannister, her former lovers. Margaery Tyrell had also been held under similar circumstances, but was released due to a lack of evidence. Margaery would be held under trial by a Jury of the Faith, but Cersei…

Sansa tried to imagine the Queen’s golden, naked body, walking the filth ridden streets of King’s landing, but could not equate the image of Cersei’s perfection with the grime of the muck of the city’s poor. The Queen Regent was returned to the Red Keep after her walk of shame, but her unwilling act of repentance had not spared her from a Trial. Unsurprisingly, the Queen choose trial-by-combat. With the Kingsguard at her beck and call, why wouldn’t she?

Ironically, the Faith was given permission to reform the the Faith Militant, the army of the Seven Gods, by the very same Queen it was about to indict. But the High Septon did not need any mere soldier, he needed a Champion of the Faith, to drive the final nail into Cersei’s coffin.

“...A champion to face the unholy demon Maester Qyburn has summoned,” Elder Brother finished lighting the last silver candelabra, bathing the room in candlelight. Lady Brienne sat, captivated by the Elder Brother’s story. They were, all three, stunned speechless.

Sometime during the Elder Brother’s long tale, Sandor’s arm fell around Sansa’s shoulders, and she basked in the feeling of love and security. Sandor was her husband, her Hound, her silent pillar of strength, and right then, the steady beat of his heart kept her anchored to this world. If Sansa had remained in the capital, would she have survived these political upheaval? Would someone have swooped in to take advantage of her vulnerability? Sansa shuddered at the thought, and scooted closer to Sandor's warmth.

“An unholy demon?” Sansa asked when the Elder Brother fell silent.

“Maester Qyburn... an unsavory character. The High Septon promises that he too, shall be brought to justice. This Maester,” Elder Brother shook his head in disapproval, the candles nearby flickered, “has summoned a man from the halls of death. And not any mere man... A knight by the name of Ser Robert Strong. This knight has assumed the open position in the Kingsguard... but the rumors of him are dark, and his history is dubious.”

“Who is this knight?” Lady Brienne asked, with no small amount of suspicion, “I have never heard of this Ser Robert Strong. Will he fight for the Queen as her champion?”

Sansa wracked her brain for any recollection of Robert Strong. There was no House Strong, that was for certain, and she knew the name of every man who was knighted after the Battle of the Blackwater. Joffrey forced her to stand through a long, hot ceremony, and congratulate a thousand anointed cowards in the aftermath. Sansa knew no Robert Strong. Why would Cersei choose a stranger?

“Yes,” the Elder Brother nodded sagely, “Yes. Ser Robert Strong is Cersei Lannister’s champion. Apparently,” he said with no faint amusement, “she first named her brother, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, but he did not deem the request important enough to respond.”

Brienne’s expression was stone, but Sansa detected a faint flicker of… was that pride? Sansa wasn’t positive.

“Instead, she has raised up, with her right hand, this shadow from the Seven Hells. An eight foot tall
monster, who neither eats, nor drinks, nor relieves himself. A mute. A giant. An armored Mountain.”

With that last word, the Elder Brother’s eyes flickered to Sandor and the grip around her hand became painfully tight.

Sansa’s mouth dropped in surprise as she began to piece together the ending of this story. The Gods were clever creatures indeed, to weave a web of lives so thick and intricate. Sansa knew how desperately Sandor had hoped for this confrontation, how he longed to right the wrongs of the past. This was an unparalleled opportunity for justice and redemption. She did not even try to hide her study of Sandor’s face. His jaw hung open slightly, but his shocked expression quickly faded into a look of gleeful determination.

“The High Septon would pit brother against brother?” Lady Brienne said, coming to the same conclusion as Sansa.

“The High Septon would have this abomination destroyed, and the incestuous King dethroned,” the Elder Brother corrected, eyes gleaming. The flames of each candle reflected in his dark orbs, giving the holy brother a fiendish appearance that sent a shiver down Sansa’s spine.

“Is that not… kinslaying?” Sansa asked the first question to pop into her head.

“What kin?” Sandor growled, shifting forward and throwing his scars into sharp relief. “The Mountain that rides is no kin of mine. You are my only family.”

With those words, Sansa’s heart ached for Sandor, she tugged his hand to her chest, feeling the scars and calluses of a lifetime of struggle.

“You are my only family, too. I do not want to lose you,” Sansa kissed the knuckles of his hand, “I could not bear to lose you.”

“A chance for justice,” the Elder Brother interrupted the moment between lovers. “For both your souls.”

“A chance to fight for what is right,” Sandor nodded in agreement. “By defeating Gregor, I also cast Cersei into the wildfire.”

Sansa’s eyes grew wide with this realization. Sandor could help wrest the Seven Kingdoms from the lion’s clutches. Memories of the Queen’s cold indifference, and harsh words, still haunted her nightmares. Sansa could be finally rid of the Queen’s cruel judgement. Lady could finally be at peace, knowing her killer was brought to justice.

“Sansa. Say the world,” pushing back his wooden chair, Sandor fell to his knees and rested a hand on the pommel of his sword. Grey eyes never broke eye contact. “I will fight for you. I will rip the crown from her hands. We will make the Lannisters a mere mention in the history of Westeros. I will not fall to my brother. When he lived, I was the only man he feared. With you by my side, I cannot fail.”

“A chance to avenge my family… our families. The people we love,” Sansa concluded, her eyes welling with tears. Sansa’s hands shook with the raw emotion that washed over her. “My father, my mother, my brothers, Lady. Your mother,” Sansa realized, “your sister. All those people the Mountain butchered. We can avenge them all. We can give them peace in their graves.”

“It is fate,” Lady Brienne said boldly.

“It is the will of the Seven Gods,” the Elder Brother said with finality, ”and will of the Gods is
always perfect."

Sansa exhaled a heavy breath. A tense few seconds followed where Sansa felt every eye in the room trained on her. Brienne was seated at the edge of her seat, a look of passionate interest on her face as she looked between her and the Hound. The Elder Brother’s cowled figure was leaning forward, a broad grin uncharacteristically adorned his face. And Sandor… Sandor knelt before her, eyes full of hopeful expectation.

_He need this, Sansa realized, and so do I._

“Yes,” Sansa kissed the hand she still held and nodded her head, “it is the will of the Gods.”

Chapter End Notes

_Dun, dun, dunnnnnnnn! What do you guys think? Would you trust the Elder Brother and the High Septon?_
Lost and Confused

Chapter Summary

Sandor and Sansa travel with a company of the Faith toward King's Landing. Sandor wrestles with his conscience about their quest and the future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the most part, the journey to King’s Landing went by smoothly. The Saltpans were, in fact, the trickiest stretch of the journey. The cart of goods, for all it’s uses, was difficult to navigate, slow, and often stuck in the mud. Sandor feared the delays would draw attention to their party, and the wrong type of attention could be deadly, but no such trouble panned out.

Once past the sandy shores however, the Riverlands stretched out before them. All they had to do was keep quiet and avoid attention until they reached the tip of the Kingswood. Then, the company could take the highly trafficked King’s Road to the capital. The King’s Road could be safe, or dangerous, depending on who they might encounter. With three trained swords (Sandor, Lady Brienne, and Podrick Payne, the squire) to warn off any robbers, the company stood a fair chance.

The countryside was a mixture of burning buildings, crumbling farmhouses, and ruined towns. It was as if the Mountain, had drawn a giant scar across the landscape, spreading fear and pain in the wake of his monstrous steps. The company swung deep and wide of Harrenhal, and Sandor was glad of it, because he did not need to see that dark place to know the horrors Gregor undoubtedly committed there. Instead, the company hung closer to Maidenpool, traveling through the more unpopulated areas of Lord Tully’s Rule. The path they choose was longer, and more difficult, but the Holy Brothers were not onerous company.

Traveling under the sign of the Seven Pointed Star was both an advantage and disadvantage. While Sandor was used to being shunned and despised everywhere, the Holy Brothers were welcomed with open arms. The smallfolk shared food and shelter willingly with the Faith, in exchange for a blessing, advice, or a shoulder to cry one. The major disadvantage, of course, was the Holy Brothers’ inability to leave a person in need.

Two weeks into their journey and Sandor had assisted a farmer repairing his fence, witnessed three marriages, saw Septon Bael hand out more medicine than Sandor could count, and stared incredulously when Septon Gascon challenged a horticulturist to a bar fight. Thankfully, Sansa managed to calm the two feuding gentlemen with a few kind words and later, in the quiet of a shared inn room, both Sansa and Sandor had laughed until they cried.

Sandor always thought traveling with a large group was easier than traveling alone. There was an equal division of labor, and Sandor never worried over food and water. In fact, he had thought he could spend the long days of travel close to Sansa's side, but Lady Brienne was now sworn to his wife’s service, and that meant Sandor was pushed to the margins.

Brienne hardly allowed the newlyweds a moment alone together. The Maiden of Tarth strutted around, proud as a peacock, stuck to Sansa’s side. Most of all, Brienne’s cold stares made Sandor felt awkward seeking Sansa out, so he began to avoid it, choosing the Elder Brother’s company instead.
Of all the monks in their party, the Elder Brother proved to be Sandor’s most valuable companion. He counseled Sandor during the day, and trained the Champion at night. The inevitable battle with Ser Robert Strong would be a grueling challenge, but Sandor was looking forward to the confrontation.

The Hound relished in these mock fights, pouring years of anger and frustration into each swing of the sword. He imagined killing the one man responsible for all his suffering. He fantasized about the moment he severed Gregor’s head, the feel of his blade against the bones of his throat, and the satisfying sound as the Mountain choked his last breath. Training was tiresome, but worth the effort. Sandor felt prepared for the fight, and at the end of the day he always went to bed feeling sore and satisfied.

A few days into the journey, Brienne began to rankle Sandor’s nerves. Whenever he turned to speak in confidence with Sansa, Brienne was there, glaring and snorting like a wild bull. If he turned to gossip, or remark about something a monk had said, Brienne was listening with a bent ear.

During the day, Sandor often found them with their heads together, discussing womanly secrets in complete and utter confidence. The pair would go maddeningly quiet whenever he approached, and Sansa would smile sweetly. As if nothing was amiss.

The whispering alone made him unreasonably jealous. What did she tell Brienne, that Sandor wasn’t privy to? The whole experience was infuriating and reminded him of how when he was young, Gregor would steal his toys one by one, from underneath his bed. Each morning, he’d wake up with one less beloved belonging. One less memento of their mother. One less prized possession that made him unique. Now, as a grown man, his own wife was being stolen away bit-by-bit. Until eventually, they only had the nights.

The nights were, quite possibly, the only part of the journey Sandor truly enjoyed.

Every evening without fail, Sansa would join him under his furs. She’d whisper in his ear about how sore and tired she was, and how pretty the stars in the sky appeared, and he could only agree. At that, his Little bird would curl into his side with a contented sigh and the mighty and righteous Lady Brienne could say nothing to that.

Overall, Sansa's presence kept him grounded in the present. Otherwise, he'd be lost in thought about the upcoming trial.

Depending on the day, Sansa’s soft voice could be a balm on his soul, or a fire. The outfit of the Holy Sister did not suit his Little Bird, with it’s ornate headpiece and prudish collar. He comforted himself with the fact that she wasn’t, in truth, a Bride of the Seven. Sandor took pleasure in proving to himself, time and again, that Sansa, also, wasn’t celibate. Whenever they managed to sneak away from the company, which wasn’t often, Sandor wouldn’t let the opportunity pass by to lift up her skirts and listen to her breathily moan into his ear, all the while trying to be quick and quiet.

A task that proved to be extremely difficult with Lady Brienne constantly hovering.

On the fourteenth day of their journey, Sandor lay on his back, distantly watching the stars. Earlier, he had stolen a moment with Sansa by asking her to join him watering the horses. Walking alone back to the camp, with Stranger and Sansa’s brown mare, Sansa confessed to him she missed that she missed the Quiet Isle.
Gazing at the sky, the thought started to nag at the back of his mind. Sandor sighed and rubbed his forehead in frustration. The Elder Brother threw him a concerned look that Sandor chose to ignore.

Seven Gods be damned. If Sandor was to be completely honest, he missed the Quiet Isle too. He’d actually grown used to the stupid silence, the weekly prayers... the mundane tasks of everyday life. There was something simple and quaint and peaceful about the place they’d left behind and it bothered him that Sansa might be unhappy.

After her small confession, Sandor spent the rest of the day periodically gazed backwards at Sansa’s beautiful face, watching her talk animatedly to Lady Brienne the Wife Stealer. Inevitably, Sansa’s blue eyes would rise to meet his, as if she could feel his gaze, and he’d quickly look away.

Sansa misses the Quiet Isle, Sandor would think to himself, and I’m leading her in the opposite direction, all the whilst we grow farther and farther apart.

Before, in the days of King’s Landing and the Quiet Isle, they only had each other. A pair of misfits. The Hound and the Traitor’s Daughter. He missed the old days of traveling, when it was just Sandor and Sansa, with no spectators around watching their every move, or expecting them to act a certain way. How could he continue to act like the man Sansa had come to love, when the world around them only saw a vicious Hound? The fool in him had almost forgotten that the world saw him as a monster. A dog. A bloody sword without a mind of his own.

Those long days on the Quiet Isle gave him a sense of peace he’d never experienced before in his life. A kernel of true contentedness took root in his soul, and Sandor felt the bitterness slowly ebb away as each day with Sansa passed. Sadly, all it took was Brienne’s arrival to crush that peace, and light a fire under his anguish.

Sandor vividly recalled the night before their departure. The couple had picked apart their small hut lethargically, reminiscing over fond memories of the Holy Brother’s, and the small momentos they kept of their lives in King’s Landing. Sansa lingered awake that night for far too long, sweeping the floor and tidying the table, hands running over the worn wood of the doorway as if to say “goodbye”. Worst of all, when there was nothing left to do, she cried into his arms and Sandor revisited feelings of helplessness he thought he’d left behind.

“We will be back, Little Bird,” Sandor remembered stroking her hair and kissing her brow.

“Will we, Sandor?” Sansa’s voice shook, “This place was a shelter in our time of need. But it was not a home.”

Sandor didn’t quite know what she meant by that, so he kept his mouth shut and continued to stroke her back. The Cloisters were comfortable and safe. They wanted for nothing there. Yet, the more Sandor thought about it, the more his mind tended to agree with Sansa. Sansa deserved a true house. Seven Hells, Sansa deserves a castle. And yet, where would they go besides the monastery? Sometimes, it felt like that small island was the only safe place in Westeros.

Turning on his side, Sandor spied Sansa attempting to untangle her hair with only her fingers. Lady Brienne was nearby, unsaddling her horse and handing her belonging to Podrick Payne, the little squire who followed her around dutifully.

The camp was winding down for the night. Each person prepared for sleep independently, foregoing a formal dinner. They would wake early tomorrow, and traverse the final stretch of the Riverlands. Already, a smattering of trees surrounded them. Those trees would soon transform into the dense forest of the Kingswood. Beyond the sparse canopy, a full moon shone, making it easy for Sandor to see his Little Bird struggling with her red hair.
Sansa encountered a particularly nasty snarl and winced visibly. She leaned toward the lady knight and whispered something quickly and quietly. Sandor could read the words on her lips. The lady knight shook her head in response, which wasn’t really surprising. Lady Brienne didn’t give a rat’s ass what she looked like. She kept her stringy hair cropped and short. All the better to wear a helmet with.

Sandor appreciated Lady Brienne’s practicality, but Sansa’s femininity was something else entirely, something mildly intoxicating.

Making a mental note to somehow obtain either a brush or comb, Sandor watched Sansa approach Septon Gascon, the only Septon whose hair was not bald or cut. Probably because the mad gardener could never be bothered to take care of his personal hygiene.

Septon Gascon joined their company to reveal the results of his research to the High Septon, but Sandor suspected it was because he’d grown fond of Sansa’s patient company. For some absurd reason, not just one, but several inhabitants of the Quiet Isle decided to accompany the Champion of the Seven to King’s Landing. What a farce, Sandor scowled when he thought of the ludicrous title he’d been bestowed. I barely have any Faith in the Gods, the moniker hardly fits.

“No, my dear girl,” Gascon sighed, snapping Sandor back into the present, “I too, shall soon resemble a wild shrubbery. For shame!”

“Sansa,” Sandor tugged on her skirt from where he rested on the ground, and Sansa’s blue eyes fell on him. His traitorous heart stuttered a moment when he received her full attention and he hesitated, rubbing the fabric of her skirt between two fingers. “There is a small stream not far from here. These are the Riverlands, after all. I can escort you there and back, and you can untangle that mop.”

Sansa’s face blossomed into a teasing smile and she knelt down to whisper to him, “Does my appearance displease you so, Sandor? Or are you implying I stink?”

Sandor’s face was a mere inches from her, and his eyes swept across her blushing cheeks. I do like when she’s bold, he found himself thinking distractedly.

“Neither, I was just hoping to get you wet.”

Sandor enjoyed seeing her skin flush even further, but he also secretly enjoyed the stern, displeased expression on Lady Brienne’s face when he stood up and pulled his Little Bird away from the company and down a small hill.

“Sandor!” she said in false protest, a light laugh colored her tone “You shouldn’t say those things around the Septons!”

The sound of camp faded away, and the night air was suddenly filled with the cries of crickets and the hooting of owls as Sandor led his Little Bird far away from prying eyes. The grass was soft and dry, and moonbeams filtered through tree branches, lighting their path. Sansa’s hand was soft and pliant in his, and Sandor thought that one of the Seven Heaven’s must be exactly like this. A place where only Sansa and the woods existed.

Reaching the little stream Sandor spied earlier, Sansa smiled in delight. The water trickled softly down a riverbed of smooth stones, creating a soothing melody of drips and drops, and a small waterfall was created where the Earth had broken in ages past. The moon’s reflection was disjointed across the water’s rough surface, scattering light every which way.

Sansa hurried to the little waterfall and divested herself of the Septa’s cowl. Throwing the headpiece
onto a low hanging branch with little care, she dunked her head under the streaming water.

“Oh, this is just what I wanted,” she groaned, running her hand through her thick locks, smoothing over the damage the journey had already caused.

Sandor felt his chest well with pride. He brought Sansa this brief respite, not Lady Brienne. Sensing Sansa would take a moment, he knelt down by the stream and washed his hands and face. The water was fresh and cool, not like some of the rivers they’d passed this week. Those rivers had been polluted by bloated bodies or the Red Wedding Sickness, as they were calling the newest wave of illness to sweep the peasant population.

Neither Sandor or Sansa had had much of an opportunity to wash or bathe over the last several weeks. And they had hardly had a moment alone, either. It was a startling change, from the intimate privacy of the Quiet Isle, to the arena of Westeros again. Brienne’s hawk like eyes reminded him of things he’d rather forget. His reputation, his title, the horrific deeds he’d committed in the name of obedience and how he’d dragged Sansa into the Hound’s world.

Sandor had thought far too much these past few days.

Shaking his head, Sandor splashed more water on his face and forced himself to think of more pleasant things. Like Sansa.

*This is a fortunate moment,* Sandor mused to himself, *I should not waste it.* Sitting back on his heels, he took a moment to observe her, his wife. Sansa. Half of him expected a reprimand for staring so openly at her every curve. Yet, the other half of him argued that he was fully within his rights to simply look at her.

Sandor watched her fingertips stroke her scalp and then vanish into the tresses of her hair. Drops of water struck her exposed neck, and coalesced into a small trickle that disappeared into her robes. Sandor watched scene, fascinated, imagining how it might feel to run his fingers down the very same path.

Of course, Sandor knew how it felt, he’d done it before. He’d run his hands over her body a thousand times and never grown tired of it. On the Quiet Isle he’d taken his time acquainting her with the physical nature of love, because with Sansa, it was never just fucking. The entire act took on a new meaning, from the way she shyly pulled at the strings that restrained his cock, to the way she hooked her legs behind his knees and draw their hips together. The way she’d whispered maddening things in his ear, from declarations of love and endearments, to quiet pleas and whimpers. The experience was so cathartic, he was completely undone by the end of the night. Reduced to a disorganized, panting fool.

Sandor had never felt this way before. So... exposed by one person. Sansa knew everything. She knew how he got his scars, his family history… and with a single probing look, she could make him confess his darkest secrets. Sansa hadn’t a clue what she did to him. Although, perhaps she had a better idea now.

After the wedding, they tangled in the sheets for two days consecutively, until the third, fourth and fifth day when they rested, partially because Sandor wasn’t certain how to proceed. The next week or so, Sandor managed to bed her on and off. Sansa seemed willing, but he just wasn’t *used to* initiating physical contact. With whores, the distinction was clear. Start fucking, roll off and be gone. Obviously, *those* experiences did not apply here. Sandor could never equate those quick and rough tumbles with Sansa.

Sansa needed time and patience. She needed finesse. She deserved more than what he had to offer
and he was so bloody uncertain where he stood. After the first week, he found himself asking permission. Time after time, Sandor relied on the awkward phrases, “do you want…”, “are you willing…”, and “would you like to…” Once, he asked her twice and she had laughed at him, which wounded his pride in more ways than he could say.

Sandor had had his own fears about the wedding. But Sansa had never rejected him, not once. And once the vows were said and the ring was in place, Sandor had somewhat assumed love would become less complicated. A stupid assumption. He realized the error of his ways soon after.

Sansa never said no to intimacy, except once when she was feeling ill. The morning after her refusal, she vomited upon waking. That day incited a new terror in Sandor. The day they both realized neither of them had taken any precautions. Sandor could remember the blood rushing out of his face, and Sansa’s wide eyes when she asked if he could somehow, someway acquire some.

The couple worked in a frenzy, gathering the recipe from an old apothecary book Sansa found in Gascon’s library, and brewing the mixture independent of the Elder Brother’s knowledge. Sandor wasn’t sure what the holy man’s opinions were on the matter, but he didn’t dare ask. Sandor faked an illness, just so they could spend the day together, pouring over old texts and failing to add juniper berries at the right moment.

And once the tea was brewed, Sansa hesitated to drink it immediately.

“Because… it could kill... if there is one.”

Sandor felt his heart crumbling and cracking when she told him that, with tears in her eyes. Morally, she could not kill an infant. Seven Hells, he could not fault her for having a heart.

So, the two abstained from copulating until they knew for certain whether or not Sansa was… with child. Sandor cringed at the memory of those days.

The thought of being a father provoked an insanity from within him, unlike anything he had ever experience. During that week, Sandor entertained the notions of a madman. He deliberated becoming a sellsword or a pirate, schemed over different ways to make money, plotted to overthrow the ironborn at Winterfell, and debated whether or not they should take a ship to the Free Cities. Most of the time Sandor planned houses and cribs in his head. He was anxious about clothing and food and shelter and when he went to sleep at night, he was wide awake, dreaming and thinking and driving himself mad until he could dream and think no more and all he did was stare at Sansa in disbelief.

Sansa was no better, of course, half hysterical and half overjoyed. She laughed the first night, cried the next morning, and constantly wished for her mother to give her advice. That week was an emotional storm for Sandor. He could only stand by as Sansa also entertained ludicrous thoughts. She mentioned she might take up sewing, how she could become a seamstress and sell her wares for extra gold. The next day she was a singer, and the next day she postulated becoming a healer, because it would be so useful if the baby ever became injured. Once she'd realized what she said, Sansa turned red and clapped her mouth shut. A few days later, after the panicked frenzy had passed, Sansa simply walked around in a stupefied state that alarmed Sandor more than anything else, because she never mentioned a babe again.

The day her moonblood came, they were both immensely relieved. Sandor “borrowed” two bottles of wine from Septon Bael’s medical supplies and they toasted to moon tea and their new professions. Sandor couldn’t ever recall being so happy to see blood on his furs. Of course, once she was sufficiently drunk, Sansa sobbed against his chest and begged for children later, to which he could only acquiesce. What was he supposed to do?
Sandor didn’t give his promise much thought after that night, because as before, the thought of children terrifed him.

Sansa started drinking moon tea every day, and life fell back into a normal routine for the pair. Sandor and Sansa finished off the second bottle of wine another night, playing a game that Sandor invented. The game was rather straightforward (neither of them enjoyed complicated rules). Drink and take off one article of clothing. They passed the bottle back and forth, like they used to do in Red Keep, during those nights when the Hound would sneak the Little Bird out of her cage and onto the Keep’s parapets.

Soon the bottle was forgotten, and relations between them continued, but in the back of his mind, he knew it could never be just fucking with his Little Bird. Laying with Sansa meant home and family, and held the possibility of children. The moon tea lesson was a harsh one, but he would never forget it.

Of course, Sandor still asked permission… he never wanted to overstep his bounds with Sansa. Perhaps he would always ask, even though he was getting a little better at judging her small signs of desire. The way she’d curl her hair in one finger, or bite her bottom lip while looking at him from underneath long eyelashes. Those were maddening tricks she played, that set his blood on fire.

“Sandor?” Sansa’s voice brought him out of her reverie. Sandor shook his head and his eyes refocused on Sansa kneeling in the dirt.

“Might want to head back soon,” he coughed, “they might be wondering where we are.”

Sansa cocked her head to the side, and put her hands on her hips, studying him. True to her intent, her red hair was wet and untangled, draped over shoulder. The water created a dark spot that traveled to the top of her breast. Sansa had unbuttoned the stiff neck of her Septa’s uniform, exposing her skin to his eyes.

Sandor had seen her in much less, he knew, but the privacy of the trees incited lascivious thoughts. The unbidden image of her arched back floated to the surface of his mind, and he felt himself stirring. It had been long time. Since that inn near Maidenpool. Was that a week ago?

“But it is a beautiful night, don’t you agree?” Sansa leaned forward to place her arms around his neck and he instinctively grabbed her hips to prevent her from tumbling forward. Underneath those conservative robes, Sansa was warm. And the night was so cold.

“You’re more beautiful than the night.”

Sansa blinked, surprised, and smiled. Sandor felt a few long fingers play with the hair at the nape of his neck.

“I missed you,” the words left his mouth before his brain knew he’d said them.

Sansa stopped and it was Sandor’s turn to blink. Why did he say that? Warm arms left his neck and shoulders, and her body slipped from his fingers. Sandor inwardly chastised himself for ruining the only free moment they had together in ages. That wasn’t what he intended to say. Anything would have been better. *I love you. I like your eyes. There’s a bear over there.*

Sansa’s face was now, unfortunately, obscured by the shadow of a tree branch, but he heard her sharp intake of breath.

“I’m right here, though,” she whispered.
“Aye, silly me, now I see you are,” Sandor ran a hand over his face. “Forget I said anything.”

“No,” Sansa pulled his hand from his face and Sandor let out a frustrated groan. If there was one thing he hated, and one thing he was abysmal at, it was talking. Sansa was good at those sort of things, not him.

Sansa was looking at him patiently, the same she look she gave him whenever she was waiting for him to speak. It was a curious look, full of silent questions. A look that made Sandor feel guilty for no reason at all.

“Sansa, I don’t know why I said that. Forget it,” he loathed how he sounded like he was begging. The Hound didn’t beg.

“No!” Sansa’s sharp tone caused a painful stab in his heart. Seeing his dejection, her tone softened. “No, Sandor. I… miss you too.”

“You do?” Sandor couldn’t keep the note of disbelief out of his voice.

“Yes, it’s been a little… crowded lately. Don’t you agree?” Sansa’s eyes flickered back toward the flickering light of the camp in the distance. “Not that I don’t enjoy the company. But I had grown accustomed to the Cloisters... Just the two of us.”

“Your lady knight doesn't help.”

Sansa cocked her head and folded her arms, instantly on the defensive. “Brienne is a good and honest friend.”

“She hates me. She can’t stand the thought that you choose me.”

“She doesn’t know you,” Sansa said pointedly and poked his chest. Sandor raised his eyebrows at her brash actions. “You make it difficult, you know. Be patient.”

“Patience isn’t a strength of mine. We haven’t time to argue this, we should get back to camp,” he rebutted, standing and brushing off the dirt on his pants. The sound of his boots crunching against the underbrush was pronounced as he said, “and I don’t care what she thinks.”

“Wait!” Sandor heard the soft swish of her robes behind him. Sansa tugged on his sleeve and Sandor relented. “You said you missed me. I know how I feel, but what do you feel? What do you mean?”

Sandor paused and searched her eyes. Sansa was staring back at him, waiting for something. She looked hopeful, anticipating his answer. What was his supposed to say? What did she want to hear? Sandor hung his head and opened his palms.

“Brienne is just one of them,” Sandor sighed, “just one of many that will look down on us. On you. I’ve brought you down, Little Bird. I’ve defiled you,” he spat, “we’re returning to the capital. You aren’t a Stark any longer and there was honor in that name. Now you’ve a different name,” he shook his head, “a less than honorable one. Your name used to protect you, and now it paints a target on your back. They’ll treat you different. You’ll be in danger.”

Sansa’s eyes widened as he spoke, and she shook her head, “it was my choice. I choose you, Sandor.”

The grip on his sleeve turned tender. Her hand turned his cheek to face her and Sandor breathed in the smell of pine fresh. He was caught in her gaze and afraid to look away, or else the dream would be shattered.
“I… am starting to believe that. But they won’t.”

Sansa steadily kept his gaze. Her expression was unreadable, and more than ever, Sandor wished he could

“I swore… I swore to myself that I would never go back,” Sansa’s eyes left his and grew distance. “When we escaped the city, I wanted nothing more than to never return. Now, we’re headed directly into Lannister territory. I am glad Joffrey is dead, but I am afraid also.”

Sandor couldn’t resist pulling her towards him and tucking her head underneath his chin, “I will protect you with my life. Nothing will happen to you.”

“I’m not afraid of pain, or my life…” Sansa shook her head against his chest, her voice slightly muffled, “I fear for you. For your life.”

Sandor didn’t know what to say to that. Sansa was the driving force behind this journey. He agreed to the Champion of the Faith for her sake, and her sake alone. If she had doubts, he’d turn around in a heartbeat.

“We are indebted to the Faith,” he finally managed, regretting the words as he spoke them. Since when did the Hound care about debts?

“I know, and I want to punish them…” Sansa sighed shakily and pulled away. Sandor could see small tear tracks on her cheeks. He reached a hand out to brush them away, and Sansa leaned into his touch. “I want revenge,” she said slowly, “so I can sleep better at night. So I can finally put my family to rest… I want her dead. And you, Sandor… you have suffered so much, my love. Isn’t it time your brother was put to the sword?”

“Aye,” Sandor nodded in agreement, the fire returning to his heart. “It is past time.”

They stood in silence, wrapped in each other’s embrace. Sandor couldn’t shake the small tendrils of dread snaking around his heart. Were they walking toward salvation? Or their doom?

“What ever happens…” Sansa bit her lip, “I am proud to be a Clegane. I am glad we married… while we had the chance.”

Sandor looked down at her. Sansa smiled sadly and brushed a strand of hair behind his hear. His skin tingled at the contact. “You don’t regret it?”

“No, never,” she shook head, smiling genuinely now. “Do you?”

“I have had a streak of good luck lately, it seems,” Sansa’s face fell and Sandor paused, registering that that was not the response she wanted, “and no. I have no regrets. I never have, and I never will.”

“Neither will I…” Sansa tugged at a strand of his hair, rather insistently, and her other hand drifted to chest. “I spent so long living under a shadow… I do not want to waste another day.”

Sandor felt her shifting closer. She raised herself on the tip of her toes and pressed against him. Sansa kissed his unburnt cheek, her lips lingering to press lightly against the stubble of his chin. Sandor sucked in a deep breath, his nose inhaled the scent of her slightly damp hair.

“I don’t want to go back yet…” Sansa fiddled with his collar. She looked up at him from underneath her long lashes and bit her bottom lip. Sandor’s eyes widened, and his heart beat rapidly against his ribs, but a sense of trepidation prevented himself from acting.
“Would you like…?” he trailed off, leaving the question open ended, as he always did.

“Sandor…” Sansa pulled his head down to hers and kissed him. He groaned at the feel of her teeth tugging on his lower lip, and her hands tangling in the nape of his neck. “It’s been so long. You don’t always have to ask…” she whispered.

Sansa knew all the best ways unravel his self control. Their lips met again, in a familiar and yet still unfamiliar fashion. His tongue claimed her mouth, but she fought back valiantly, always surprising him with the passion of her ardour. Sandor remembered long nights in the Red Keep, where he took himself in hand and fantasized about a moments like this. He imagined kissing her and biting her and marking her body with bites and bruising that she wouldn’t mind because she would be his, his, his.

And now, she was his. Pulling her tight, their hips met and she gasped lightly when he laid his hands on her backside and ground himself into her lower stomach. Losing control with Sansa was like slipping into unconsciousness. Sandor never knew when the fall began and end, he could only ride the waves and pray she stayed.

Sansa pulled at his tunic and it came undone, while his fingers scrambled to unbutton the robes that covered her head-to-toe. The next thing Sandor felt was her fingernails scratching lightly at the hair that led down to his groin. He exhaled sharply, and worked harder to divest her of her clothing. Sansa loosened the ties to his pants and one hand slipped between them to grip the base of his manhood. The feel of her hand curled around his shaft drew a shameless groan from him.

This happened once before, on the Quiet Isle, when Sansa grew curious one night. She’d boldly took him in hand, and then shyly asked him what to do. He spent himself too soon that night, like a green boy, and afterwards, she seemed rather smug.

Right then, Sansa’s hand stroked up and down, slowly and cautiously. Sandor pulled her hand away and spun her around, pushing her against the trunk of a nearby tree and hoisting her legs up and around his waist. Underneath his hands, he felt her legs squeeze around him for support. Sansa’s hands fell on his chest and arms, mapping nonsensical roads all over his body with a featherlight touch that only made him want to beg for more.

Somehow in the midst of all this chaos, Sandor had successfully undone the line of buttons that held Sansa’s robes in place and the fabric began to slide down her torso, revealing a cotton underdress. His reward was another kiss, slower and more languid than the first. One hand reached up to cup the swell of her breast and she broke away, gasping.

In hindsight, the tree might not have been the wisest choice. Truthfully, he hadn’t actually intended for things to become heated between them, and most of his actions were completely unplanned at this point. As usual, things with Sansa spun wildly out of control before he even knew what was happening.

“Sandor,” Sansa’s voice was high and airy, and he paused, “the bark.”

It took him a moment to understand, but when he did, he released her immediately. Sansa slid off the trunk and with shaky legs, pulled them both to a patch of grass on the forest floor. Sandor started to mutter an apology but Sansa silenced him with another kiss. Once again, she entwined one of her legs behind his knee and pulled her down on top of him.

Sansa held his face sweetly and stroked both burnt and unburnt skin. Her affectionate touch stifled the fire of his wild passions, and his actions became more gentle in turn. Sandor slowly gathered her robes at her waist, and slid a hand between her legs. The accompanying moan and whispered “Sandor” was enough to bring him back to the edge. He watched her eyelids flutter and her head
toss side to side, transfixed by the way her hips would sometimes rise involuntarily. This game would never get old.

The sound of her ragged breathing was driving him mad and there were only a few layers of cloth between him and her. Sansa blindly started to pull at him, tugging at his arms and the ties of his breeches, and he took that as his cue.

Joining with Sansa was indescribable. Like always, suddenly he was inside her and then the world stopped. Sandor forgot everything about life prior to that moment. There was nothing but Sansa, and her gasps, and her hands fluttering over his back and shoulders, and her legs around his waist, and the tentative movement of her hips, and Seven Gods, did he say things he would never say otherwise. He told her he loved her, that she was his perfect wife, that she should move her leg up like so and she should please, please say his name. Sansa always obliged him in these incoherent ramblings, chanting his name, and her love, over and over again until she too, lost herself to the physical, and said things she wouldn’t say otherwise, like keep going, faster, and his favorite, please, Sandor, please.

When he spilled his seed, and the lust was gone. Sansa pulled him to her chest and they lay there, content and satiated. Nothing was ever said, and Sandor always feared crushing her underneath the weight of his body, but she’d always laughed when he mentioned it. So he said nothing, and took in the scent of her hair, as his blood cooled and the world came back into focus.

Eventually, he lifted himself up and smiled bemusedly at the state of her tousled hair. Sansa’s skin was flushed and her robes were dirty, if anyone was still awake at camp, there’d be no question as to what had occurred between them in the woods.

“Your hair is messier than how you left,” Sandor pointed out, leaning down to kiss her nose and both her cheeks. Sandor felt her smile and she returned the gesture, not even blinking before kissing his scars.

“Well worth the sacrifice, I think,” Sansa said, closing her eyes and groaning ever so slightly when he slid out of her.

When Sansa sat up and began to straighten her clothing, Sandor was given a full view of the light scars that graced her back.

The first night he saw those, he fists shook with a fury that frightened not only Sansa, but himself. At the time, Sandor forced himself to be calm, but the next morning, he had vented his frustrations with the Elder Brother. Knowing that Joffrey was dead did him no good now. Sandor wanted to inflict pain beyond imagining on the boy King, he wanted to punish Joffrey for marring the skin of someone as kind and good as Sansa.

Sandor shook aside those thoughts, helped Sansa back into her robes and then tucked his shirt back into his trousers, searching around for Sansa’s headdress. Once the damned contraption was located, they walked hand in hand back toward the camp.

Sansa would occasionally brush her side against his, and run her hands over his abdomen or chest, in a way that warmed his heart. There was never a cold day with Sansa around.

Camp was quiet, most everyone had fallen asleep. Lady Brienne was on guard when they returned. She glared in their general direction, but blushed heavily when Sansa shot her a cocky grin, still holding his hand. They fell into their furs together, tired and warm and happy. Sansa lay half on top of him, her head above his still racing heart, while he stroked her arms and back.
“What a story to tell our grandchildren one day,” she whispered into his neck and Sandor froze.

“What do you mean?” he asked, eyes flying open.

Ever since the incident with the moon tea, and the almost child, and the promise she wrested from his lips, Sansa had casually mentioned the possibility of children. But, never before had she gone beyond one generation. Did she build an entire family tree without his knowledge? Gods, how old did she think he’d live?

“Oh, it’s just something my father used to say to my mother,” there was a note of sadness in her voice at the mention of her father. Sansa’s hand rested against the crook of his neck, and her thumb touched the corner of his scar. “I meant everything, our pasts, how we found each other, the rescue, our quest… it’s terribly romantic, don’t you think?”

Sandor turned the story over in his mind, finding no reason to disagree with her, other than the obvious, “Why would they want to hear about that?”

“All children want to know how their parents met…” Sansa yawned and closed her eyes, “What will you say?”

“I…” Sandor’s wracked his mind for the right response, but he hadn’t a clue what Sansa wanted. What would he say? *Your mother was viciously beaten by the King I served, so I stole her in the middle of the night, fucked her senseless, killed my brother along the way and we all lived happily ever after.* Sandor’s side of the story had a somewhat false ring to it.

“Sandor…?” Sansa looked up at him worriedly.

“Well,” he finally decided, and squeezed her hip, “I did rescue you from a tall tower. I think that deserves a small mention.”

Sansa laughed and laid down her head, drawing hounds on his chest again, “And your heroic defense of the maiden’s honor, when she was taken by evil men during the Riot of King’s Landing.”

“Oh, aye,” he nodded, “can’t forget about how our brave hero saved her from that vicious sea monster either.”

Sansa smacked his chest lightly, “You were the sea monster.”

“Only in my free time.”

“You’re incorrigible,” Sansa’s laughter shook his chest and he grinned, “you also saved me from drowning… twice,” she reminded him, tapping his chest to emphasize her point, “Once in the storm, and once at the Godswood dock. Probably more than that, now that I think about it.”

“I do sound impressive. You should write this down, wife.”

“Shh,” Sansa buried her face in his neck, “do not make me laugh, we will wake up the camp. I only wanted to say, it’s a good story. They will enjoy it. I can just imagine all their excited faces, gathered at our bed, to hear all about the evil king and queen, and the brave hound...”

“... and the kind Little Bird,” he finished for her. Sansa nodded and fell quiet. Within a half an hour, she was snoring lightly on his chest, her fingers curled in his tunic. Brienne of Tarth the notorious eavesdropping, was sitting with a rigid posture and an ear craned toward the couple. But that night, he couldn’t have cared less. *She is mine, and I am hers....*
Before falling asleep, Sandor’s thoughts briefly, unwillingly returned to the Quiet Isle. Peaceful, but not a home. A heavy feeling settled on his chest. Sandor needed to do more. Sansa had described a home. A large bed, rooms for children… No, they couldn’t return to the Quiet Isle… but then where would they go?

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, I haven’t updated in so long! I’ve been so, so very busy. Hope this extra long chapter helps make up for the delay!
Sansa and Sandor return to King’s Landing. The city is changed and the Faith are not as welcoming as they expected.

The last time Sansa saw the Gate of the Gods, she was fifteen and riding on a carriage, clutching Septa Mordane’s hand in barely restrained excitement.

Three and some years later, not much had changed. Sansa sat on the raised back of a cart not half so regal as her father’s carriage. Stranger, being the hardiest of beasts available, drew the wagon along with her brown mare, Sugar. The Elder Brother found the lost horse wondering a small clearing and Sansa unofficially adopted the mount as her own.

Stranger and Sugar became inseparable soon after that. When Sandor tried to separate the two from each other earlier that morning, Stranger nearly bit his ear off.

“He’s never taken to any mare before,” he muttered to her quietly, while reining in the black charger.

“A late bloomer in love,” Sansa patted Stranger’s nose affectionately, and surreptitiously touched Sandor’s wrist, “quite like his master.”

The mare whinnied an almost laugh. Sansa glanced quickly at Sandor. After entering the city, they’d be as good as acquaintances to the world. She wished she could see past the hardened look on his face.

“We’re slow learners aren’t we? You and I,” Sansa heard him say softly to his horse. Sansa’s heart clenched painfully as his sad and wistful tone.

As they approached the city, Sandor’s posture become stiffer and stiffer, and the rock in Sansa’s stomach grew heavier and heavier. She kept glancing at his figure, taking comfort in his silent presence, yet still anxious, and unable to deny that there was something left unsaid. Will we survive this next return? Will we ever exit these gates? From a distance, he looked like nothing more than a world weary soldier. The brown monk’s robes that swathed Sandor’s tall frame hid his steel longsword and Sansa’s dragonbone blade.

To her left, Lady Brienne was huddled underneath a long black cloak raincloak, attempting to look inconspicuous although it was nearly impossible for the hulking woman. Next to Brienne, Podrick Payne was dragging his feet and glancing unhappily at the gates. Sansa smiled tentatively at him. Although she could not forgive his uncle for his crimes, Podrick had done noone any real harm, and he was a very pleasant and apologetic young man.

Podrick stumbled and blushed, loudly knocking his right foot against the cart’s wheel. The commotion drew the Elder Brother’s stern glare and Sandor sent the boy a dark look. Sandor disliked squires as much as he disliked knights, but he tolerated Podrick (albeit with some wariness).
The cart grew closer to the city, and Sansa dared to peek over her shoulder at the gate.

Arching over the guarded entrance, the God’s Gate was no less awe inspiring than the first time she saw it. Detailed carvings of each of the Seven Gods silently judged each and every traveler who wished to pass beneath their divine visage. Their dark carved eyes seemed to stare back at her and Sansa quickly turned and ducked her cowled head.

They approached the first portcullis.

Her heart hammered loudly in her chest. Sansa gripped her skirts with sweaty hands.

“Don’t be afraid,” Sandor had told her, earlier that morning as they prepared to enter the city. The camp was deathly quiet. A nervous energy pulsated from person to person. No happy laughter or light jesting occurred during breakfast, like it had yesterday or the night before. The company was devoid of all it’s former joy. “No one is looking for a poor, dirty Septa.”

“What about you?” Sansa had hated the tremble in her voice, “You can’t deny your face is recognizable, Sandor.”

“I’ll make do,” he said gruffly, “There are more burned faces in King’s Landing than before... ever since the Blackwater.”

Sansa couldn’t help but think Sandor’s reasoning wasn’t entirely sound. The Hound’s scarred face was known throughout Westeros. A Lannister soldier only had to point out the late King Joffrey’s lost dog, and Sandor’s head would decorate the Red Keep within a day.

A reflection of light disrupted Sansa’s reminiscence. Gold Cloaks flanked the side of the King’s Road, along with a few members of the Faith Militant, and they had passed right by their caravan. Their shining, silver inlaid armor reflected the high noon sun. The Warrior’s Sons, the Elder Brother called them. Knights who had forsaken their land, their gold, their lords, to serve the Faith. A rainbow colored cloak fluttered behind each man’s figure.

Sansa thought they looked more pretty, than dangerous, but she would never dare speak those thoughts aloud.

Glancing left and right, Sansa saw members of the holy army, menacingly armed, prowling the edges of the road. Although they hailed the Elder Brother and the monks kindly, Sansa swallowed dryly and avoided eye contact. Under the Sparrow King’s rule, the Warrior’s Sons had stolen many treasures from the ruling families of Westeros, including Lord Tywin Lannister’s gold crown. The loot was meant to feed the starving population of King’s Landing. Conveniently, these thefts also acted as just penance for the wealthy lords and ladies who allowed such destitution to continue. Yet, it was a bold move that made the nobility fear the new fanaticism of the High Septon, and it made Sansa afraid.

If they knew I was nobility, would I be treated with kindness? Or with a silver sword? Sansa shook against the wooden back of the cart.

Sansa anxiously peered over her shoulder again.

Two men - one burly looking, bronzed Gold Cloak, and a watery eyed, lanky member of the Faith Militant - stood underneath the revered head of the Mother carved into the arch of the Gate of the Gods. As they drew closer, it became clear they were tasked with interrogating travelers. Lady Brienne slowed her pace and Sansa saw her hand drift to where Oathkeeper was hidden.

A blue sigil with seven stars hailed their coming. The Warrior’s Son, a member of the Faith’s army,
rejoiced at the sign of the Faith’s sigil and raised a hand in greeting.

They halted suddenly. Sansa snapped backwards against the cart and a bolt of pain traveled the length of her spine. She winced and bit her tongue. Stars danced in her eyes. Podrick gave her a sympathetic look, but said nothing.

“Halt, Holy Brothers and Sisters, who goes there?”

The Warrior’s Son had a high, lilting voice. The voice of a man who’d sung too many hymns.

The question was posed to the company as a whole, but only the Elder Brother stepped forward, his hands folded calmly at his front while he misdirected the man’s verbal assault: Where are you sleeping at night? Where will you go today? Do you have relations in the city? Have you food and water for the next week? Do you plan to start a business? Are you selling wares?

While the Elder Brother calmed and persuaded, the burly, sourfaced Gold Cloak prowled, occasionally poking a bag or two with his dulled spear and inspecting each person with a curious sweep of the eyes. The Gold Cloak paused when he came to Brienne, and chuckled amusedly. Sansa could only imagine the look of disdain that graced the Lady Knight’s face. Perusing the cart, Sansa waited with bated breath for him to address her.

“Sister,” he nodded, his mud brown eyes looked suspiciously down on her. Sansa craned her neck to look at him, careful not to disturb her headdress. Although a Gold Cloak, his once polished chainmail armor was dented and bloodstained, and his wool overshirt spotted many holes. Underneath bloodshot eyes, swollen black bags spoke of many sleepless nights, and a scar on his nose festered red and angry. A sad creature.

Sansa tried not to linger on the angry wound. How many battles had this man seen? How many kings have come and gone, without a care?

*No one is looking for a poor, dirty Septa.* Sansa reminded herself.

With quick hands, she made the sign of the Seven over his head. “Seven blessings on you.”

The Gold Cloak nodded to the other inspector. The lanky man stood to the side and gave the party one final warning. “Obey the Gods”. Sansa felt the cart jerk forward. Her back smacked the hard wood once more and she winced, but she also felt a flood of relief.

Then, they were passing underneath the murder holes and onto the cobblestone paths of the lower city.

*It’s done,* she thought, *we made it into King’s Landing.* Happiness and fear flooded her veins. *It shouldn’t have been easy.*

Sansa gagged suddenly and covered her nose with her sleeve. The stench of refuse and rotten food permeated the air. The smell of the Seven Hells. Her eyes swept across the narrow, cramped houses and apartments that flanked the gate on both sides, while her ears were assaulted by the screams of half naked children and the shouts of vendors and merchants.

“SEVEN POINTED SILVER STARS! SOLD HERE! SOLD HERE!”

“BUSHELS OF APPLES! WITH THE STAMP OF ROSES!”

“PIES AND PEACHES! COURTESY OF THE GODS!”
Sansa gaped at the hustle and bustle of the streets. There were so many people. Too many people. The Gate of the Gods began to fade into the distance and Sansa’s party was swallowed by the crowd. Bare arms and shaggy heads. Silken skirts and ragged orphans.

On a nearby balcony, a beefy armed woman beat a rug over a stony ledge, her small child precariously balanced on the railing, throwing stones at people’s heads below. A fabric merchant was shouting, shouting, shouting, pulling the arms of passersbys and forcibly exhibiting his ware with gusto. Groups of young men stood, cross armed, at the entrance of the dark alleyways that led into the city’s depths. Sansa shivered when a particularly vicious looking lad met her eyes. He had an arrow shaped scar on his forehead, and crooked teeth when he grinned. Each group had something different to identify their brotherhood. A red ribbon tied to their arm, a silver brooch on their left pocket, or a white painted feather on their cheek. Guilds of thieves competing to pilfer the most gold before they all died, pitted against each other in an endless war.

Sansa had never been so connected to the masses. It was suffocating. On her first journey to the Red Keep, her father’s guard cleared the path for the Stark procession. Ser Jory had swept all the common people to the edges and alleys of the streets. Sansa had never been within a hand’s throw of true poverty, until the day of the Riot of King’s Landing.

*My father never allowed Winterfell to become so destitute. Joffrey and Cersei held no such concerns.*

The cart and their company became more enveloped by the crowd, and Sansa sat at the edge of her seat, willing her heart to not implode whenever a grubby hand accidentally knocked against her knees or legs.

A hand grazed against her ankle, quite like the hand that once pulled her from her horse so long ago, and Sansa was suddenly gasping painfully. There was simply no air to breathe. She searched for the familiar grey eyes of Sandor, but could only find stranger’s faces instead. Strangers… who reminded her of unwelcome hands, chasing after her, grabbing her, throwing her to the ground and--

Podrick must have said something, because Lady Brienne was at her side in an instant. A large gloved hand rested on Sansa’s shoulder.

“Are you well, my lady?” Brienne asked tentatively.

“Yes,” Sansa swallowed her own bile. “Please, I just feel… a little faint.”

“Sansa?” Sandor’s face swam in her vision and his hands gripped her sides. “Breathe, Sansa. Find a spot that’s not moving and stare at it.”

Sansa gasped and focused on the jagged red cobblestone beneath her hanging feet. She willed her dark thoughts to subside, and the gasps to stop. Sandor’s thumbs rubbed against her thin shoulders and the tingling feeling in her arms and legs began to diminish. His body blocked the stares she was attracting.

The cart stopped during her episode, and the Holy Brothers loitered around her curiously, alternating between watching the city and gazing, concerned, at the gasping lady. Various onlookers shouted for the cart to move, and Sansa blushed awfully. *I’ve done exactly what I shouldn’t have done,* she thought and ducked her head, mortified. *I’ve caused a scene.* Sansa distantly heard Sandor say something to Lady Brienne.

Sandor grabbed her chin gently and lifted her eyes to his, “Good to see you again, would you like to walk with me?”
Understanding shone in his eyes and Sansa almost jumped into his arms.

“Yes!” Sansa said. “Yes, please get me down from here. I can’t stand to sit still right now.”

Using Sandor’s hand to steady her wobbly legs, she climbed off the cart. Lady Brienne and Podrick helpfully informed her that they would guard the rear. Sandor offered her his arm, which she took with haste, and the cart began to move anew.

Within the first few steps, mud and dust caked her boots and the bottom of her skirts. Within the next hundred steps, her feet began to ache from the uneven and misshapen rocks beneath her feet. Within two hundred steps, Sansa and her company entered Cobbler’s Square.

The square seemed like it stretched a mile in each direction. The wide open space calmed Sansa’s nerves and she breathed deeply. Sandor’s presence at her side was unwavering as they waded deeper and deeper into the crowd.

King’s Landing was faring only slightly better under the reign of King Tommen, but it appeared the only order on the street was provided by the Faith, not the Crown.

The Poor Fellows, also known as the Stars, were a humble order of commoners who wore the Faith’s silver starred sigil on their breasts. Sansa looked left and right, but even raised on her tip-toes, she could not find a single red cloak or Lannister sigil. It seemed that the Poor Fellows were alone, policing the square. The Stars sigil, a red, seven pointed star, was ubiquitous, hanging from lantern posts and over doors, painted on the shields of strongmen, and posted on a long piece of parchment littering the square with a notice that read:

DEFEND the FAITH
RAISE UP thy BROTHERS and SISTERS
HALT the ABUSES of the UNHOLY
JOIN the FAITH Militant

A large group of Stars were handing out baskets of potatoes, squash, peas, and carrots, as well as cloth covered baskets of bread, to a long, wide line of poorfolk that stretched around Cobbler’s square and into the streets beyond. This line was also patrolled by Poor Fellows, and one or two Warrior’s Sons, whose shining armor and rainbow cloaks instilled both fear and respect.

Sansa tugged on her arm, and the pair made to follow the Elder Brother, who was waving at them. Sansa’s head swiveled, taking in the ordered chaos of the square.

“—been waiting two days in line—”

“—can’t wait to have ale tonight—”

“—aven’t a clue what he’s talkin’ ‘bout, ain’t ever fucked Gia—”

“Sparrows! Sparrows! Coins for the Gods’ Servants!”

“There are so many people,” Sansa said, when the Elder Brother soldiered past and their caravan continued, “I feel so small.”

Sandor looked at her. Underneath the shadow of his pointed cowl, he looked solemn and serious. “One fish in an ocean, everyone feels the same,” then he huffed and tugged her arm playfully, “I suppose it doesn’t help that you’re standing next to me.”

Sansa smiled, but her smile quickly faded. They passed a gaggle of orphans, crowded around a chalk
drawn circle, playing a game with round, colored crystals. A hairy boy with no shirt flicked one of the round crystals with his thumb, knocked a painted ball out of the circle. The hairy boy whooped loudly, causing Sansa to jump, while his other friends groaned in defeat. Behind the boys, two women with painted fans chatted amicably, trading swigs from a metal flask and blinking prettily at passing men. One of the ladies had blond, curly hair and glared darkly at Sansa. I suppose Septas and whores don’t get along very well… Sansa thought as they passed. Some things don’t change.

The cart was funneled into the narrow streets of King’s Landing that led to the Great Sept, and Sandor and Sansa had no choice but to follow. Sansa could see a distant, glowing dome and seven glistening towers growing closer and closer with each step.

The uphill trek toward Visenya’s Hill was exhausting. Each street scene ranged from horrifying, to awe inspiring. Sansa saw makeshift huts crowded into forgotten alleys, stinking and covered in mud, side by side with golden manses. Each rich man’s house was equipped with brass gates, tall walls, and a slew of sellswords prowling the entrance. Even the public water pump was guarded. Sansa was horrified at the utter disparity between the rich and poor. No wonder the city is attracted to the High Septon’s fanatical words.

Here, Sansa finally found red-cloaked Lannister soldiers. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sandor fiddle with his hood and hunch his shoulders. Thankfully, none of the Lannister guards were very interested in monks.

Finally, after leagues of walking, Sansa and Sandor reached the grand plaza of Baelor the Blessed. Sansa was instantly transfixed by Baelor’s kind gaze. His benevolent eyes begged her to forget the horror that occurred here, but Sansa could not prevent the flash of memory that floated to the surface of her mind…

A Valyrian blade sliced through the air. She closed her eyes and despite the crowd’s roaring, she could still hear the dull thump of his decapitated head--

“Sansa,” Sandor’s voice brought her back once more. The cart was brought to a halt. In the plaza, there were much less people gathered.

Three lines of Faith Militant guard the Sept. They loomed over the crowd of sparrows and poor men, and surrounded the entirety of the Sept. Beggars were looking for spare coin and hard bread from the Sisters, which they handed out freely. Most interestingly, brown robed monks stood on old crates stamped with the seven pointed star, preaching to the bedraggled crowd. Brienne appeared in front of her, and held out a calloused hand.

“My lady,” her voice dropped, “we must enter the Sept through the Mother’s Door, it is the women’s entrance. Inside, we can reconvene with the men.”

“Oh, but…” Sansa looked around for Sandor’s tall frame and spotted him exchanging words with the Elder Brother. Feeling her stare, Sandor’s eyes met hers, and they shared a long, hard moment.

A single nod from Sansa was enough to send him marching over to the Father’s Door, eager to be reunited on the other side.

“The separation will be brief,” Brienne said reassuringly, placing a comforting hand on Sansa’s shoulder. Sansa shook it off with irritation. She wasn’t a child, it was only a concern. The last thing she wanted was this woman’s pity.

“I know,” she managed, and strode ahead of Lady Brienne toward where the Elder Brother had pointed. The Mother’s door was carved and painted in beautiful scenes of flowered fields and
maternity. In another lifetime, Sansa might have stopped and stared. She might have lovingly traced each holy engraving, and felt at peace with the world. But that was not this world, and Sansa was no longer that woman.

Sansa strode toward the line of Faith Militant stationed at the Mother’s Door, inwardly questioning her confidence. She paused in front of a tall, blond haired individual who peered down his nose at her. A long seven seconds past, before the line gave way and Sansa was permitted to pass.

Sansa exhaled. To be behind armed soldiers, and away from the crowd.

If Sansa thought she would be reunited with Sandor quickly, she was sorely mistaken. Once inside the Sept, Sansa was given a few precious seconds to gaze in awe at the infamous Hall of Lamps before hands clamped onto her arms.

“What? What are you doing?” she shouted in alarm, completely forgetting herself. “Unhand me!”

Sansa was pushed and prodded through the hall, her cries of indignation ignored. Far behind her, she could hear Sandor complaining loudly about his need to see the Septa for his gout medicine. The sound of his raspy roar was a small comfort.

“My Lady,” Brienne shouted over the Septa’s head but she was soon lost. Sansa felt tears pricking behind her eyes at the sudden separation. Passing the Elder Brother, he gave her a reassuring nod.

Sansa was shown down a long, dark corridor, to a cold stone room the length and width of two men’s bodies. She soon found herself seated on a small wooden stool. The light from high, round window shone directly into her eyes, momentarily blinding her.

A Septa stood over her, casting a shadow over Sansa’s face. Blinking, Sansa wondered what was going to happen next.

“Why have you come to King’s Landing?”

The Septa’s voice was aged and broke after every other word. Sansa couldn’t decide if she had spoken too much in life, or too little. Her face was cowled, leaving her features to Sansa’s imagination. Clasped at the holy woman’s waist, hands like claws twisted and twisted around one another. A silver and red painted pin of the Mother’s portrait was clipped onto her shoulder. She was clearly not a Silent Sister, but also not any mere Septa.

Sansa paused, confused by the question. “May I speak with the High Septon? He called for us--”

“No. Who is the ‘us’ you refer to?”

Taken aback by the woman’s harsh tone, Sansa grew irate. Who was this woman?

“I would like to speak with the Elder Brother--”

“No,” the Septa repeated, “you may not see another soul until you have answered our questions.”

Sansa heard the shuffling of robes behind her, and turned. At the door, two Silent Sisters stood ominously, cloaked and with their hands clasped, mimicking the austere posture of their matriarch. Sansa swallowed dryly, mind whirling at her sudden predicament. I am being interrogated, but for what crime? The High Septon invited us. Was this a test or a trick?

A sinking feeling started in Sansa’s stomach. It seemed that the Game of Thrones was pervasive in every aspect of King’s Landing, even present in the Septs.
“Why are you here?” the Septa repeated.

“I…” Sansa settled for the truth, “I was invited by the High Septon. My husband, Sandor Clegane, will fight for the Faith in the Queen’s upcoming trial by combat.”

“Sandor Clegane was invited to fight for the Faith, not you,” the Septa pointed out blithely, “why are you here?”

Sansa searched frantically for a better answer, fearful of saying the wrong thing, “I came to support my husband whilst he faces Gregor Clegane in combat.”

“Lies,” the Septa spat, “why are you here?”

“I…”

Sansa mind whirled. What did they want out of her? Chirp pretty, a voice echoed, little dove. A sweat was forming on Sansa’s brow, and the Septa leaned over her shrinking form. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. What did these people want?

“I… I came to see Queen Cersei beheaded…”

“Ah, yes, vengeance,” the Septa crooned. Suddenly, the matriarch swept backward in a gust and the light fell on Sansa’s eyes again. Blinded by the rays, she held a hand up to regain her sight, but her hands were suddenly held behind her. “Revenge is a sin, the Gods take revenge, men and women are incapable of such judgement.”

Sansa clamped her mouth shut and nodded. Old habits began to fall into place. “Yes, yes, you’re right.”

“You will repent tonight with seven prayers to the Crone for wisdom.”

“Yes,” Sansa nodded, anxiety building when the Septas refused to release her hands, “yes, I will.”

“Say it.”

“I will repent tonight with seven prayers to the Crone for wisdom.”

“Good! Good,” the Septa whispered again. The hands around Sansa’s wrists loosened, and Sansa felt the blood return to her fingers.

“How did you escape the city? Did you plot to kill the King born of incest?”

The questions came two at a time, making Sansa uncertain which to answer first. Should she address the first question, ignoring the accusation or murder, or should she skip straight to the second question, potentially looking over eager to dispute the charges?

“I escaped with the assistance of Sandor Clegane. I did not plot to kill King Joffrey.”

“Did you trade your maidenhead for freedom?”

“No!” Sansa felt herself flush at the implication the Septa was making. “No, we… I--”

“Why did the Hound assist you?” the Septa stepped closer, bathing Sansa in darkness once more.

“He is… in love with me,” Sansa almost said more, but thought better of it. The less these sisters knew, the better.
"You bound yourself to him in front of the Gods, under false pretences, but the Gods see past all lies. Sansa Stark and Sandor Clegane are one," the Septa stepped even closer, close enough that Sansa could smell the strong scent of the soap the sister’s used to wash their garments.

"Yes, I know." Sansa furrowed her brow. "I knew the lie was wrong and I knew the Gods would not fall for such amateur trickery."

"Good! Good!" the Septa clapped her hands and Sansa’s wrists were fully released. Sansa breathed a sigh of relief as blood rushed down her arms, reigniting her sleeping nerves.

As she rubbed her hands, the Septa stepped backwards, casting the window’s light against her eyes once more. Sansa blinked and almost groaned out loud at her next words, “You will say seven prayers to the Maiden for your lies.”

“Yes, I will say seven prayers to the Maiden for my lies--”

“And?”

“I will…” Sansa searched her memory, “I will say seven prayers to the Crone for wisdom, and seven prayers to the Maiden for my lies.”

On and on they went. Back and forth. The Septa would ask questions, ranging from the bizarre to the extremely personal, and Sansa would respond. The initial answer never seemed to please the old crone, and Sansa was forced to reanswer repeatedly. Every once and a while, when the Septa grew particularly unhappy with Sansa’s answers, the Septas would grasp at her wrists again, and pull her arms behind her, until they grew numb and weary.

Sansa quickly exhausted of this game, and lost track of time. It was getting darker, she could tell by the dimming light of the small window. She wondered where Sandor was, and if he was enduring the same treatment.

Hours and hours passed. Eventually, the questions ended with the promise from Sansa “I will say seven prayers to each of the seven Gods for my sins. I will pray for wisdom, for my lies, for the courage to do right, for forgiveness, for greater strength, for the light to reach my mind and heart and body, for peace, and I will serve the Gods with humbleness and humility.”

The Septas led her into the depths of the Great Sept, down many sets of stairs and into the dark. Here, the labyrinthine corridors were lined with cells, not unlike the interrogation room she just escaped. Sansa searched her mind for an avenue of escape, but there was none. No one knew she was in the capital, and the only ally she had was in the High Septon’s clutches. At the end of a long hall, the Septa’s stopped and unlocked a barred door. Sansa stumbled through the doorway, afraid, but dared not ask any more questions. She was pushed into a familiar figure and the cell slammed shut behind her.

“Sansa,” a voice rasped and she was enclosed in warm arms. Sansa almost cried in relief and returned the embrace. “I didn’t know where they had taken you.”

“Sandor,” she breathed in the familiar scent. “Where is Elder Brother? The Others?”

In the dark, she could barely see him shake his head. He had been stripped of his armor and wore only a yellow shirt and a pair of roughspun breeches. Like her, he was barefoot and weaponless. “I do not know, I was separated from the party on arrival for questioning.”

“So was I…” Sansa breathed. “What do you make of it?”
“We are not safe here,” her non-knight shrugged and led her to the small cot that they would be forced share. A short, fat candle sat unlit upon the only other furniture in their cramped stone room, a wooden crate. Sansa found a set of matches and lit the wick.

Sandor’s troubled gaze reflected the dim light. “And yet, we would be no safer anywhere else. Do no be afraid, I am still a pawn they need. The High Septon needs a warrior to fight for him, and there is no better to face Ser Robert Strong.”

Sansa fell onto the thin cot. Sandor searched with his hand for hers and gripped her tightly. She gazed about their prison, acquainting herself with their new cage. About ten feet by ten feet, with tall vaulted ceilings. She wondered if they were being held underneath one of the many pyres. There was a small, round window with bars that caught her eye. Looking up, Sansa could see a distant blue sky through the tall vent.

“We will play their game, and then leave quickly,” Sansa decided then. “Sandor, I want no part of this,” she waved her hand around the room.

“Neither do I, Little Bird.”

Sansa’s heart leapt at the old, familiar name. They sat in silence for a while, digesting the events of the evening. A septa eventually came with their dinner and a copy of the Seven Pointed Star, which she slid through the bars with a pointed stare. Sansa grabbed the book and handed it to Sandor, who burned it on top of the crate for warmth.

Later, she laid on top of Sandor, their legs entwined, on the small cot. The mood was too serious for passion. Instead, they took solace in each other’s company.

“Sandor,” she said, as she drifted off to sleep. “Do you think you’ll win?”

There was a long pause. The candle light was snuffed by his hand, and they were bathed in darkness. A darkness that seemed to creep closer with every second. *Perhaps we should have kept the Seven Pointed Star.*

“Maybe,” he finally whispered.

“If you don’t,” Sansa gasped, “I think I will die with you. Right there, in the arena. I don’t think I could go on.”

“You could,” he patted her back. “If you wanted to.”

“I wouldn’t want to,” she said into his shirt.

Hands fisted into her back and Sandor took a ragged breath. “That’s your choice.”

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes
I know I haven't posted in forever! I'm so sorry. I won't make any excuses but as I said before, I do plan on finishing this fic. It just might take a while!
Imprisoned

Chapter Summary

Sansa and Sandor are trapped in the dungeons of the Great Sept. Sansa reminisces about her time together with Sandor on the Quiet Isle, and they have two unexpected visitors.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three Months Ago…

Sansa lay on the green, green grass of the Quiet Isle. A cold wind was blowing and a bright sun shone from the east. Tendrils of red hair danced across her face and tickled her nose. Today was a day of rest for the pair from King’s Landing. It was the day after her rushed wedding and the day after their wedding night.

Sandor rose earlier that morning while Sansa pretended to be asleep. She watched him move under red eyelashes. First, lacing up his brown pants and shrugging on a shirt, then swiftly pulling on his wool socks and brown boots. He made the fire (characteristically jumping away from the resulting flames), swept away the ashes, and belted a knife to his waist.

He bustled about with speed and efficiency. No movement was wasted. Sandor never tapped his feet or twiddled his thumbs, never paused to think or reflect on the previous night, never sat at her side and stroked her hair. He moved.

A man of action… Sansa admired the strength of his unburnt profile. My father would respect that.

Sansa could remember when she was little, how Robb took her down to Wintertown. They’d sit and watch Mikken dance with molten steel, go on a stroll through the Builder’s district, or watch the laborer’s in the Glass Gardens. Sometimes, Father might take her to the stables and Sansa was allowed to pet the filly that had been born that year. Even Jon took her once. That day they had visited the floral shop, Jon bought her a bouquet of winter roses and Sansa had truly loved him then, her half-brother. Those days, her father and brothers would always speak with respect - a strange reverence for the men who hefted the crates, who dug the earth, who built the Keep.

Sansa tried to imagine Sandor at Winterfell. Without his scar, he would have melded into Wintertown like a snowflake in a blizzard. He even looks like a northman… Sansa took in his black hair and grey eyes where he sat in front of the flickering fire.

Would he have been happy there? Had he lived beneath her father’s feet?

Sansor rose and left quietly. Pausing only once to lean down and kiss her brow. “I know you’re awake. I’m going to pay the Elder Brother a visit.”

His heavy weight left a small imprint on their makeshift straw bed. After the door closed, Sansa remembered pressing her palm into the small dent, feeling the fabric and tracing the outline of his shape. She rested for a half-hour before hunger drove her to rise and find the Common Hall.

I am married now… The surprising thought came to her as she peeled her morning egg. I am not the
same as I was yesterday. The thought sat uneasily in her stomach and she left the Common Hall quickly to seek solitude.

Scrunching her eyebrows, Sansa thought about the circumstances that led up to her wedding.

Before the Quiet Isle, she never reflected much. Life was a storm of unexpected events. In King’s Landing, she needed to survive, to stay on her toes, to outwit the King and the Queen by pretending to be a pretty simpleton. Every day was a struggle, and at the time, she had had no use for the past. Reflection seemed utterly pointless. Yet, the Quiet Isle brought out her more serious nature. The nature she inherited from her father.

*If only I had a white weirwood*, she smiled sadly. *I would sit and sharpen my dragonblade sword in front of it.*

Sansa left Winterfell in a hurry, never saying goodbye or paying homage to the Gods. Although the Godswood in King’s Landing was sweet and fragrant, it could never replace the red eyes of the weirwood. *Father would have insisted I marry in front of a Heartwood, and Mother would have insisted I marry in the Sept. What would they think of my simple wedding, in a wooden Sept, with a simple dress and my non-knight, the Hound?* For the umpteenth time, Sansa wondered what her family might have seen in Sandor Clegane.

*Had they lived, would the relationship ever have flourished?* Sansa wondered. *My father might have seen my heart's actions from a distance, and nipped the flower in the bud. My mother would have insisted on our separation. Or perhaps, it would have grown in spite of any resistance. Like a rose amongst the rocks. If Joffrey could not have stopped it.* Sansa began to put some faith in fate.

A romance with Sandor was never expected.

One night. It only took one night. It only took the storm of the century and her annoying sister, Arya, to sweep her into the Hound’s arms. And then… *a secret affair?* Sansa winced. Those were the only words to describe it. Sneaking around at night, to the docks or through the Keep, secreting kisses and embraces. One day, she would sell this story to a bard and have it made into a saga. *The Lady Wolf and Her Hound.* A lovely title.

*I never thought I would marry anyone other than a knight, or a Prince, or a Lord.* Shame welled in her gut. Had she changed? Two and a half years ago, she arrived in King’s Landing. A completely different person. Sansa’s whole world turned upside down, and then reverted, and then turned upside down once more. She lost her family, her title, her influence… everything that cemented her in this world. And yet, all those things dimmed in comparison to Sandor.

*Would I have chosen him over my family?*

The answer slowly sunk into her skin, like the warmth of the sun. Sansa knew the answer in her heart, but it didn't make the thought any less painful. Yes, she would have defied her father, forsaken her mother and brothers, abandoned her title and inheritance… and in a way, she already had.

Sansa was in love with Sandor. The thought of marriage had occurred to her once or twice in the dark of the night, but she always felt those hopes were futile. It was always the end goal, after escape and freedom. A dangerous dream that she could never speak aloud.

For so long, she’d been striving for his moment. Now, it had actually happened. Not because her father wished it. Not because her life depended on it.

But because he asked, and she had wanted to, and it seemed like the only natural course of action.
Clouds covered the sun, blanketing Sansa in a cool shade. She crossed her arms and sighed. She loved him, but sometimes she thought if it wasn’t for the Elder Brother’s insistence on a wedding ceremony, Sandor might never have asked. Would he have had the courage to defy what he had been taught, as she did? Would he have rejected hatred for love? Would she have rejected tradition for rebellion.

*It was a combination of choice and fate, Sansa decided. Like our lives.*

Sansa heard a rustling behind her and saw Sandor’s head pop in and out of view.

“Cold day to bathe in the sun,” he commented, and then he was laying next to her, with his arms folded behind his head. Sansa turned her gaze to the sky once more, just in time for the sun to reappear.

“It comes and goes,” she said softly.

The pair lay next to one another, and Sansa wondered what he was thinking. *Does he regret the bonding ceremony? Do I?*

Sansa sighed and closed her eyes.

*I do and I do not. I regret not having my family. I regret not speaking honestly with him. I regret being a fool for most my life... yet I do not regret my foolishness with him.*

Once again, his unburnt flesh was facing her. Sandor’s strong jaw, darkened with a growing beard, clenched and unclenched, as if he meant to chew on his words.

*Strange, I do not remember seeing this side of him in the Red Keep, as much.* Sansa pondered. The Hound always made sure to show his burnt side there, his dark side. Here, he was free to face her in the light.

“Are you...” he cleared his throat awkwardly and stumbled over his next words, “feeling rested and well?”

“I do not believe I have ever heard you stutter,” she turned on his side and faced him. Grey eyes flickered between the sun and clouds, and her face. Sansa could see the trepidation written on his features. All the usual signs were present. He opened and closed his lips ever so slightly, debating whether or not to speak, tensed and untensed his shoulders, avoided looking at her and then inevitably gave into the impulse. *Have I come to know his moods so well?*

“I love you,” she said and blinked, surprised at her own boldness.

“As... as I love you,” he stuttered for the second time. He slowly raised a calloused hand to lovingly sweep the hair behind her ear, and then thumbed the bottom of her chin and her lips. “My lady.”

Sitting forward, he rested his arms on his knees and gazed out into the sea. Sansa’s lips and right cheek burned with his touch, but she ignored the familiar sensation Sandor left in his wake. *Is that it? She wondered to herself. One word of spoken affection, and all his worries are put to rest?*

“I do not believe you ever learned how to swim,” he said aloud, in an almost stunned tone of voice.

Sansa raised herself to sit next to him, and smiled at the rolling waves with mirth. “Oh, I think I can swim in a pinch, if I needed to.”
“Little Bird,” Sansa’s heart beat when he gently held her hand, “You could barely swim two feet without rushing back to me.”

“Yes. Toward the end, I really was swimming quite well. Now that I think of it, half the time I pretended to grow afraid just so I could drift by your side. The waves would bump me against you, and I secretly enjoyed it,” she blushed, “but I didn’t want you to find out, so I pretended to be afraid. You’d hold me occasionally, when the waves were rough.”

Sandor turned and stared at her. His gaze unreadable. In the silence, Sansa could hear the waves striking shore. Then, his lips twitched and threw his head back and laughed. A full, honest laugh. “Gods, San. I spent half my nights worried you’d fall into a river one day.”

Her heart warmed at the sound of the new endearment. “You were a comfort to me,” Sansa smiled. Finding now, that speaking the truth was becoming involuntary. She had held it in so long. “I didn’t want the lessons to stop. I didn’t want you to leave me. You made me feel safe when I was with you.”

Sandor’s smile faded. With one arm, he drew her close in an embrace. Their noses brushed and she was face to face with her non-knight. The sun illuminated both the light and dark sides of his face. “Do I still make you feel safe?” His voice was a deep, dark bass, and he leaned closer to her mouth, almost kissing. She felt his breath ghost over her lips. “Alone with the Hound,” he commented lightly, “Lesser maidens have fainted.”

As per usual, Sandor was both joking and serious. There was a hidden wariness to his eyes. A vulnerability she had seen before, many times. Sansa thought they had grown past these games, but it seems in the light of current events, the Hound couldn’t help but test his beloved. One last time.

She hesitated too long. Suddenly, Sandor pulled her underneath and he was looming over her. Sansa was trapped by two arms and two legs. Memories of Sandor’s vicious nature came swimming back to the surface. She recalled the way his words could bite, and his grip could bruise. Sandor loomed over her. No doubt trying to intimidate her, and he was moderately successful. The primitive part of her brain sent a shock of fear down her spine, knowing she was about to be dominated by a much larger predator.

A small movement to the left caught her eye, and Sansa turned her head to see the tiniest crab scuttling away from them. It reminded her of camping on the sandy shores of Westeros, and when Sandor would capture crabs to boil… for them.

“Well?” he huffed impatiently, almost petulantly, and the spell was broken. Sansa’s mysterious smile must have shaken his resolve.

She raised a hand to his cheek and stroked the growing stubble. “Lesser maidens might faint. But they do not know you as I do,” she lifted herself to kiss him softly and he jumped slightly. Sansa smirked against his lips.

Within moments, he melted into the embrace. A small, satisfied noise escaped the back of his throat when she ran her hand down the muscles of his back and drew him closer. They tangled in the sand awhile. For once, Sansa felt complete control over their embrace. Knowing this man was so pliable under her touch.

When they broke off, rather breathless, she stroked the burnt side of his face and he leaned into her touch. Sansa couldn’t help but giggle. Oh, how easily the tables can be turned.

Sandor’s eyes snapped open at her laugh. “What’s so humorous?”
“You’re covered in sand,” she opted to say, and ran a hand through his hair. Stray particles fell onto her face and she closed her eyes against the onslaught.

“So is my lady,” she heard him say, and then the sunlight was on her again. Sandor had rolled onto his side. With a strong arm, he drew her close against him, and now they were laying side by side once more. Sansa ran a hand over the length of his arm appreciatively and he shuddered.

“Young lady wife,” she corrected.

“My lady wife,” he agreed.

The repetitive sound of soft waves drew them both into a sleepy fog. Sansa lay down her head in the crook of Sandor’s shoulder and he clung to her in turn. Time passed lazily around them. Soon, Sansa felt herself drifting off to sleep despite the chill in the wind. Sandor kept her warm enough, and the lull of safe slumber was calling to her.

When she woke, she was warm and content. The sun was no longer shining, and she realized she was back in the small cabin she shared with Sandor. The curtains had been drawn. She thought Sandor must have left but when she turned, he was there beside her, slumbering quietly. The look of innocent peace of his face was adorable, and she took a moment to commit it to memory. Then, careful to not disturb him, she curled against his side and sighed.

She wasn’t careful enough, however, because soon he was awake, and asking if she was cold.

“No, no. I’m fine. Don’t leave,” she pressed herself against the solidity of his chest. “I am so happy here.”

Sandor stopped fidgeting and settled back against the furs with resignation. He kept one eye trained on the door. The light was dim, but it was clearly enough to keep him awake. His restlessness transferred into her restlessness, and Sansa could not bring herself to fall back asleep.

“What is it?”

“We… I—Sansa,” Sandor stared down at her and then they were both sitting up. Sansa could sense his discomfort, and in an effort to reclaim their earlier ease, drew herself into his lap. His arms came around her reflexively and they settled against the wall of the cabin. “Sansa,” he started again. “You do know… I cannot lie to you easily.”

“I know,” her heart beat faster at his unexpected words. “I would not have you lie to me.”

“Then I must tell you. We are not safe here. We are not safe anywhere. Perhaps we are safe for the time being, but…” he trailed off. The silence stretched between them. Sansa knew now, he had been ruminating on her earlier words.

“So…” Sansa gripped the hand on her waist. “What do we do now?”

Sandor shook his head and sighed. “We wait, I suppose.”

“We will wait then. Wait for the war to be over. Wait for them all to forget all about us. Wait until it’s safe to return,” Sansa said decidedly.

The arms around her tightened and she felt a light kiss on her brow. “I can think of no better companion than my lady wife, to wait out the storm.”

Sansa recalled the night of the storm and shivered. The night he saved her life. How dangerous, and
yet surprisingly human, he had seemed then. Did he know then, how much he intrigued her? Sansa traced racing hounds down his leg and grinned.

“I can think of a few things to pass the time.”

Three months later…

Sansa and Sandor lay together on the cot the Faith had provided for them. It was, like most beds, a bit too small for his height, but wide enough to accommodate the two of them. It had been a long night. Sandor hardly slept. The candle flickered out long ago, and he couldn’t help but see shadows and monsters in the dark. Biding their time. Waiting for him to sleep so they might strike.

Sansa stirred against his chest, mumbled something sweetly, and then fell motionless once more. Sandor held her tightly, drawing comfort from her presence.

_I am afraid_, he realized.

For the first time in a long time, he had something - someone - to lose. For the first time in a long time, he felt true fear. Circumstances here were beyond his control. Evil people operated outside his influence. If he failed to protect Sansa… if he failed to defeat his brother. He might die and leave her behind.

His widow.

Sandor’s hand balled into an angry fist. Sansa’s red hair streamed from his knuckles, reminiscent of blood. _That must not happen._ “It will not happen,” he told the darkness. “I will make certain of it.”

His proclamation was met with silence, as expected, but he was filled with a sense of small victory. The darkness seemed somehow less substantial than before.

Footsteps approached from down the corridor and Sansa red hair fell from his grip. Careful not to wake his sleeping wife, he gently eased her onto the cot and replaced his body with the thin blanket they had been given. Sansa moaned softly in protest, but a few soft strokes of her hair, and she was out again. _Did she know how charming she was, even in her sleep?_

Sandor crept quietly to the edge of their cell. A dim candle was approaching, and beyond the candle, Sandor could see brown robes. A brother. Was this man on patrol? Simply checking to make sure the imprisoned had not escaped?

Sandor gripped the bars of their cell. _Remain calm_, he reminded himself, _perhaps this man can relay a message to the Elder Brother._

The message was unnecessary, however, because when the figure came into view, it was the man in question.

“Sandor,” the Elder Brother’s greeting was hoarse, “I am glad to see you alive and well.”

Sandor eyed the man before him. A traitor or an ally? He didn’t know any more.
The Elder Brother looked exhausted. Dark bags hung beneath his eyes, his skin was pasty and pale, and his hand shook as he held a candle and several bags between them. Sandor eyed the goods the monk carried before reaching between the bars and hefting one of the large bundles from the Elder Brother’s shoulders. The monk sighed in relief and thanked him.

A minute passed as they unburdened the monk. “I was uncertain as to my reception, after yesterday,” the older man said wearily and produced a key from underneath his robes. With a clank, the door to their cell swung open. The Elder Brother had brought with him odds and ends. Two blankets, a pack of food containing apples, bread, dried meats, and a flagon of wine. A bundle of candles and matches, two flasks of water, a change of clothes for both Sandor and Sansa, and a vial of white liquid. “Milk of the poppy,” the monk explained, “to ease sleep. I feared for the Lady Sansa, however, it seems I should have feared for you. She slumbers soundly and you do not.”

Sandor shrugged uncomfortably and gently placed the second blanket over Sansa’s sleeping form. The woman had no idea, but she could sleep through a storm if she so desired.

“I am plagued with thoughts,” Sandor whispered softly. “Elder Brother, what in the Seven Hells is happening in the capitol? Why have we been imprisoned here? Albeit, ‘tis a generous prison.”

“That… that my friend,” the Elder Brother whispered as they both crept toward the door, away from the slumbering lady, “keeps me awake tonight, too. I have spent the last day in prayer and conversation. With most of my time consumed by the High Septon. I have questioned him, these very questions, and I am wary,” the Elder Brother shook his head, “very wary of what I have learned. The Capitol is crumbling around us. Lack of stability has driven thieves from their dens and into the streets. And, I fear, into the halls of the Gods.”

“King’s Landing has been crumbling for years,” Sandor snorted. “I’ve seen it. I’ve lived it with Joffrey. It’s the damn Lannisters—”

“And now, the Lion Queen has put swords in the hands of fanatics,” the Elder Brother whispered sharply. “There will be a new order in King’s Landing soon, my friend. We need only wait.”

“And?” Sandor gripped the bars of their cell once more. The Elder Brother’s face was drawn and fearful. “What do we do?”

“I… don’t know,” the older man seemed to shrivel. “We have little choice. Here is what I do know. The High Septon fully intends for you to fight for the Faith in the upcoming trial. If you refuse, you make an enemy of the upcoming power in King’s Landing. If you succeed, you’ve made a powerful friend. The path seems clear to me.”

Sandor exhaled sharply and shook his head. “And the interrogation, the cells, the treatment? If this man needs my aid, you’d think my reception would be a bit warmer.”

“Common courtesy in the halls of the Faith, these days,” the Elder Brother’s eyes narrowed in anger. “I have been thrown in my own cell, as it were.”

“And you escaped?” Sandor’s eyes rose in appreciation. The Elder Brother never ceased to amaze him.

“I hardly had to. I merely asked to pray in the Sept, and out I was!” the Elder Brother smiled grimly, “I’ve escaped from many more stringent prisons.”

Sandor surveyed the man in brown before him. On the Quiet Isle, the Elder Brother had become somewhat of a confidant. A father figure he could go to, should the shadows of the past begin to
overwhelm him. They spent many hours together, in the monk’s cave-like home, revisiting historic battles, pondering over the men they killed, the lies they told. Sometime during the past few months, Sandor began to feel the bonds of kinship toward this man, and now he found it difficult to judge without bias. He wanted to believe the Elder Brother was not leading them astray. He wanted to believe there was good in the world, for Sansa’s sake.

“What can you tell me to expect, Elder Brother?” Sandor made his decision. “How long until the trial?”

“You have two days to pray and prepare. The High Septon would have you spar with the Warrior’s Sons, to test your mettle before the combat. He also bids thee eat and drink generously, which is why I have brought you food from the kitchens.”

“Granted,” Sandor inclined his head. “Many thanks for the food. But about my brother?”

The Elder Brother turned away and steepled his hands anxiously. His whispers grew sharp and anxious. “A vile creature, by all accounts. Neither living nor dead. He swings with the might of a giant and does not tire. He neither eats or drinks or sleeps like normal men. I would be cautious, very cautious. We mustn’t rely on strength alone for this fight.”

Sandor felt hope dwindling as the Elder Brother continued.

“Small cuts will do nothing against this beast. I am not entirely certain he has retained a head. The skull of Ser Gregor was said to have been brought before the Prince of Dorne, and this creature has never been seen without his greathelm, and white steel armor.”

“Then…” Sandor searched the darkness, “how do I kill it?”

“I am searching for an answer, my friend. I am searching. The answer lies in the past of the supposed Maester who summoned this beast. Qyburn.”

“He rode with Vargo Hoat, and the Brave Companions,” Sandor mumbled to himself. Recalling a grandfatherly figure, bowing and scraping to Lord Tywin. “No good can come of that company.”

“My thoughts exactly. Upon further investigation, I’ve discovered that Qyburn lost his Maester’s Chain for dabbling in dark magic, and necromancy, during his time at the Citadel. The High Septon confirmed this.”

Necromancy. A shiver traveled down Sandor's spine. The Elder Brother was right. They musn’t rely on strength alone for this fight.

“How do we kill that which is already dead?” Sandor furrowed his brow in thought.

“I do not know, but I am hoping my ravens to the Citadel will be returned. If they have dealt with this beast before, perhaps they have an answer--”

Their whispers were interrupted by the creak of old hinges. Sansa stirred awake on the bed and rose blearily at the sound. “Sandor?” she questioned. But there was no time to explain.

Sandor pulled her to her feet and the Elder Brother scurried underneath the cot, tucking his feet so they were hidden. Sandor tugged the blankets over the edge, to hide his form and turned to his wife, who opened her mouth to speak. He placed a finger over her lips and gestured toward the hall. Voices could be heard.

Sansa froze and together, they listened.
“--unhand me this instant! I demand to be taken to my lady. Where are you keeping her--

“Lady Brienne,” Sansa whispered.

“Silence, you stubborn woman. The pious will not bow to your demands--”

Sandor felt the Little Bird seize at these words. A high, cold voice they both knew too well. The voice of the Queen.

Chapter End Notes

I will finish this story! Next chapter is already written it just needs to be edited. It's the editing that's taking me so long, lately. I just haven't been satisfied with my original drafts and keep rewriting.
Imprisoned II

Chapter Summary

Sansa comes face-to-face with Cersei Lannister for the first time since her escape.

Cersei Lannister.
The Queen Regent.
The cruel, abusive mother who caged her in a tower.

A flood of memories returned to Sansa. The Queen, stroking her hair during the carriage ride to King’s Landing. Cersei pouring glass after glass of wine, beautiful features twisted in disdain. The Queen’s dark countenance as she observed Sansa from her position next to the Iron Throne. The sickeningly sweet liar who drove Sansa to betray her father. The Queen was in this very hall, quite possibly a measly few feet away.

The newlyweds peered curiously out of their cell, Sandor shielding her from view. The comforting hand on her back kept her from acting on the sudden wave of nausea that swept over her stomach. The sound of the Queen’s shrill voice was like a bucket of ice water over her body. She was shocked. She was enraged and fearful. Why now? Why, when Sansa could do nothing but stand and bear the brunt of her anger?

“--unhand me and return me my weapons. I am on a quest. Twas given to me by King Tommen and the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard himself!”

Brienne! Sansa almost called for her Lady Knight, but at the same time, she didn’t want the Queen to know she was here. It was such a relief to hear Brienne’s voice and to know she was alive and well.

Four septas escorted the two prisoners into the dungeons. Brienne was forced forward first. The Maiden of Tarth struggled honorably against her bonds, but it was no use. The septas had far too many years to perfect their knot making.

Following Brienne, the Queen drifted lazily down the hall, and the septas at her back had to keep pushing her forward. Sansa couldn’t see her old nemesis - Brienne’s large frame was blocking her view - but she didn’t need to look at Cersei Lannister to hear her sharp criticism.

“You daft cow, no one can hear you down here. Stop struggling and learn to walk like a lady.”

Sansa exhaled shakily. Sandor tugged her away from the bars and enveloped her in his arms, silently offering his comfort as the scene unfolded. Or perhaps it was a show of possessiveness, Sansa didn’t know but she wished they were alone. Suddenly remembering the strange figure that Sandor had hidden beneath their cot, Sansa cast a suspicious glance backwards. She couldn’t discern anything hiding underneath the blankets, but she knew there was another person. Sandor’s hand tightened around her waist and she quickly glanced away.

Two cell doors clanged open. First one, and then the other. It was difficult to discern anything in the dark.
The eldest septa, at the head of the party escorting the Queen, carried a single, dim lamp. When they walked past, Sansa and Sandor’s cell was illuminated. Glancing at the underneath of their low cot, she glimpsed brown and silver before they were bathed in darkness once more. The Elder Brother, or a monk from their journey? Sansa wanted to turn and question Sandor, but they were no longer alone.

The septa’s departed, taking the lamp, their only source of light, with them. Long robes swish, swish, swished in the silence as they waited for the older women to leave. Sansa willed her beating heart to still, taking several deep, shallow breaths. She could feel Sandor’s body, taught as a bowstring and ready to strike. The tension in the air was almost palpable.

“Come back! Come back!” Brienne cried, “I have reason to be freed! Reason given by the King!”

“Quiet, you fat cow. They’re gone and they will remain gone.”

The voice of the Lion Queen sent another shiver down her spine. Sandor stroked her hair softly.

*Did Cersei see my face?* Sansa suddenly wondered. The Hound’s burned visage and his large frame was unmistakable, even in the dark, but did the Queen Regent bother to check the other cells as she was unceremoniously shoved into her own?

Sandor’s hand tensed and untensed on her hip, a sign of nervousness that Sansa now recognized. Cersei may be a woman, but she wielded words and power like a knight wielded a sword, and without mercy.

“You are cruel,” the Lady Knight retorted. Brienne sounded to be on their right. “Even in disgrace you cannot find humility.”

“Not as easily as you found my brother’s bed,” Cersei spat from across the hall.

Sansa gasped lightly and Sandor raised a hand to clamp it over her mouth. In the dark, she could feel his gaze pleading with hers. He bent his head down until his mouth met her ear. “What should we do, Little Bird? You play this game better than I.”

Despite the direness of the situation, Sansa’s heart filled with warmth. It was sweet to know that he was willing to place such great faith in her. Months ago, that might not have been possible.

“Wait a moment,” Sansa whispered back softly. The two women in the cells across the hall were too busy arguing to hear their soft words. “Then we will speak. It would be pointless to remain hidden in such close quarters. She will discover me eventually and I would rather reveal myself. Besides, we must speak to Brienne.”

“Hmm,” Sansa could sense Sandor’s frown. She knew that her husband and the maiden of Tarth didn’t exactly see eye-to-eye but Sansa was undeniably fond of the larger woman who once served her mother.

“Your insults are baseless—”

“Oh no,” the Queen’s voice was mocking, “The noble Beast of Tarth wouldn’t spread her legs to advance her position? Like you did for Renly - only the noble poof wouldn’t have you?”

Sansa winced. The topic of Renly was a sore spot for Brienne and the Queen’s words hit their mark. Sansa could hear her friend’s breath hitch, and then the Lady Knight burst out passionately.

“You foul cockroach! Besmirching the name of a noble, caring—”
Sansa could detect notes of pain in Brienne’s voice and decided to speak.

“Brienne, I am here.”

“Lady Sansa?” said the Maiden of Tarth, just as the Queen uttered a gasped, “Little Dove?”

Sansa took a deep breath and stepped toward the bars, leaving the relative safety of Sandor’s arms. Her husband left a single hand resting on her hip, though whether or not it was for Sansa’s comfort, or for his, she didn’t know. “Yes, ‘tis I. Sansa.”

“Lady Sansa? Are you well, unhurt?” Brienne’s voice went from angry to calm and concerned in a matter of seconds. Sansa couldn’t stop the small smile from spreading across her face. Brienne always seemed to genuinely care about her wellbeing. “What happened to you?”

“We were interrogated,” Sandor said above Sansa’s head. “Both of us. And then shoved into this blasted cell.”

“DOG?!” the Queen shrieked and Sansa jumped at the sound. It was as if a banshee sounded throughout the dungeons. Sansa peered into the darkness from whence the sound came, but still couldn’t see anything. The Queen’s angry voice filled the dungeons.

“HOUND! You treasonous bastard! You TRAITOR--”

Sandor’s hand on her hip was almost painfully tight as he struggled to control his rage. Sansa knew there was nothing she could do to silence the Queen’s yelling, so she choose to ignore her and address Brienne’s question first.

“I am safe with Sandor, Brienne, for the time being--”

“And you! You little bitch--”

A noise, similar to a growl, emitted from Sandor’s throat. He stepped forward menacingly in the dark and his fists clanged against the iron bars. Sansa placed a restraining hand on his arm, but the muscles there were tense and bulging from unleashed anger.

“Lady Brienne--” another voice launched itself into the fray. Sansa spun around in surprise.

“Elder Brother?”

“--have you both KILLED for abandoning my son--”

“That was you hiding beneath the bed--”

“--Come to tell you--”

“--Ser Brienne, catch the blasted blanket I throw you--”

“--You TREASONOUS WITCH. I will have you RAPED AND KILLED when your trial is over--”

“ENOUGH!” Sandor reached between the bars and somehow, miraculously, got a hold of the Queen’s collar. Sansa knew because of her pained gasp. He pulled her flush against the confines of her own cell and Cersei yelped. All conversation ceased. The Queen’s strangled gasps echoed in the empty hall and Sansa watched with amazement as the shadow of the Queen struggled against her husband’s iron grip.
“You will not threaten her again,” Sandor - The Hound - snarled through the bars of their cell.

In that moment, Sansa believed that if he could, he would kill the Queen right then and there. He was fueled by an ancient rage and the mere presence of the Lannister matriarch was enough to bring it boiling to the surface again. The same rage he tried calm and suppress on the Quiet Isle. The rage that once made him the legendary Hound.

Sansa’s hand wavered, outstretched toward her husband to touch him, but then it fell. I cannot control him in this regard, she thought. Sandor stepped in front of her to reach the Queen and she could dimly see his shoulders shaking with anger and the tightness of his jaw, And I don’t particularly want him to stop.

“I second that,” Lady Brienne sneered from her cage. “Silence, you snake.”

Somehow, during all the commotion, the Elder Brother managed to strike a candle. The flame flickered as it was brought to the edge of their cell. The monk held it in the darkness between all three cells, and five faces were revealed.

In the dim light, Sansa and the Queen were able to observe one another once more. The Queen’s green eyes were wide and frightened as the Hound held her against the bars of her cage.

Sansa took in her haggard appearance. The Queen’s natural beauty was ever present, but she looked significantly less threatening in bare feet and a tattered nighttime shift, as if she had just been plucked from bed and dragged through the streets. Cersei’s golden hair was unkempt, her face was unpainted, and her knuckles were not lined with the sharp jewels that once reminded Sansa of a lioness’ claws. Instead, she looked plain. She looked common.

Sansa stared and the Queen stared back.

If I asked him to, Sandor would kill her right now. Sansa thought, as the Queen’s green eyes flickered between Sansa and Sandor. She can see it. Sansa realized with grim satisfaction. Sandor would do anything for me. The Hound himself, would do anything for his lady. The heady rush of power filled her.

Sandor’s grip tightened on Cersei’s’ neck and the older woman let loose a pathetic, strangled gasp. Her voice used to haunt me in my sleep… but now that I see her… Sansa felt something akin to pity well within her, before she remembered the many reasons why they journeyed to King’s Landing. My father… My mother… my brothers… Sansa’s gaze hardened.

They came to King’s Landing for justice. Justice that would be delivered publicly, for the whole world to see.

“Little Dove,” the Queen rasped.

“Watch your mouth,” Sandor snarled. He shook her lightly in warning and the Queen whimpered. Sansa felt suddenly sick at the sight and placed a gentle hand on his arm.

“Sandor,” Sansa turned away from the Lannister matriarch and sought his eyes. “Let her go, she can do nothing from over there.”

Sandor glanced down at her, and then back at the Queen. She could see his indecision, but ultimately it was the stroke of her hand against his arm that finally prompted him to action. Without a word, he released his hold on the Queen.

Cersei went stumbling backward, tripping over her cot and falling into the shadows.
"As my lady commands," Sandor remarked dryly.

"Lady Sansa," Brienne’s face poked out of the cell to their right. Sansa peered into the darkness and saw, just barely, the shape of Brienne’s shaggy hair. “Have these cretins harmed you?”

“No,” Sansa shook her head, “have they harmed you?”

“I fought them,” Brienne said simply and Sansa could only imagine the scene, “but I was tied to a bench and left until I would submit. And you, Hound? Elder Brother?”

“I was treated respectably, if only for the sake of my sword arm,” Sandor said as he snaked an arm around Sansa’s waist and pulled her back from the bars. Any other situation, and Sansa might have protested, but she allowed him this display of ownership, if only for his pride. He was still eyeing the Queen viciously, but it looked as if the older woman had curled in on herself. The Queen could only stare at Sansa and Sandor across the way, her gaze full of hate.

Sansa watched the Queen for a moment, certain she would speak, but the older woman said nothing. She didn’t even blink. It seemed as if Sandor’s threat had shaken her to the soul, and she had become despondent in her hatred.

“I was treated with regard, although interrogated rigorously,” the Elder Brother joined them at the bars.

Sansa jerked her gaze away from the Queen and soon all four companions were engaged in discussion. Brienne, Sandor, and the Elder Brother began to debate their circumstances, routes of escape, and the motives of the High Septon.

Sansa mostly thought. She could have spoken up, but she was feeling tired and nervous, especially with the Queen so near. Every once and a while, Sansa felt the weight of Cersei’s stare fall on Sandor’s hand, which remained firmly situated on Sansa’s waist. It must have driven her mad, wondering how I escaped the Keep undetected, Sansa thought. And now, she knows my secret. Our secret.

Sansa wondered how the Queen would react, knowing that Sansa had bound herself to the Hound. What would she say, if she knew exactly when our relationship began, when I was still betrothed to Joffrey? What would she say, if she knew I snuck out at night to swim with Sandor in the Blackwater? I stole the Lannister Hound, right out from under their upturned noses.

Before long, Brienne, Sandor and the Elder brother all came to the same conclusion.

It would be fruitless to attempt an escape from the city. Not with the Faith Militant on every street. Besides which, their faces were far too recognizable. The Hound and Lady Brienne were unmistakable, and Sansa was too easily identified with her pale features and red hair. Brienne proposed that they seek to contact Ser Jaime and the King, or perhaps even the Tyrells, and explain their situation, but none of them could figure a way to send word to the Red Keep. Besides, there was no certainty that the nobility would respond.

The Elder Brother made a strong argument to ingratiate the High Sparrow. With the Faith as the new power in King’s Landing, they would need to curry favor with the Sparrow King. If Sandor could defeat Ser Robert Strong--

“YOU?!?” Cersei seemed to come alive again, at the mention of the upcoming trial. Sansa jumped, startled, at the sudden shrill of her voice. “The High Septon has chosen you as the Faith’s Champion?”
The group fell silent, and they all turned to stare at the Queen. Sandor’s grip on Sansa’s waist tightened once more.

None of the other prisoners responded to her statement and soon, a mad cackle came from the shadows. Cersei Lannister slunk forward, almost drunkenly, with a smug smirk on her full lips, “Oh, there shall be justice for the dead.”

The Queen’s mad laugh echoed in the dungeons. It was truly unnerving, and Brienne threw a rock at the Queen’s cell. It clattered to the ground noisily, ending her laughter.

“Explain yourself,” Brienne demanded.

“What is there to explain, cow? You’ve heard the rumors, and I’ve seen the proof. Ser Robert Strong is an undefeatable champion. A bulwark. A man who is not a man,” Cersei sounded so self assured and confident. Sansa could feel the group’s hope dwindling. “There is no victory for you here, Hound. You will die in the arena and the Little Dove will be left all alone. With no dog to warm her bed at night.”

A clawed hand gripped the iron bars across narrow dungeon corridor from Sansa, and she willed herself not to flinch as the Queen’s cruel stare suddenly fell on her.

“I never imagined, Sansa, how well you would take my advice. You’ve used your woman’s weapon well, sweetling, and gained a fierce protector. You’ve even ensnared the fat cow. Well done, Little Dove, but you must aim for greater prizes in the Game of Thrones. The Hound will not suffice, especially not when he dies. A landed lord might leave you a fortune, a castle, an army. But this dog cannot protect you in death.”

Sansa’s eyes widened in horror at the callousness of the Queen’s word. It was beyond insulting to hear her love for Sandor, so minimized and belittled. And to mention his death?

“Tell me, Little Dove, who will you bed next to protect you from your fate? The Lady Knight?” Brienne threw another rock in the dark, but she missed. “This monk? Baelish perhaps? Gods know he pines for you and if you spread your legs wide enough you might even catch Lord Frey or Lord Bolton in there.”

Sansa felt a cold rage build with her as the Queen dragged on and on.

“But the Hound, Sansa? I thought I taught you better than that. A lady is above laying with mongrels. I suppose you’re ruined now. Soiled ladies cannot hope to wed a true lord—”

“Shut up!”

Sansa saw red. With quick hands she snatched a handful of the Queen’s hair and pulled. A deathly shriek emitted from Cersei’s lips. Sansa looked down. Long strands of woven gold hump limply from her fist. With a sickening lurch, Sansa realized she had even drawn blood. Disgusted at the sight, she threw the hair back at the Queen.

“I’ve listened to enough of your words,” Sansa barely recognized her own voice, so clouded by hatred, “I know your poison, and you will not corrupt me again.”

Cersei retreated back into her cell, reminiscent of a shriveling slug, clutching her scalp and weeping pitifully. It was a strange sight. One moment, the Queen was delivering vicious threats, and the next, she was snivelling on the ground. Sansa stared at the older woman, wondering how she was ever frightened of this sad, pathetic creature.
“I pity you,” Sansa said. “No one loves you. Not even the Kingslayer. Not any more.”

With those words, Cersei fell silent and motionless. Sandor’s hand crept to her arm and he tugged her gently backwards and away from the Queen. Sansa shuddered and fell against him, completely exhausted by those few words.

The Elder Brother cleared his throat.

“I’ve been gone too long. Soon, the brother’s watching me will wonder where I am.”

The monk produced a key from his robes and unlocked the door to their cell. Sansa stared at him in befuddlement. “I will make a copy and give it to you, Lady Sansa, in case things should go awry.”

Sandor nodded and moved past her to clasp the Elder Brother’s arm. “Thank you for all you have done,” her husband said gruffly, “for us.”

“Do me the greater favor, and defeat this beast. My lady,” once outside of their cell and in the corridor, the Elder Brother went to Lady Brienne and handed her some bread and cheese from beneath his robes. Sansa’s mouth watered at the sight, and she finally noticed the bags placed on their small table. The Elder Brother had brought them food! “I will return for you tomorrow.”

Sansa heard the swish of his brown robes and the clank of the door opening and closing. The Elder Brother’s sudden departure left a solemn mood in the air.

“What do we do now?” Sansa voiced the question to Lady Brienne, but Sandor responded.

“We wait.”

“Get some rest, Lady Sansa, Hound,” Lady Brienne said wearily. “And I will attempt to do so myself. I fear we will need to be well rested, in the coming days.”

Sansa nodded mutely, even knowing Brienne could not see her nod. “Until tomorrow, Lady Brienne,” she managed.

Sansa didn’t move. She felt exposed, knowing the Queen was only a few feet away. The blonde woman was curled in a ball on the floor, shivering pathetically. Sansa couldn’t help but feel uneasy, even a little sick at the thought.

“San?” Sandor whispered in her ear questioning.

Sansa sought his embrace. He gave it freely, as he was wont to, and with one hand, snuffed the candle that illuminated the cell. Sansa allowed him to pull her toward the cot and they collapsed together. The strength of his presence made her feel infinitely better. *I am not alone*, Sansa sighed into his chest. *I am not alone.*

They held one another in the dark, both too alert to sleep. Sansa ran her hands through the scruff of his growing beard and over the scars on his face. She traced the shape of his burn with her fingertips, and found the action strangely comforting. He didn’t flinch away, like he used to. A testament to their growing familiarity. Instead, his head fell onto the pillow, next to hers, and he sighed into her hair. Sandor distractedly ran his hands over her back. Side by side now, and in the dark, she imagined she was looking into his eyes.

The sound of the Queen’s sniffling eventually subsided, and then it was just Sansa and Sandor, lying on the cot.
“Sandor,” she whispered, when she was certain the Queen was asleep. Then, she paused, weighing her words. She wanted to say something about the Queen’s accusations, but she didn’t know how. “It was not a game to me.”

“I know,” he said, close to her ear, “It was not a game to me, either.”

Sansa closed her eyes and willed herself to fall asleep. It took her several tries, but after a while, she was lulled to sleep by Sandor’s soft snores.
Before heading off for battle, Sandor makes a bizarre request of Sansa.

Sandor didn’t know how many days had passed. The small window that tunneled down into their prison cell barely allowed any light, and the pair wheedled the time away. There was naught much else to do other than sleep, eat, wait, pray (on Sansa’s part), or whisper through the bars to the Lady Knight (also, Sansa).

He had been taken out twice to practice with a new sword.

The first day, Sandor was only given a moment to marvel at the fine steel the High Septon had crafted for the occasion: a bright longsword with seven encrusted jewels on its hilt. The steel glittered prettily in the sun and rang sweetly as he cleaved the air. Sandor wondered what lord this sword belonged to, before the High Sparrow stole it. Before he could inquire about the sword’s origins, he was suddenly faced with a line of the Warrior’s Sons.

Sandor recognized a few faces from his past. Lancel Lannister was first to volunteer for a beating, and he was surprised to discover that the weakling he remembered had developed a man’s strength. They sparred back and forth for a while, trading casual blows and loosening their arms. Sandor took the chance to familiarize himself with his new weapon. It was really too pretty for a man like him.

Up next, Ser Percin, who rode with King Renly during the War of the Five Kings. Percin was tall and skinny. A fast competitor who had Sandor leaping and ducking away from a long spear. Sandor eventually managed to sweep Ser Percin's feet after a parry, effectively knocking his opponent to the ground, but only after he was seriously winded.

The day wore on, and Sandor was dealt challenger after challenger. Each stronger than the last. It was glorious to hold a real blade again. Each step shifted into the next, and the Hound found his rhythm in the sweat and dirt of the training field. Block, parry, strike, parry, duck, turn, attack. For the first time since their arrival at King's Landing, Sandor began to have faith in the strength of his own body again.

Sweat blurred his vision, and he felt himself panting heavily on the field. The Warrior’s Sons never ceased. In fact, each seemed to come back thrice, with wide grins and dangling silver stars round their necks. Finally, when no more came, he was given a brief respite.

After quenching his thirst with a water skin. Sandor returned to the yard to face a new opponent. This one looked no less deadly than the rest, except for the fine steel armor he wore.

“Theodan Wells,” said the man.

Sandor recognized the name. This was the commander of the Warrior's Sons. According to Elder Brother, he was one of the first to offer his sword to the High Septon.
“Commander.”

The knight raised his sword and nothing more was said. The two fought long and hard. The Commander was scarcely intimidated by his size and thus, fell for none of the Hound’s usual tricks. Instead, he danced on his toes, circling his enemy, picking at weaknesses and testing his strength. Sandor grew weary of the dance before long, and then the two fought in earnest. Blow for blow.

It ended with Theodan Wells in the dirt.

“Well fought, Clegane.”

Sandor lifted his sword point from the man’s throat. The Commander rose to his feet and picked up his discarded weapon. “Though I fear it will not be enough to smite the monster you will face.”

“Any suggestions then?”

“Learn magic, or fight harder.”

That ended Sandor’s first day of training. When he tried to leave the dirt arena, he was stopped by a circus of cloaked brothers, who asked for the Champion’s Sword once again. The High Septon stood chiefly among them, and with an blank, unmoving stare, gestured for Sandor to be bound and gagged once more. In such a state, Sandor was led back into the dungeons, and deposited on the stone floor in front of his worried wife.

*Learn magic, or fight harder.*

Those grim words echoed in his sleep at night. In their cot, the little bird clutched him, as if afraid he would disappear suddenly. The thought made his heart ache in a way that he was unfamiliar with, and he held her tighter until the feeling passed. Time passed in an anxious manner. The next day he was taken to the dirt arena once more, and the day's events repeated themselves. Only this time, he was given more time between sparring sessions to drink and rest. There was never any wine, of course, but he was free to stare at the sky and pray to the Gods (as he was sure they wanted him to).

The next day came too soon.

Sandor woke with a knot in his stomach. Red hair obscured his vision and he realized Sansa was laying on top of him. The weight of her body pressed against him, and the smell of her hair, drove him into a moment of distraction. He reminisced about their time on the Quiet Isle. The way she would murmur his name when she first woke in the morning. How stunningly wild her hair looked on windy days. Her humming as she sewed or planted another winter flower outside their door.

His thoughts took a turn for the worse. Will today be our last day together? Will this be the last time she wakes next to me? The last time I feel her, the last time I kiss her, the last time… Instinctively, he wrapped his arms around her thin frame and held her close. A feeling of longing welled from deep within him and he mourned the life he might have had. More days and nights of shared warmth. A home to call their own. A pack of hounds. A little boy.

Sandor mentally shook his head. Gods, he hadn't had those types of thoughts before.

The sound of the dungeon door woke his wife. She blearily groaned and then stilled, as if suddenly remembering their circumstance. Sandor couldn’t resist the urge to run an errant hand through her hair, and pull her back towards him. *We can sleep a little while longer.*

Unfortunately, the moment was not meant to last. The sound of approaching footsteps attracted his attention and soon, a light came into view.
The High Septon appeared.

The leader of the Religion of the Seven was a pious man. Clothed in simple brown monk’s fabric and a silver chair, there was nothing immediately remarkable about him upon first glance. It was only when he spoke, that one could understand his silent genius. The man had a way with words. A fanatical passion for the Gods that could sway both peasants and nobleman alike. He had the ambition (and now, the military) to carve out a place in the history books. Upon ascending to his position, he decided to forgo the large crystal crown of his predecessors, and his bald head shone in the lamplight. Seven septons followed in his footsteps, the Elder Brother among them.

“Cersei Lannister.”

The High Septon’s youthful, yet firm voice seemed to fill the dungeons. Sansa watched raptly from her position on the bed, and Sandor hoped beyond hope that the next name the High Septon spoke was not hers.

“You have been accused of many crimes. Incest. Murder. Conspiracy. Inappropriate relations. You’ve confessed to many, but the Gods demand penance. Today, your trial shall be held and justice will be dealt.


“Sometimes, it is wise to be afraid,” came the High Septon’s short reply.

Sandor heard the cell door open and clang shut. The Little Bird, his wife, tensed at the sound. _Gods, don’t take me from her_, Sandor thought. Footsteps signaled the group’s departure.

“Champion.”

The High Septon had remained. He stood holding a seven-faced lantern at the entrance of their cell. Sandor rose slowly, unwillingly, to his feet. Sansa followed, her hands lingering over his neck and shoulder, as if to prolong the moment between them.

“Follow me.”

He had no choice.

Sansa grasped his arm tightly as the High Septon unlocked their cell door and proceeded down the corridor. They slowly followed. Sandor first, then his Little Bird, her iron grip on his forearm never wavered.

“Seven blessings on you, Hound,” Sandor heard Lady Brienne say from behind her bars.

Sandor met her eyes and nodded. The Lady Knight might have been a great annoyance to him, once, but her loyalty to Lady Catelyn and Sansa was admirable.

“And you, Lady Brienne,” Sansa said softly. “We will meet again.”

“It is a promise.”

Sandor didn’t think either ladies could make such a promise, but if it gave Sansa peace of mind, he didn’t care.

Up, up, up they trailed after the High Septon. The stairway was narrow, and Sandor and Sansa could
not longer walk side-by-side. Their entwined hands hung stretched between them, neither willing to abandon their hold.

Sandor couldn’t bring himself to let go of her hand. Oh, he tried to loosen his grip, but his hand refused to cooperate with his mind. In his heart, he knew he could not cling to the image of Sansa for much longer. His lady, his wife. Soon, he would be suited with armor, and handed his sword. Within the hour, he might be fighting for his life in the arena. Sansa was a potentially fatal distraction, and if he thought of her, if he glanced backwards at just the right moment… it might spell his end.

What would happen if he couldn’t let go? Sandor sighed internally and pushed away the heavy, thick emotion he was experiencing, burying it deep within his heart. Now was not the time.

At the end of the stairwell they were met by Theodan Wells. He ushered them through the Hall of Lanterns and out into the sunlight. Sandor blinked rapidly, the burst of light burning his eyes. It had been an entire day since he’d last trained, and thus, an entire day since he’d seen the sun. A cold wind whipped around his body, chilling him to the core.

Sansa dropped the hand by his side, in favor of covering her eyes.

“The sun!” she said, tears streaming down her face. “It feels as if it's blinding me!”

“My lady,” Theodan offered her a roughspun, brown cloak. Sansa blearily reached out a hand in the wrong direction and Sandor might have laughed if they were in any other situation.

_Three days since she’s seen the sunlight._ A wave of anger washed over him at the thought of his wife, his Sansa, locked in a cell. _Good_, he thought to himself, _harness that anger. The Hound will need it to survive._

Seeing her obvious distress, Sandor took the proffered fabric and flung it around her frame, swiftly pulling up the hood.

“Better?” he asked, once the hood was in place.

“Yes,” she breathed shakily, “lead me?”

“Always.”

Instead of taking her hand, Sandor snaked an arm around her and drew her to his side. They walked side-by-side down the steps of the Great Sept and into the square. Unlike their arrival in King’s Landing, the square surrounding the statue of Baelor the Blessed was completely abandoned. In the distance, Sandor could see armed guards patrolling in front of the gates, and a large iron gate had been constructed to block the street.


Sandor took his Little Bird by the waist and hoisted her onto the back. Without pausing, he leapt into the wagon and took his seat next to Sansa.

“Wells,” he called at the knight’s retreated back. “Why with haste?”

“The trial will begin within the hour, Lord Hound,” he called in turn, raising himself onto the back of a white stallion, “remember your magic!”

With that, the curtain on the back of the wagon fell into place and they started forward. Sansa was gasping when she lowered the hood to her cloak.
“How’re your eyes, San?”

He tried to resist, he really did, but his hand reached over of it’s own accord, and tucked a stray red hair behind her ear. She turned to him, squinty eyes and flushed, and he memorized every detail of her beautiful features.

“Alright, better now, with time,” she ran a frazzled hand over her face. “Where do you think they’re taking us? An hour, did he say? A fucking hour? That’s how much time they’ve given you to prepare? It’s as if the Septon doesn’t give two wits about the outcome of this trial. Seven hells, I can hardly think straight. Sandor? Sandor, how are your eyes? Are they the same as mine? You need to see—”

“Fine, fine,” he pulled her close to quiet the rambling. Sansa tended to chirp incessantly when she was nervous. A quality that used to annoy him in the Red Keep, now endeared her to him even more. “And if they’ve given us an hour, they’ve given us an hour. There’s nothing we can do now but use it to our best interests.”

The wagon picked up speed and Sandor heard the swing of iron gates as they jostled through the streets. Seated in the covered wagon, he could not see the city, but he could hear the sounds of the market. It was strangely quiet. The quiet before the storm, he thought. There should be more noise. More shouts, more screams, more babies crying and more children laughing. Where are the crowds?

Probably hiding, his intuition told him. Whatever way this battle goes, it might not bode well for the common people. If the Lannister Queen remained in power, what would she do out of revenge? Would she wreak havoc on the city? Cersei was not known for her compassion on the poor, and already allowed millions to starve during her reign. Conversely, if Ser Robert Strong was defeated, and the Queen ousted, a change of power might occur. Tommen was too young to assume the role of the King, and a thousand greedy eyes were fixed on the iron throne. The city might be gripped by riots tonight.

“Where do you think they are taking us?”

“Wherever the fight is being held.”

Sandor pushed the fabric covering away and risked a glance outside.

The fishmarket, a normally boisterous and crowded place, was eerily subdued. Although people still milled around, it was slow and the streets were sparse. Uncertainty and tension hung thick in the air. A lad on the street made eye contact and scurried away from the wagon, calling for his mother. Sandor scowled and lowered the thin covering.

“They might be taking us to the tourney grounds,” he mused out loud.

The idea appealed to him. In the Red Keep, the trial would only be seen by as many lords and ladies as the arena could hold. Out in the open, the tourney fields could fit thousands. A greater chance of escape, should the trial go wrong and Sansa needed to flee--

Sandor shook his head, he would not think of that anymore than he already had.

The road became rough, transitioning from brick to cobblestone, and Sandor wondered if they had crossed beneath the King’s Gate. He heard shouts and a muffled conversation, followed by the creak of hinges.

The murmur of the crowd reached his ears and grew in intensity as they continued down the road.
The wagon pitched back and forth, and stopped abruptly. The urge to glance outside returned, but he resisted. Suppose he lifted the fabric, and some knight caught a glimpse of Sansa? How many people already knew of her presence in the city? She needed to stay anonymous. Safe and unknown.

Sansa gripped him tightly as they came to a full stop. Quickly, he threw the hood over her face and tucked her hair beneath her cloak.

"Don’t speak to anyone," he whispered harshly, more harshly than he intended, “Don’t look up. Don’t let anyone know you’re here.”

“Sandor--” she started but didn’t finish as the back cover was removed. Theodan Wells and his stallion stood in waiting, and he gestured for them to hurry. Sandor jumped off the wagon and taking Sansa by the waist, helped her down onto the ground. Together, they were ushered into a large silver tent, with the sigil of the Seven painted on it’s front flap.

Sandor lifted the flap for Sansa and quickly followed after the knight, hoping that none saw her face. Of course, in his haste to hide Sansa from view, he hadn’t bothered to cover his own face.

Distantly, he heard some shouts. “The Hound! The Hound! The Hound is the Seven’s Champion!” Shouts of disbelief, and some of unhappiness, reached his ears. He ground his teeth in irritation at his own stupidity.

Inside the tent, a small hearth was burning, and the Elder Brother greeted them with open arms.

“Sandor," he said, “Lady Sansa. I expected you some time ago.”

“We’ve only just arrived,” Sansa wrung her hands nervously and embraced the Elder Brother like a father. “When did you get here?”

“Hours ago,” the Elder Brother furrowed his brow and turned to Sandor, looking concerned. “The High Septon did not release you?”

“The Champion must prepare for combat,” Ser Theodan interjected. “Your assistance is no longer needed, Elder Brother of the Quiet Isle.”

Sansa held onto the Elder Brother’s arm in alarm, pleading with her eyes for the monk to stay. Sandor knew what she was thinking, because he was thinking it too. Here is the man who gave us shelter. Here is the man who married us. Sandor closed his eyes in frustration and turned to the commander.

“I need him,” Sandor stepped between the knight and the older man, “the Elder Brother was once a military man. In the absence of a squire, he will fit my armor.”

A tense moment followed where both Sandor and Wells refused to back down. Wells eventually shifted his eyes to the Elder Brother and nodded mutely. Turning on his heel, he was gone with a flourish of his rainbow colored cloak. Sandor glared at the empty space he once occupied, his age-old hatred for knights simmered.

“We haven’t much time.”

The Elder Brother armored him with surprising speed, fastening each vambrace or plate with a skill that bespoke his many years of experience. Sandor was momentarily stunned when he saw the beauty of each steel and leather piece. Only the Kingsguard ever wore such bright armor. The metal was silver, with white-gold inlaid stars racing across each border. The sigil of the seven was proudly displayed on his chest, loudly proclaiming his loyalty for the whole world to see.
Sandor couldn’t help but feel unworthy of its unblemished grace.

_This armor was made for a Champion of the Faith, not an skeptic, and certainly not a dog._

Sansa helped in whatever way she could. She handed the Elder Brother whatever piece he called for, or sometimes tightened the spare leather strap. She fluttered about nervously, constantly touching his arm, or leg, or stroking his back. Sandor shuddered whenever she did so and wished she would stop, but he didn’t have the heart to turn away her affections. Not yet.

Once he was fully suited, the Elder Brother gestured for him to stand and plucked a large longsword from it’s stand across the tent. Sandor recognized the sword from his time practicing with the Warrior Son’s. The sword with the seven jewels in it’s hilt. The Elder Brother presented it to him, hilt first, and Sandor hefted it back and forth between his hands before decided to draw it and observe the edge.

Sansa gasped when the blade was finally revealed. Her eyes wide with wonder. The silver steel seemed to glitter with a mystical power as Sandor beheld his weapon.

“That is a kingly weapon,” she breathed. The Elder Brother nodded in agreement.

Sandor swung it through the air, feeling the strength of his arms with satisfaction. Perhaps... perhaps he stood a chance against this beast.

“Do not hesitate,” the Elder Brother stepped forward and looked him in the eye. Sandor always liked that quality in him. Of all the men Sandor had known, the Elder Brother never once flinched away from his burned face. “Do not give in to hubris, like the Viper before you. Even if the victory is messy. Take whatever opportunity you have.”

Sandor could not find the words, so he nodded gravely.

“And you, my dear,” the Elder Brother turned to Sansa, magically producing a long object in his hands that was hidden within his robes.

Sansa gasped in recognition. “My sword!”

Sandor gaped in disbelief. The Elder Brother held the tiny shortsword she once used to spar with him on the Quiet Isle. It’s blackened edges were dull and unimpressive, and it was more the size of a knife than a sword, but Sansa was deeply fond to the dragonbone blade. He assumed the blade had been lost when they were taken prisoner by the High Septon.

Sansa took the weapon reverently and held it to her heart, uttering her thanks to the Elder Brother. Then, in a flash, she was embracing the old monk and crying her gratitude.

“Oh, I’ll miss you, Elder Brother. I’ll always remember you.”

Why did it sound like she was saying goodbye? Sandor swallowed heavily and turned his gaze to the ground, suddenly feeling as if he were intruding on an intimate moment. Sansa’s words from the other night came back to him. _I think I will die with you. Right there, in the arena. I don’t think I could go on._

He felt a knife twisting in his heart and he looked up in time to see Sansa let go.

“Sandor.”

“Elder Brother.”
The two men paused and surveyed one another. Sandor took a moment to observe his unexpected ally. Elder Brother’s square face was set in determination, but beneath the steel of his silver eyes, Sandor could see wrinkles and the signs of many sleepless nights.

“If I ever have any sons,” Sandor heard himself speaking, “I’ll send them to dig graves for you.”

“Oh,” the Elder Brother smiled, “I think I would like that.”

Sandor could think of nothing more to say. The Elder Brother seemed to understand his need for a quick goodbye. Without another word, he clasped the armor of Sandor’s shoulder and slowly left the tent, stopping once to allow Sansa to kiss his cheek and thank him once more. Opening the tent flap, a rush of cold wind entered the tent, sending a shiver down Sandor’s spin.

That’s the last time I’ll see that man, Sandor knew it in his heart.

Turning to Sansa, he was surprised when she flung herself into his arms. He fell onto the divan, barely managing to catch her in his arms.

“Gods, gods, Sandor, I’m nervous,” Sansa said once the Elder Brother was gone. “I can hardly breathe.”

Sansa looked up at him and he could see tears swimming in her eyes. Without a second thought, he pushed the red hair away from her face and stroked the curve of her jaw lovingly.

“Remember why we’re here,” he said. “Remember all the wrong. The Injustice. The horrors they inflicted on you. On me.”

“I don’t care anymore,” she confessed.

Sandor froze. What did she say? Shock registered throughout his body, and he struggled to formulate a thought. He opened his mouth to speak but was cut off.

“I hate them. Oh, how I hate them, Sandor. But I would choose you. I would choose you over any justice, any day. I would choose you over my brothers, and my sister, and my mother and father. Gods curse me, but I would.”

Sandor heartbeat wildly in his chest. He didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. Sansa’s blue eyes stared pleadingly up at him, begging him to understand her confession and return the gesture. But how? Sandor felt at a loss. What could he say in this instance.

“Sansa…” he gathered her in his arms and leaned back. The armor must have been terribly uncomfortable, but his perfect wife didn’t seem to notice, or care about the cold steel between them.

“I would also choose you. I have chosen you, on the night we escaped King’s Landing.”

Sansa’s hand rose to stroke his jaw and the hair growing there. Sandor closed his eyes at the sensations she could so easily invoke. It was strange, how earlier he wanted nothing more than for her to disappear, so he could focus on the trial, and now, he could not think of anything besides Sansa. Sansa, and her red hair. Sansa, and her sweet words.

“But I want a better life for us,” he choked out, his voice sounded hoarse and broke on the word “us”. “I don’t want to run anymore, and I don’t want to be hunted. As long as she’s alive, we will never be safe, San. You deserve better than I.”

Sansa was shaking her head, “No, no. Can’t you see? You deserve better than me.”
Sandor didn’t even think to argue with such a ludicrous statement. Sansa was out of her mind if she truly believed that.

“No, truly,” she said emphatically, “you don’t understand. I’ve caused us so much strife, I betrayed my father. I started this war. I am the reason we fled the Red Keep. I am the reason we went into hiding. I wanted to get married. I can’t help but think…”

Sandor stared at her, open mouthed. Where were all these confessions coming from?

“... if you had loved another woman. You might be happier.”

Sandor stared at her incredulously. Tears streaked her pale cheeks. Sansa was no longer looking at him and instead buried her head in the crook of his neck, unable to meet his gaze.

“Sansa, that’s madness,” he took her chin in his hand and forced her gaze upward. “Pure madness. I was lost without you. A husk of a man. I felt nothing. Loved nothing. You made me feel again. You’ve given me something to fight for.”

Sansa’s blue eyes filled with tears again and she looked away.

“No,” he demanded and took her chin once more. He had not done this in a year. It brought back memories of the time in the Red Keep, when she first looked away from him after the Hand’s Tourney. How many days had passed since then? How many lifetimes?

“Listen to me. You are blameless in all this. Can’t you see?”

Impulsively, he kissed her then, as he wanted to months ago, when they lived in the Red Keep. He claimed her mouth forcefully, pouring all his love, and anger, and confusion into that kiss. Sansa gasped against his mouth. Her arms snaked around his neck and she clung to him. His heart leapt into his throat, and he fought against the wave of an unknown emotion that resembled the love he felt for Sansa, only stronger and more intense. As if every emotion in the last several months was thrown against him at once.

Somehow, their positions switched, and when Sandor broke away, he was leaning over her trembling form.

“I fought for them, San. I dedicated each bloody swing to their name, and I wish I could undo it. I see now. I let them drag me deeper into darkness. I want to be free from this anger. I never want to look back.”

“I want to be free from them, Sansa,” he concluded "forever.”

Sansa closed her eyes. He watched her breathing slow and deepen, as if calming herself. When she opened her eyes, Sandor couldn’t say why or how, but something had changed between them. Sansa looked at him with an expression akin to awe.

“Fight for me,” she whispered. “Fight for us. One last time.”

Sandor felt a weight lift off his shoulders. The world seemed simpler now. All he had to do was fight for Sansa. The rightness of it all settled in his soul, and he sighed, leaning down to rest his forehead against hers. The noses brushed and she smiled tremulously. Instead of the tears he was expecting, Sansa pulled him close and placed featherlight kisses on his jaw, his nose, the length of his scar, and finally, his mouth.

“Sansa,” he muttered. The only word he could manage, and when he opened his eyes, all he saw
was red hair.

“One last time.”

In that moment both parties could sense the other's desperation. Sansa continued her soft kisses as Sandor abandoned several pieces of armor in favor of her warm flesh. Meanwhile, the kiss they shared never broke. He ran his hands up her calves, her thighs, and her skirt, quickly disposing of her small clothes and pulling her on top of him. Sansa relaxed into his embrace, pulling up her skirts and settling on top of him.

She wasn’t quite ready for him. Sandor almost pulled away but she insisted. “No,” she said and broke away from the kiss. She placed his large hands on her waist and he paused, uncertain.

Those few, silent seconds of pleasure were possibly the most agonizing of his life. He was afraid to move, afraid to breath. Joined at the hip, he wished he’d die right here. What if I’ve been living in one of the Seven Heavens with Sansa, and didn’t even know it?

When she finally lifted herself and settled back down, Sandor bit back a groan. His eyes were transfixed on her lips, which were making his favorite sounds in the world. All too aware of the thin fabric of the surrounding tent, Sandor quickly covered her mouth with his, tasting the sweetness within. The pace she set was slow, slower than ever before, but Sandor couldn’t find it within himself to object. Neither wanted this moment to end.

All too soon, Sandor felt her stroking a familiar fire - the sight of her red, slightly tangled hair falling in a curtain around them, the feel of her rising and falling, the smell of roses and pine - it drove him to the brink too quickly. Suddenly, he was clenched and crying her name. Hands tangled in his hair, she stilled and the moment was over.

Sandor was certain the joining wasn’t as enjoyable for her, but she collapsed against him anyway and curled against his chest, murmuring her love and adoration. “Sandor,” she said. He loved it when she said his name. Taking a deep breath, he inhaled her scent one last time and smiled.

They were interrupted by loud trumpets.

Sansa jumped against his skin and tensed. “No,” she whispered. “Not yet.”

Sandor sat up straight and felt the lethargy, and the lingering pleasure, leave his veins. Sansa slowly untangled herself from his arms and together, they silently replaced whatever armor they’d abandoned on the floor. He watched her shaking hands adjust the straps of his armor.

When it was done, Sandor reached for her hands and placed two final kisses on the insides of her wrists. She sighed and closed her eyes.

“Wait,” she abruptly turned and dove for something on the floor.

Standing, she fastened the dragonbone blade onto his belt.

“It couldn’t hurt,” she mumbled to herself and stepping back, she surveyed him one last time.

The trumpets sounded again, this time louder. The fanfare was greeting with a roar from the nearby crowd. Heralds began to shout over the din and Sandor wondered just how many people had gathered to watch the trial of the Queen.

Theodan Wells burst unceremoniously into their tent, followed by two Warrior’s Sons.
“Champion, I will lead you to the grounds.”

Sandor nodded and stepped away from his wife. It was the most painful separation of his life. Worse than when he was forced to say goodbye to his dying mother. Worse than when he first left home. Sandor felt his heart shredding in two as he moved to follow the knights.

Sansa’s hand found his and he froze. Unable to move.

“Is it my choice?” she asked.

*I think I will die with you. Right there, in the arena. I don’t think I could go on.* The words echoed in the chambers of his mind.

“Yes,” he said, and unable to bear the thought any longer, he turned to leave.

Theodan gestured for him to follow and Sandor fell into step behind the three rainbow cloaks. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him, and he paused before the exit of the tent. The men all stopped outside the tent, and he was left holding the fabric open. A cold breeze kissed his face. The words stuck on the roof of his mouth, and he turned to her.

*She’s beautiful,* was the first thought that came to mind.

Sansa stood, red hair streaming wildly about her shoulders, flushed and wide-eyed, afraid to move. It was quite possibly, the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. The question died on his lips.

“What is it?” she asked softly, after a moment of long hesitation.

“If I die… might I have one last, dying wish?”

Seemingly gripped by the same emotion as he, she could only nod. Staring into her blue eyes, Sandor asked for the one thing that might seal both her fate and his. The one thing he feared most, and the one thing that might ensure she didn’t take her own life the following day.

“Don’t drink the tea.”

Chapter End Notes

I finally posted! Yes! Success! Sometimes I feel like I can't post until I rewrite it five times and that just drives me crazy (and also, c'mon, it's fanfic, I gotta lighten up!).

Anyway, off to dally around with the next chapter! Drop a line if you're feeling adventurous enough to post online.
The Fight

Chapter Summary

Sandor fights Qyburn's monster during Cersei's trial.

Sandor stepped into the arena, temporarily blinded by the rising sun and a hush fell over the crowd.

It was a cold, almost winter, morning in King’s Landing. Frost from the night before still clung to the grass around the tents. A shiver worked it’s way down his spine as the wind kissed his face. Sandor took a moment to discretely survey the environment.

On his right, a large structure had been erected. Familiar with the tourney layout from his youth, Sandor recognized the posh elegance of the royal stands. Flapping in the wind, the red and gold lion of Lannister danced above every head. Look at me, it seemed to say. Hear Me Roar.

Strange, how the lion used to symbolize such hope for him. Hope for a better lord. An escape from home. A more noble life. And now, that same image drew forth such anger and resentment.

Tommen sat at the apex of the wooden structure. A podium had been built and his small, boyish frame could be seen perched on the edge of his temporary throne. Next to him, the distinctly oafish figure of Lord Tyrell, the Hand of the King, could be seen lounging with a cup of wine. Other faces he recognized from his days as Joffrey’s Hound loitered around patiently for the trial to begin. Some, he didn’t recognize, and others he wished he could forget. A few faces he searched for, but could not find.

Where is the scoundrel, Baelish? And Lord Varys, the man who sprung them from this prison? Sandor thought with dismay.

Their absences were unsettling. Baelish, who lusted insatiably for Sansa, and Varys, whom Sandor owed a life debt. The Spider would one day be cashing in that debt. Of that, he had no doubt but it was his ignorance, that disturbed him the most and gave him reason to be suspicious. The Quiet Isle was beautifully peaceful, but isolated. The War of the Five King’s came and passed with nary a word until Lady Brienne. What other things occurred during those long months? Besides Joffrey’s fortuitous death?

Pushing away his anxiety Sandor’s eyes swept over the rest of the field. To his left, and surrounding the circular, wooden arena, a large crowd had gathered by the High Sparrow’s bidding. The smallfolk stood in their workclothes and beaten sandals, waving flags of blue and silver for the Faith, and green and gold for House Tyrell. Nary a red and gold lion was to be seen.

At least that hasn’t changed. King’s Landing still hates Cersei as much as she hates them.

Steeling himself, Sandor took a few steps forward and into the direct sunlight. The silence grew more pronounced and the empty field around him seemed desolate. Not even the flowers dared to grow here. More and more of the crowd began to notice his presence and Sandor felt stares on the burnt side of his face, which was underneath, but not quite hidden by his visor.

The opposite end of the arena remained empty. The sand and dust laid there that morning, swirling in
the wind.

Where is Gregor?

Sandor felt his heart dance. His brother’s absence alarmed him more than he’d care to admit. He gripped the hilt of his sword tightly and took a few experimental swings. Unfortunately, the action drew gasps from the nearby onlookers, as the sword’s unearthly glow attracted unwanted attention.

Sandor scowled at no one. *I must be such a sight. Silver armor. Silver sword.*

*And a darkened heart,* the Hound snarled.

Just as he began to lose his patience, and the stares of the commonfolk began to irk him, the sound of a squeaking wheelhouse drew everyone’s attention.

The approaching wagon was not Cersei’s usual gaudy atrocity. Sandor scoffed to himself, remembering the golden carriage she would seclude herself in, during Robert’s excursions. No, this was a rustic thing, a merchant’s cart at best, transformed into a prisoner’s cage. It’s simple wooden structure and barred windows concealed the Queen from view, but no one could mistake the Lady’s golden hair when she emerged.

Despite her stay in the High Septon’s dungeons, Cersei managed to descend the steps regally to the dirt ground, her head held high and lofty. A Holy Knight escorted her up the platform’s wooden steps and they halted before the King. The High Septon, barely distinguishable from any other man in his brown robe and silver belt, trailed after the pair silently. If not for his uniquely unpleasant experience with the man, Sandor might not have known him from any other brother in the crowd. *What a mummer’s trick.*

“Your Grace!”

A hush fell over the whispering crowd. If it was silent before, the world was still now. Lord Tyrell rose from his seat. Tommen leaned forward and nodded his kingly head. Sandor felt a twinge of some feeling for the small lad, who always treated him with cordial respect. Tommen, who loved to play with dolls and kittens. There were days in the past when he wished he was the little lad’s sworn shield, instead of his damned brother. Sandor always felt a certain camaraderie for the younger prince, who was also saddled with a horrendous brother against his will. Joffrey’d torment the lad mercilessly, reminding Sandor of his own experience as a youth.

“Noble Lords,” the Hand’s address wrenched Sandor from his own reminiscing, “Esteemed Ladies.”

Tyrell paused for emphasis. The Lord Hand’s voice traveled over the heads of a few hundred, and further back in the crowd Sandor could see men on boxes, or men standing on other men’s shoulders, further heralding the Hand’s words.

“We have gathered here today to witness the Trial of Cersei Lannister, daughter of Tywin Lannister. Who has been accused of many grave crimes. And now, I will hand the proceedings over to the Faith, who will conduct this trial with the grace of the Gods.”

And with that, Lord Mace Tyrell sat down promptly. The crowd jeered in response. Sandor blinked in surprise and winced beneath the visor of his silver helmet. *Cersei is a fool,* he thought, not for the first time in his life. *The last time the Faith was militarized, it took the flames of the Black Dread and a seven year war to topple that regime. Then again, the Lady of Lannister never truly cared for history, unless it served her vanity.*

The High Septon stood and silence reigned once more.
“Cersei Lannister.”

Despite being of average height, and wearing nothing but simple brown robes, the High Sparrow managed to command all the souls of King’s Landing with a single utterance. His face was cowled, half hidden in shadow, giving him a mystical air. There was something powerful in the way he spoke. Something immovable about his nature. Sandor’s gaze was riveted on the single, black-brown eye visible beneath his hood. The man’s unwavering gaze on the horizon gave Sandor the impression that it would take dragons once more, to break his hold over these people.

Sandor glared from beneath his helm at the High Septon, the man who sent for a champion. Who had he sworn his service to? The Sparrow was certainly not a man convinced by cunning words, or even a maiden’s tears. No, this was an immovable rock. It reminded Sandor of his first intimidating meeting with Lord Tywin, all those years ago.

“You have been accused of adultery, conspiracy, treason and the most abominable crime: Incest,” the High Septon’s voice carried across the crowd, and even further as his orators mimicked his words, “A trial by combat shall determine your innocence... Or your guilt.”

The cries seemed to surround the walls of King’s Landing. The crowd roared. Cries of “murderer”, “witch” and the ever popular “brotherfucker” rose into a cacophony of unholy noise. Sandor felt his sword arm itching. The noise reminded him of the riot from years ago, when Sansa had nearly been stolen from under his nose.

It took all of his willpower not to search for her figure in the stands. He’d instructed the Elder Brother not to leave his wife's side and he’d told her a hundred times to cover her hair and face. Would he even recognize her in the crowd? Sandor shoved all thoughts of Sansa to the side. Now was not the time.

The High Septon rose a single palm upward and - as if waiting for the cue - the line of Warrior’s Sons ringing the arena suddenly straightened. The sounds tapered off into suspenseful nothingness.

“Fighting for the Accused, Ser Robert Strong.”

Silence.

Sandor turned to face his opponent, eyes flitting left and right. No figure appeared. No monstrosity from the Seven Hells. Sandor tapped the hilt of his longsword in anticipation and a huff of anger and disappointment slipped past his lips. Where the hell was Gregor? The High Septon’s hand remained raised in the air, patiently awaiting the arrival of the Queen’s Champion. The man's unconcerned and expectant demeanor was almost mocking.

“Will he not show?”

And suddenly, all semblance of the Queen’s dignity was gone. Sandor watched in rapt fascination as the great Queen Regent flung herself down on her knees. It seemed, faced with her own death, Cersei was just as willing to beg for her life as any other mortal soul. “No, no - no,” she blithered and shook her golden head back and forth, “He will. He will come. Patience. Patien-- QYBURN!”

The outburst earned a sharp stamp from the Holy Knight’s spear butt. Sandor could see her lips thin, as she looked around with watery eyes. Gods be good, will I even need to raise this sword? The thought was enticing, but a false hope, he knew. Gregor never failed to show before, and even in death, he would not miss the opportunity to send Sandor to the Seven Hells for good.

“Qyburn, Qyburn will bring him to me,” Cersei continued, although in a much more submissive
tone. Her hands were clasped together and sent skyward, as if in prayer. Sandor watched with grim satisfaction as the High Septon shook his head, sending Cersei into another wailing fit.

On the pedestal, the presumed figure of Qyburn stepped forward and whispered something in the Queen’s ear.

“If no champion shall step forth the accused may --”

“LOOK!”

Gasps and murmurs rippled across the crowd. Sandor felt an icy chill travel down his spine as he turned to face his opponent. There, stepping into the arena, armored in all white steel, an eight foot monstrosity towered above the heads of the crowd. Beneath the rainbow plume of his visor, Sandor could see only darkness.

Raising his sword arm, thick as a tree trunk, Ser Robert Strong stepped forward. Once. Twice. Thrice. The razor edge of his longsword swung menacingly as the bulwark moved forward with increasing speed, regardless of the Hand’s cries of “Wait! Wait for the horn!”.

Crossing the length of the arena in mere seconds, the dead Gregor brought down his sword to the screams of the crowd.

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Sansa screamed.

She hadn’t meant to scream. She hadn’t meant to react at all. But the sight of that-monster in front of Sandor, swinging wildly. Her heart stopped. The Mountain screeched like a wraith out of a nightmare as Sandor rolled expertly away. Ser Gregor sword whirled, striking the ground again and dodged that blow, backpedaling to the edge of the arena. The crowd roared.

Another inhumane shriek emitted from Ser Robert Strong’s helm. The sound was like acid poured down her ears. Sansa closed her eyes in agony. Can I watch? A wave of nausea worked its way to her throat and she seriously wondered if she could stomach standing in the audience. Could I bear to see him die?

“Lady Sansa?”

Sansa exhaled and opened her eyes to see the heart shaped face of Margaery Tyrell peering down at her. Lovely brown curls wreathed the other girl’s face, like a dark halo. Sansa stared unblinking for a moment, certain she’d imagined the apparition. The Elder brother gripped her hand tightly and Sansa realized she’d been standing in a stupefied silence while the other lady was waiting for her response.

Oh Gods, Margaery. I’d forgotten about Margaery. Sansa felt herself growing faint. She can’t recognize me. She can’t. She’ll report me to her father, the Hand, or to her new Lannister King, Tommen.

“You must have me mistaken--”

“I am not mistaken, Lady Sansa,” Margaery’s voice was like iron, Sansa saw the other woman’s cheeks flush with repressed anger, “We thought you were dead.”

Gods, how did Margaery find me here? Sansa pulled the cowl tighter around her face. Back when she believed Sandor to be dead, she remembered the Tyrell’s plotting to marry her to their crippled lord, Willas. The Tyrell family must have viewed her disappearance as an insult. Sansa looked left
and right. Thankfully, the large crowd's cries diminished the sound of Margaery and Sansa's conversation, and no one spared them any attention. Sansa was surrounded by three brothers and a septon, and it didn't seem Margaery had brought anyone of consequence with her, except for a few of her cousins, who were watching the fight intently, oblivious to the fugitive in their midst.

Sansa’s hand shook lightly with repressed emotion as she tightened her cowl once more. Margaery still stood in front of her and Sansa wanted to scream at the lady. *Leave me alone, damn you!* 

Inside the arena, Sandor had drawn his sword. Sansa felt her heart leap into her chest as Sandor and the Mountain met each other, blow for blow. The advantage was clearly on the Mountain. Heavier and taller, Ser Robert hammered downward against his smaller opponent. Sandor’s steps took him backward as he avoided being knocked down by the other man’s strength.

“I had heard you escaped with the Hound,” Margaery continued, perhaps after realizing Sansa would not further the conversation, “I didn’t believe it at first. Him, I believed to be dead. And you… I never thought you would succumb to the man’s… rougher character,” Margaery wrinkled her nose and Sansa resisted the urge to shove her aside. “It seems the rumors were correct.”

Sansa saw Sandor parry the Mountain’s last blow and strike his opponents arm. Her eyes widened at the sight and her breath caught in her throat. The crowd cheered but the cut should have drawn blood. It was under the arm and sliced through chainmail, Sansa could see several rings hanging loose, but there was no blood. There was no blood.

No blood. A horror crept into her heart. The Mountain didn’t even stagger. The creature only shrieked once more and extended it’s arms wide open as an invitation to strike. Dread snaked it’s way into her heart and she couldn’t decide whether she wanted to scream, or strike Margaery, or run away. All she could do was watch in mute horror.

“I thought Ser Robert Strong was a mute?” Margaery began again. “But perhaps, not all rumors are correct?”

Sandor was on steady feet again, circling his enemy. Sansa felt her heart pounding against her ribs, as the beast slowly circled her champion in turn. The crowd began to boo at the standstill, but the monster was cocking its head, much like an animal evaluating it’s prey.

Robert Strong was clearly frustrated at the speed of its new opponent. *Yes, Sansa thought, perhaps he can outrun him, tire him out. Then strike when the moment is right.*

“Sansa!”

“GODS, Margaery!” Sansa yanked herself away from the Tyrell Rose’s grasp in time to see Qyburn’s beast attack. This time their swords met. Sandor parried and ducked underneath the Monster’s arm, landing another strike on it’s leg. The crowd cheered, but once again, but the Mountain did not falter. Sansa screamed in horror as the monster swung it's gauntleted hand, sending her non-knight to the ground once more.

“Sansa!” Margaery attempted once more, “Listen to me, girl, do you know what I’m asking you?”

Sandor was on his feet again, and spinning away from the Mountain’s blows. The crowd cheered and Sansa took a shaky breath, willing her heart to be still. The adversaries continued to circle one another, neither willing to strike first.

"Do you understand?!"

“Margaery!” Sansa grabbed the girls wrist once more and turned to face her. In that moment, Sansa
saw her. Truly saw her for the first time. The heart shaped face that Sansa once envied, was tired, her luscious brown locks strewn carelessly in the wind. Margaery looked older, wary. More cautious than Sansa remembered. Time with Joffrey would do that to any lady. Sansa remembered her warning to Lady Margaery, the day that the Queen of Thorns asked her to tea. He is a monster.

Sansa met her eye, “I am with him willingly.”

Margaery blinked, and then it seemed to Sansa as if some imaginary wall of worry crumbled in her mind. “Well, then. Let us watch and hope for the end of this nightmare.”

Sansa released her iron grip on the other lady’s arm and turned back to the arena. Sandor and the monster were circling each other once more. To her disgust and excitement, it seemed as if the wound on the Mountain’s leg did indeed draw blood. Only, it wasn’t blood Sansa had ever seen before. Black puss dribbled onto the sand’s floor, where it bubbled and emitted a foul odor. Sansa covered her nose and gagged. Men and women at the edge of the wooden pavilion covered their noses with shirts and scarves.

“The stench from that creature,” the Elder Brother finally spoke. “It is not human.”

Sansa gripped the railing as “Ser Robert Strong” rallied for another attack. The smell was awful from here, but she couldn’t imagine what Sandor must be experiencing, fighting in the midst of all that black ooze.

Distantly, she heard Margaery and her handmaidens begin a soft prayer dedicated to the Warrior. The Mountain roared and lifted it’s longsword toward Sandor’s defiant form. It leapt forward, hacking at the air. Sandor parried the blow but lost his footing on the black sludge that had formed in the sand. For Sansa, it seemed as if time had slowed down. The horror of the moment cruelly prolonging every second as the monster cut into her husband’s thigh.

Sansa heard the scream of pain distantly. It echoed and echoed in the dark recesses of her mind.

“No,” she breathed, even as she watched his arm jerk as he struggled to deflect another of his dead brother’s blows. The Champion’s Sword went flying out of Sandor’s hand. It clattered to a stop several feet away. The ethereal light of the sword faded, leaving behind simple, steel sword.

“NO!” Sansa flew from the stands. She had to get to him. She had to be there as he died. She couldn’t leave him to die alone, in the arena, surrounded by strangers and enemies and the bloody Lannisters.

Sansa heard the Monster screeching. Out of the corner of her eye she could see it raising an arm in victory, a foot on Sandor’s stunned body. Sansa flew down the wooden steps of the stands, pushing through the sea of bodies. A panic settled into her throat and she was gasping. There’s no time. No time to reach him.

The monster lifted it’s mighty claw.

“SANDOR!” she screamed as she reached the sandy entrance to the arena.

A cloth covered hand from the shadows clamped around her mouth. Sansa screamed once more as a noxious smelling fume filled her mouth and nostrils. The arena was spinning, spinning, spinning and her vision blurred, mashing together the images of sand, the sky, the stands... The world turned upside down.

The sound of the crowd’s collective gasp and the monster’s unholy shriek never reached her ears. The world was dark when Sansa’s body was dragged away.
Chapter Summary

Sansa and Sandor wake up after Cersei's trial.

Sansa woke to the sound of a creaking wagon and the feeling of being swayed side to side. A musty, unrecognizable smell wafted up into her nostrils. The ground - no, not the ground - the hard surface beneath her was moving, but it was not the familiar gait of Sugar, her brown mare. It was the rambling gait of a cart… or a carriage, she wasn’t certain. Coarse wool rubbed against her cheek and Sansa struggled to make sense of her surroundings.

A groan escaped from her lips before she could think. My head is aching... Sansa tried to piece together the day’s events. Where am I? Where is Sandor?

A pressure on her hip attracted her attention, and she lolled her head to stare at the hand there.

“What…?” Sansa croaked, her eyes trying to focus on the blurry surroundings.

“You are safe, my lady,” an oily voice said nearby. “On the path to the Crossroads.”

Sansa recognized the voice. Panic, laced with no small amount of fear, raced through her blood, bringing her to a level of alertness she hadn’t yet experienced. Twisting her head, which throbbed painfully, in a desperate attempt to acknowledge her captor, she could make out the thin, handsome character of Lord Baelish, smiling indulgently at her. Sansa’s eyes widened and she gasped. A bright sun shone behind his figure, illuminating him against the morning sky. In any other circumstance, Sansa might have thought him a God come down to spirit her away. However, she was disillusioned.

Too late, Sansa realized her hands were fastened to the moving vehicle beneath her. A small wooden cart, cushioned by bolts of fabrics and furs. The top was down and open to the elements, allowing a cool breeze to brush against her body. She shivered violently, from either the cold, or the company. Baelish strolled a few feet behind the cart, his hands folded across his front. Green-grey eyes bore into her own.

“What… wer…” Sansa fumbled for words, but for some reason, her tongue refused to cooperate. It felt like there was cotton in her cheeks.

“I understand…” Petyr reached hand forward and patted her hip again.

Mustering all her strength, Sansa flung herself backwards. The cart rocked beneath her, and she halfway off the roll of fabrics she had been situated on. Sansa was righted again gently by Baelish’s hands. Worms crawled over her skin at his touch. Memories of the riot returned, and her eyes searched left and right for a familiar scarred face, but her non-knight did not appear.

Now, it seemed as if the slow cogs of her brain were loosening and the world came into better focus. The clouds in the sky stopped merging and the ground seemed relatively still, if not for the movement of the cart.

Sandor…
Sansa felt her heart constrict painfully as she remembered running from the wooden stands, racing down the stairs while Sandor was battling the beast and then… what? Sansa’s memory went blank. What happened?

Petyr’s fingers fastened the ties around her foot and Sansa’s head was clear enough to register the unfamiliar touch of his hand on her ankle.

“Do not touch me!”

Sansa kicked out, but her foot only met thin air. Fortunately for Baelish, he jumped backwards and skillfully avoided the amateur attack. A startled look crossed his face, quickly replaced by schooled sympathy, but not before Sansa caught a glint of malice. A blood-red anger hidden far, far beneath the surface.

Craning her neck, she searched the scene around her. They were on a narrow dirt road, tall trees and brush surrounded her. Sansa remembered these paths from her original journey South along the King’s Road, back when her father was still her protector. Baelish did not travel alone. No, there were several donkeys and various armed men milling around, all bearing the sigil of House Arryn. All eagles except Baelish, who styled himself always, as the mockingbird. Sansa looked feverishly around for any familiar faces.

Sandor… she couldn’t find him anywhere. She stared into Baelish’s pale green eyes, trying to discern his mood or motive, but his face revealed nothing other than serene calm. He smiled and placed his palms outward in a gesture of peace.

Baelish. Sandor told her once, over the fire in their small hut on the Quiet Isle. Cares for no one and nothing but himself.

“My lady, do not be alarmed! We are here to protect you,” his words were like honey, sweet, slow and heavy. “This is your armed guard, sent to escort you back your aunt’s domain in the Eyrie.”

Next of them, a tall, dark-haired girl called a halt to the caravan from atop her horse, she turned her head to watch the scene unfolding curiously. “Ah, the lady has woken…” she drawled with a hint of humor. Sansa’s eyes flickered between Petyr and this new threat.

The other girl sat confidently on her mare. Unlike a lady, she wore leather armor and simple furs. Sansa couldn’t deny she was beautiful, but her beauty was marred by an arrogant smirk.

Surrounding Sansa’s cart, there were four armed guards, talking quietly to one another. The only man to catch her eye was a well armored knight. Cold, crystal-blue eyes watched dispassionately as she lay helpless, bound to the cart, and Sansa felt a surge of anger toward this unnamed figure. Another knight. Another ordained, anointed, holier-than-thou knight who would watch the helpless suffer in the face of tyranny.

The arrogant girl looked down at Baelish for direction, dismissing Sansa instantly.

“Release me at once, Lord Baelish!” Sansa said, after a few calming breaths and in the firmest tone she could muster, “If you are here to protect me, untie me!”

Baelish’s eyes swiveled, taking stock of the surroundings and most likely, the number of witnesses. The guards paid no attention, and the knight shifted so his back was turned to her, but the girl, the arrogant one, watched on curiously, as if the whole matter was her business.

“At once,” Sansa added after Littlefinger’s hesitation.
“My lady, I would gladly undo your ties,” Petry bowed and then snapped his fingers. The taller girl hopped off her horse and made quick work of Sansa’s hand ties, “I apologize if you were alarmed. It would be only natural, considering the trauma you have been exposed to. They were put there to still your movement, else you might injure yourself. As you can see, we are traveling the King’s Road. We’ve just passed Harrenhall.”

“The Crossroads?”

When she straightened, she could see further past the trees. A cool wind blew Sansa’s hair away from her face, opening her eyes to the landscape.

The party was perched atop a tall hill above Harrenhall. The monstrous fortress stretched out before her, cocooned by the surrounding fields and trees. A shadow fell over the city and shrouded it’s massive towers, filling Sansa with a sense of unease. The burned remains of Harrenhall’s once mighty towers appeared as crooked skeletons, twisting toward the sky. Even from her position, Sansa could distantly see small dots, men, the size of ants patrolling it’s massive walls. Harrenhall was at once beautiful and tragic.

It was enough to make Sansa gasp and sway in her saddle. “Gods…” she whispered to herself.

“A right sight, isn’t it, my lady?” the dark haired girl said to Sansa, shaking the hair out of her face.

“Harrenhall. How long have I been asleep?” Sansa’s mind raced.

Harrenhall is leagues from King’s Landing, leagues from the arena. Sansa felt the pain in her head double and she groaned, nearly falling over.

The girl caught her before she tumbled over the edge and pulled her onto the ground. Sansa could have screamed in frustration. This is wrong, all wrong, Sansa thought, but she felt too sick and helpless to struggle against the older girl’s stronger arms.

Baelish watched her closely as a Maester was called from the party.

“Maester Coleman, my lady, at your service,” a thin, nervous looking man bowed before her and Sansa had the presence of mind to nod her head. “You-you’ve suffered from the after effects of a strong drug,” the Maester pressed a cool cloth to her forehead and Sansa instantly felt relief, “causing a slight fever. My lady has been unconscious and semi-conscious for days. I’d have done more for you, but my lord begged us to make haste. Toward safety in the Eyrie and I quite agree,” Maester Coleman nervously looked backwards at Lord Baelish and then redirected his attention back towards the cloth on her head. “I am relieved to see my lady awake.”

“Days?”

Maester Coleman nodded and then uncorked a flask at his waist. Bringing it up to her lips, Sansa tasted watery wine. “Eight, to be exact.”

“Eight days?” Sansa exclaimed.

“We believe your captor drugged you to keep you compliant, and to prevent your escape,” Petry interrupted and took a step forward.

Kneeling on the ground, Sansa was now eye-to-eye with her mother's old friend. “I found you nearby the King’s Wood. There were signs of a struggle, signs on your wrists,” Sansa lifted her hands and blinked in amazement at the ligature marks on her wrists that weren’t there before, “I believe, in a moment of divine clarity, you tried to escape your kidnapper’s grasp and stumbled in the woods.”
“... my kidnapper’s... grasp?” Sansa felt a pit at the bottom of her stomach and searched her mind for the answer to this feeling of dread.

The arena. Sansa was at the arena watching Sandor fight. The monster had it’s sword raised, and Sansa was running. Running towards the gate and then.... nothing. “I was kidnapped?”

“Of course, my lady, you’ve been missing for months--”

“Poor thing, doesn’t remember a thing--”

“Who… what are you talking about?” the Maester took some snow from the rocks nearby and repressed the cold cloth to her head. It felt glorious to her aching head. “Where is Sandor?”

“The Hound is dead.”

Seven days earlier...

Sandor blinked against the light. He raised a bleary hand to swat it away from his face but it was always just out of reach, no matter how far he stretched.

“Ah, good. You’re awake.”

The Elder Brother’s familiar voice shook him from his daze. Sandor opened and closed his palm in wonder as his consciousness slowly returned. He was laying down, comfortably, he might add, in a large cot. The light he’d seen when he woke was a hanging lantern, situated near his bed. Blinking, his eyes focused on the Elder Brother leaning over him but the peace didn’t last long. He groaned at the sudden rush of pain emanating from his leg.

A wound, it must be, he thought, and struggled to move into a sitting position. Firm hands held him down and Sandor couldn’t find the strength to resist those hands. The pain, gods, my leg.

“You’ve been unconscious all night, I’ve cleaned and sewn your leg but your brother’s... sword.. tore the muscle. It will be a difficult recovery.”

Sandor shuddered as another wave of pain emenated from his leg. The Elder Brother held a wooden cup to his lips and he drank. Too late, he realized it was milk of the poppy. Lifting his head, he realized he was in a healing room. From the ceiling, various dried herbs and flowers hung from copper wire, giving the room a fragrant scent. On the table in the center of the room, a mortar and pestle lay, along with a collection of glasses and tubes of all shapes and sizes.

The colored glass on the window, drawn in the image of the mother, made him belief he had been returned to the Great Sept. Only this time, there were no bars surrounding him, merely a wooden door with no lock.

The Elder Brother’s words returned to him. His brother? Sandor blinked. The Mountain. An onslaught of memory had him jerking unnaturally to his feet despite the protests of the Elder Brother. The arena. The trial. Sansa.

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The Mountain loomed over him. The sun’s light reflected in the sword point leveled at his head. It was over. The battle was won by his brother. Sandor glanced to his left where his glowing sword had been flung and his hand flailed helplessly, calling to the steel he had lost. The black ooze that still poured from his brother’s broken leg surrounded his body, it's diabolical scent curled around his
nostrils. Black bubbles rose and broke, spattering his armor.

*I'm going to die here, Sandor thought. I'm going to die surrounded by evil.*

A cry came from the crowd. His name. Sansa was calling for him and he knew then, that his wife, the one person who loved him, the one person he loved most in the world, was going to watch him die. Executed publicly, like her father, by this unholy creation. *My final moments.*

The Mountain, his brother, this… thing… screeched unnaturally once more. Reveling in his victory and Sandor’s nostrils flared in repugnance. The burnt side of his face twitched in recognition. This thing that scarred him, this monster could not survive.

Suddenly remembering the second small sword hanging at his belt. Sandor’s hand flew to it just as his brother’s dead body raised it’s sword higher, preparing for the final blow.

*One last chance…* he thought to himself. *I will defy this beast until my last breath.*

The sword swung downward toward him. “SANDOR!” he heard Sansa scream from close by. Sandor unsheathed the dragonbone sword swifty and struck at the monster’s steel. A ringing sound filled the arena as steel met dragonbone and Sandor closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

The crowd gasped. Sandor cracked an eyelid and then the other, gaping in wonderment at what he saw.

The monster’s sword was cloven in half. Sandor stared at the smooth cut of his brother’s blade that was now one fraction of it’s original size. The creature screeched and reeled backward, raising it’s broken sword in anger.

Knowing this might be his one chance to even the score, Sandor leapt to his feet and struck out with the sword sword at the monster’s flailing arm. Dragonbone met steel and once again, the air was filled with a mysterious ringing. The arm was cloven, his short sword cutting steel like a knife cut butter. The crowd was roaring. Shouting for blood and death and “Kill! Kill! Kill!”

Years of experience on the battlefield trained Sandor to strike once more, even as the monster retaliated. His brother's broken sword cut into his leg and he screamed in pain but the sudden closeness allowed him a rare opportunity. The opportunity to bury the dragonbone blade into the monster’s heart.

An explosion of black blood came from the hole he created in the creature’s armor. Sandor wrenched the sword away from the monster’s chest and prepared himself to strike again. When he did, he drew forth more of that noxious potion from his brother’s dead body. Qyburn’s monster screamed as it crumbled to the ground, limbs flailing and twitching uncontrollably.

The noise left a ringing in his ears as he fell, the pain in his leg too great to ignore. The crowd was screaming and chanting some nonsense that no longer mattered. Sansa was his last thought. He needed to find Sansa and get the hell out of here, but before he could move, a wave of dizziness rushed over him. His head began to soar towards the clouds, and he looked down in horror at the sight of his own red blood, mixing with the black of that demon.

*Not now,* he thought helplessly, before he lost consciousness on the arena floor.

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“Sansa!” Sandor’s eyes flew wide and he felt his heart seize in a moment of panic. “Sansa! Elder Brother, where is Sansa, what happened?”
“Stop! Before you tear the stitches,” Elder Brother forcibly pushed him back onto the cot he had rolled out of, and moved to inspect his leg. Sandor could have screamed in frustration but paused when he caught sight of the wound. A long, jagged cut above his knee and into his thigh muscle. The monk poked and prodded the edges of the wound, drawing forth a hiss from his patient. “You were injured. The injury will heal but full function of your leg may never return—”

“I don’t care about that. I don’t care about any of it. Tell me,” Sandor grabbed the Elder Brother by the sleeve of his robe, “Where. Is. My wife.”

The Elder Brother met his gaze evenly, but his eyes were closed off. “You need to remain seated,” he said. “This will take a moment.”

Sandor’s blood froze in his veins, he had no choice but to comply.

“I will. Tell me. Everything.”

A moment passed where the monk deliberated internally. Sandor could only plead using his eyes. “Please,” he swallowed his pride and ever instinct that was screaming at him to run out of the room and butcher every last man until her, "she's my wife."

“The Queen is dead,” Sandor closed his eyes and exhaled in relief. The tension in his shoulders relaxed. Another fallen enemy. “Executed after the trial. Humanely given nightshade until she no longer drew breath. The King is in mourning—”

“Sansa.” Sandor stressed to the other man. *I don't give a damn about the King. Where is Sansa?*

“I…” the monk sighed and closed his eyes, “During the fight, we lost sight of one another. When you nearly fell, Sansa ran for you. I tried to follow but the crowd made it difficult. When I reached the gates to the arena, Sansa was nowhere to be seen. I found this,” here, the Elder Brother pulled out the brown cloak Sansa had been wearing, “on the ground.”

Sandor took the cloak and turned the fabric over in his hands, searching for some clue that wasn't there. “Gone? She’s gone…?” His voice sounded weak and distant, even to him.

“She was running for you, Sandor. Someone took her.”

Sandor opened and closed his mouth, unable to find the words for the sudden rage, loneliness and desperation he felt. “No,” he said. The only word that came to mind. *No. Sansa was supposed to be safe. The Elder Brother was *supposed* to be watching her. She was supposed to be *safe*. As if sensing the dark turn of his thoughts, the Elder Brother held up his hands.

“I sent Brienne and Podrick in your stead, she was more than willing to depart in the following chaos after your brother’s defeat. The Septas that were meant to be guarding her cell were distracted. You had been dragged off the field, the crowd thought you dead but I convinced the High Septon to take you back here for healing, after I discovered that your heart still beat.”

“I… where did she go?” Sandor didn’t know if he was referring to Brienne or Sansa.

“North, there was more,” the Elder Brother said gravely and pulled out another piece of fabric from behind him. It was a small blue square, stained with dirt and torn in the corner, “When we returned to the scene of her disappearance, Podrick found this underneath the nearby podium,” the Elder Brother turned it over and pointed to the torn corner. Near the edges of the tear, a faint symbol could be seen, although it was mostly unrecognizable. "A critical error on behalf of the abductor. He or she was either careless, or recklessly confident."
“What is it?” Sandor asked, irritated by the look in the expectant other man's eyes “Who the hell cares about a lady’s handkerchief? Get to the fucking point.”

“This isn’t any lady’s handkerchief,” the Elder Brother smiled grimly, “It’s evidence of another perpetrator.”

“How?”

*I’ll kill them,* the Hound roared to the surface. *I’ll tear them limb from limb. I’ll make them scream.*

The Elder Brother paused at the murderous look in his charge’s eye, and quickly crossed the room. Grabbing a piece of parchment and unrolling it before Sandor, he revealed a simple drawing of a broken wheel on a green field. The monk placed the torn fabric on the table before them, and slowly matched the torn symbol with the parchment.

“House Waynwood.”

"And why," Sandor's nostrils flared as he looked down at the completed sigil, searching his mind for a reason to this new madness, "would House Waynwood stake an interest in Sansa Stark? Damn it! Sansa Clegane."

"Because they're sworn to House Arryn and the Vale. You may be able to guess the new Lord Protector of the Vale? Fueled by both lust and revenge, this man has a penchant for kidnapping. You once told me he held you captive, bound to a torture device, where he planned to bleed you dry for daring to lay hands on a woman he viewed as his by right."

The burnt side of Sandor's face twisted with rage as his hands blindly tore the parchment in front of him, searching for something, anything to destroy.

"I'm not just going to kill him. I am going to mutilate him."
Mya Stone

Chapter Summary

Sandor and Sansa have been separated. Sandor chases after her while Sansa is left to piece together the events of Cersei’s trial with help from a surprising source.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sandor drew Stranger and the brown mare to a halt in front of the stream. He knew he would remain unseen hidden within the forest branches, but he felt uneasy traveling so close to the King’s Road. Yet, this path remained his only choice. He routinely looped backwards and across the road, checking for his lost target, or any sign of the party that traveled to the Eyrie.

The horse’s heavy pants filled the air and he pulled on their reins, leading them through the darkness and towards to the water. Sandor felt a twinge of guilt for riding them so hard. Since their departure from King’s Landing, he’d set a frantic pace over the countryside, pushing the limit of their endurance.

Long ago, he’d traveled these woods at a leisurely pace with the King’s Company. but those days of easy luxury were long gone. He galloped through all hours of daylight and long into the night until the horses nearly collapsed. Whenever he camped, Sandor refused to light a fire despite the cold, and instead huddled close to the horses with little ceremony, quickly eating a small ration and collapsing into a restless sleep.

The three of them acted as a broken family without Sansa to lift their spirits. Stranger could sense his inner turmoil and acted anxious and skittish throughout the entire journey, while Sugar looked bereft without the Little Bird’s constant mothering and Sandor wasn’t very affectionate.

On the second day, the journey was much the same, an extreme gallop followed by walking until he was forced to stop or risk a nasty fall due to unconsciousness. The horses hated him that second night, and wouldn’t afford him their warmth, which was just as well because he hardly deserved to be warm.

*How could I have let this happen?* He thought, leaning against an aged oak tree and shivering in the cold, *Why didn’t I plan for her safety? What if I had insisted she stay at the Sept?*

During the ride, every red flower or orange sunset, every bird’s call or trickling stream… Everything reminded him of her. It was punishment for failing to protect her. Every color, every evidence of life was an agonizing reminder of the vibrancy he once had, and lost. When he closed his eyes at night, he could see her being dragged into the darkness as he lay, paralyzed by some unseen force. Inevitably, he’d wake to the sound of her screaming his name and he’d leap to his feet, only to figure that it must have been the whistling wind, or the morning birds.

He knew he must look a monstrous sight, half dead, dressed in worn black leather armor, fighting the pain in his leg and with shadows under his eyes, but he was possessed. The only way to stop the madness was to find her. And fast, before she was hurt.
The armor he wore was a “gift” from the Warrior’s Sons armory. Equipped with a heavy black hood, he was nearly unrecognizable when he left the hubbub of King’s Landing. Stranger and Sugar’s presence made him look more like an ugly horse handler than a warrior and it worked heavily to his benefit that the countryside was now telling stories of his heroic death against the monstrous Ser Robert Strong. A death that afforded him anonymity for a short period of time.

It had taken two long days before the Elder Brother, and the unnamed healer, released him from the healing quarters. Two days of vigorous verbal arguments before the two men would concede to letting him leave the Capital. The High Septon had all but forgotten about his Champion since the trial was won and the deed was done, so Sandor had been shoved in some forgotten room and someone almost always forgot to send food or water to the injured warrior. The uncaring attitude of the High Sparrow infuriated the Elder Brother, but Sandor couldn’t have cared less at the moment. The only thing that mattered was convincing the Elder Brother to let him leave, and leave soon, so he could find his wife and end the torture of not knowing her fate. The only thing that kept him from striking out on his own was the constant Milk of the Poppy the Elder Brother used to drug him so he wouldn’t tear the muscle in his leg.

When he was finally released, Sandor raced out of the Sept, miraculously locating Stranger and Sugar in the chaos, and stole the armor and food he needed for the journey. The Elder Brother hastily handed him the sword he’d been gifted, wrapped in wide straps of leather to disguise it’s identity, and the small dragonbone blade. Both weapons had been salvaged from the arena before the High Septon could loot them.

“And your belongings from the Quiet Isle,” the brother had said, and handed him two large packs. “I believe your wife will be glad not to lose these few things, when you find her.”

“When I find her,” Sandor remembered saying as he took the two packs.

Now, he checked the binds on those bags and, since Stranger and Sugar were still breathing heavily, curiously unhooked the one he knew to be Sansa’s. It would be another hour or two before the horses would be willing to move, and he knew better than to test their patience.

Sitting down on a nearby moss covered log, he unbelted the top and sifted through the contents, feeling a slight twinge of guilt for invading her privacy. However, he needed the distraction now, more than ever.

A simple blue dress pooled around his fingers and he pulled out the article. He’d seen Sansa wear this one often on the Quiet Isle and knew it to be her favorite. Unable to resist the compulsion, he brought the fabric to his nose and inhaled her scent. Longing washed over him and he quickly put the dress aside, unwilling to revisit those memories.

Next, he pulled out a wooden comb, a few strands of yellow-red hair still attached. Sandor touched those softly and then spied a few other odd items he recognized. A bag of seeds that that mad monk gave her while she worked in his gardens, a painted doll from her father, a sack or dried herbs he wasn’t familiar with and underneath that, more fabric. Not just any fabric, he realized. The cloaks she had sewn for their wedding. Sandor pulled these out in amazement.

He ran a hand over the grey fabric of her maiden’s cloak, turning it over and over again in his hands, startled at it’s sudden appearance. *Am I being reminded of the only vows I ever took?* Sandor moved to replace the cloaks before catching sight of something embroidered on the inside of Sansa’s.

*A direwolf,* Sandor traced the needlework with his hand. Turning over his own cloak, he found a similarly stitched sigil of House Clegane. For the first time, the three running dogs actually looked happy in their place. *A loving hand created their image,* he thought to himself. Their wedding had
been so euphoric for him, he hadn't noticed the hidden sigils, having no need to wear those cloaks beyond that day.

Sandor swallowed heavily, his throat suddenly dry and uncomfortably. He folded the cloaks carefully away, unable to continue. Before he finished stuffing the belongings back into her bag, where they belonged, he caught sight of something strange.

Pulling out the wooden frame Sandor was suddenly face to face with an old portrait of his sister. Her brown curls and bright eyes, stared sympathetically back at him. Sansa had placed it in their hut at the Quiet Isle, having secreted it away from the Red Keep, so long ago. She had said their house had needed “a touch of home”, whatever that meant.

Sandor’s eyes took in the image of his long dead sister for the first time in weeks. “I did it,” he whispered to her, in the silence of the woods. “I finally avenged you.”

Wrapping the portrait in Sansa’s dress he took a few shuddering breaths and blinked away shameful tears.

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A few leagues away, Sansa nervously clasped the secret ring hanging around her neck. Sandor’s mother’s ring. Her wedding ring. The one object she had that still tied her to her past with Sandor. During their journey to King’s Landing she had been forced to take it off, but Sansa didn’t want to lose the precious item so she’d tied it around her neck with a spare bit of string that Brienne found and it had hung there ever since, hidden underneath the Septa disguise she’d borrowed.

“We are almost to the Inn at the Crossroads, my lady,” the girl, Mya Stone, told her.

Mya was a bastard from the Vale, as she’d told Sansa freely during her first night with Petyr’s guard. She served House Royce and was the best “donkey tamer” in the Vale. Sansa knew from her father’s stories that donkeys were used to navigate the treacherous high path to the Eyrie, and any other time she would have been intrigued and delighted to talk to another girl her age, but her normal interest was dulled. Nothing seemed to matter, any more. Not even a distant connection to her father’s past.

“The Hound is dead,” he’d said.

_Littlefinger_ had said. The Hound is dead.

Sansa turned mute after that revelation, unable to muster any sort of response. She had stared wordlessly at the man her mother once trusted, words of denial and disbelief frozen on her tongue. The words echoed back and forth in her head, and yet they made no sense. She tried to breath but every breath came shorter and shorter until she felt paralyzed by the weight on her chest and collapsed.

Maester Coleman attributed her reaction to shock and quickly forced a tonic down her throat. Then, he bid her rest in the carrying cart for the remainder of the journey. Mya Stone helped her to her feet and into the fur laden cart wordlessly, while Sansa lay limp, falling into her temporary prison without a sound.

After the tonic wore off, and she’d slept in a black oblivion for the remained of the day, Sansa could not rest. Part of her soul rallied against the thought. _He isn’t_, her heart screamed, _you thought him dead before and he came back. He’ll come for you. Just wait._ But the other half of her heart, the more despondent half, simply surrendered to the grief, unable to muster the energy to fight against the closing darkness.
She cried. The night was filled with the sounds of her incoherent weeping and nothing Petyr Baelish or Mya Stone or any of those strangers said made any difference. When the camp couldn’t take any more wailing, the Maester came to give her more tonic and she slept then, but only in a drug induced haze, and in her sleep, she dreamt.

Sansa dreamt of her brother, Jon Snow, at the wall with a flaming sword, fighting an army of corpses. She dreamt of Bran, flying in circles around trees, she dreamt of Arya dancing her water-dance on a boat. She saw dragons and lions and snow. Enough snow to cover the world three times over. She only woke when she dreamt of a dog with a scar on it’s face, limping down the road.

When she finally opened her eyes, Maester Coleman was looking down on her. “We’ve arrived at the Inn at the Crossroads, my lady,” he said kindly and offered her his hand. Sansa hesitated a moment before she remembered that this man had only been helpful. Of all the company, Maester Coleman looked down upon her with the most sympathy and pity. He reminded her of Maester Luwin, and for that reason, she took his hand. With his help, she was on unsteady feet and walking away from the cart, toward the large building she knew to be the Inn.

_The royal retinue stayed here, years ago, Sansa remembered. Lady was killed near here, she faltered in her steps at that memory, this place is a bad omen._

The Maester assisted her across the road and onto the steps of the inn. Sansa paused to catch her breath, her head pounding from the exertion and the recent shock that had yet to fade.

“We will stay at the Inn for the night, my lady,” Mya Stone approached her from behind, her arms laden with her horse’s saddle.

“And then?” Sansa asked, not truly caring about the answer.

She’d realized in the night that there was no chance of escape from this group. Mya Stone, Baelish, the Maester and the Knight all watched her constantly. Even if she could steal a horse and made a run for the hills, she wouldn’t get very far with her limited experience on horseback, and she had little to no survival skills. When they were alone, Sandor always did the hunting. Sandor would set the traps and she’d light the fire. They had shared these tasks but he always took the man’s share--

“The path to High Road begins here,” Mya grinned, ignored the distressed look on Sansa’s face and obviously happy to be headed to her home in the Vale, “and then the Eyrie--”

“Where we will take you to see your dear cousin Robyn,” Lord Baelish interrupted, approaching the trio. He was garbed in a green lord’s coat today, freshly shaved and unnervingly pleasant, as always. Sansa stiffened. Every lady’s instinct she’d ever honed told her to fall into a curtsey and greet the lord, but her heart refused.

_Baelish cares for no one and nothing but himself_, Sandor’s voice filled her head.

_Sandor distrusted him greatly, Sansa thought, though he never said why, I know something happened between those two._ Studying his profile, she looked away as his gaze flitted to meet her eyes. She was curious, but furious at the same time. Her heart was telling her not to trust this man.

“Lady Sansa,” she saw him take another step out of the corner of her eye. Sansa steadied her gaze on the mountains looming near the path to the Eyrie. “I am relieved to see you awake and recovering.”

Sansa focused on the distance. A crow flew high above them, possibly headed north, and she wished she could join it. Seconds ticked by and her lack of response made the Maester’s shoulders tense. Mya Stone’s eyes swiveled between her lord and the lady, before she politely bowed and moved to
“Mya,” Petyr’s command stopped her abruptly, “take the lady to her room. There are matters I must discuss with our esteemed Maester Coleman. If you would.”

The bastard girl turned and bowed (like a man would, Sansa noted), and then without waiting for further instruction, took Sansa’s arm and led her into the Inn’s entrance. Coleman relinquished his hold on Sansa and stepped away. “I will send a sleeping tonic to your room later, my lady,” he said softly as she walked away.

Sansa didn’t have time to thank him as she was turned around by the bastard girl. Mya had a strong grip and was muttering to herself as she steered Sansa toward the innkeeper. “Don’t know why you’re antagonizing a powerful man like that…”

Sansa pulled her arm out of the other girl’s grasp. “I can walk on my own,” she said, even as she swayed unsteadily on her feet. Her head was still pounding for some unknown reason and she clutched her skull with one hand. She knew she looked like a fool, but the bastard girl’s constant disapproval made her blood boil. This wasn’t the first time the other girl had said something above her station. On the road, there was always some snide remark about “the lady” and “her needs”, and every day Sansa remained in grief on the cart, Mya’s resentment seemed to grow.

“No. You can’t walk,” Mya practically growled, “Don’t be stubborn. I know stubborn and it can get a donkey killed.”

“Are you honestly comparing me to a donkey?” Sansa jerked her hand away from the other girl, as Mya tried to steady her once more. An exasperated look crossed the bastard girl’s face and Sansa felt her face growing red with rage.

“I just learned my husband is dead,” she balled her hands into fists. “The only man who ever loved me for who I was, instead of what I was, died by the sword of his mad brother, fighting to free me from the people who imprisoned and tortured me! I’m in the hands of the man who betrayed my mother and father to their deaths. My brothers are dead. My sister is dead. Everyone I’ve ever loved is rotting in the ground and you--”

Sansa stopped to take a shuddering breath. The inn had grown rather quiet and Sansa realized she was announcing herself to the world. Mya’s arrogant smirk had disappeared and her face was flushed. With either anger or embarrassment, Sansa didn’t know. Thankfully there were only a few patrons in the Inn at that time and they were all children, but they were all watching the interchange curiously.

Mya opened her mouth once or twice to respond but then snapped it shut with a click. She lowered her head in defeat. For some reason, her subservient response made Sansa even angrier.

“Take me to my room,” Sansa spat, “and go do whatever you really want to do. A girl like you couldn’t possibly understand.”

Mya’s lip twitched, as if she was about to say something, but then she just turned away to flag down a tall boy. No, a man, Sansa thought she almost recognized him as he got closer. He was heavily muscled, with a thick head of black hair and blue eyes. It occurred to Sansa that the man bore a striking resemblance to Lord Renly, but he couldn’t possibly be related.

Standing side by side, Mya Stone and this newcomer looked remarkable similar. Sansa paused for a moment, wondering about their relationship just as the pair realized the similarity too. They looked each other up and down with interest.
“Ser Gendry, of the Hollow Hill,” the man said gruffly, his voice a pleasant rumble “at your service.”

The man nodded respectfully to Mya and then, seeing Sansa for the first time, transformed his preemptive his nod into a low bow. Sansa bobbed her head politely in turn. A hedge knight running an inn full of children?

“The party of Lord Petyr Baelish has arrived, Ser, and the Lord requires lodging for ten. We’ve coin to pay for our meals and rooms. The lady will require her own private quarters for the evening,” Mya said quickly, as if eager to do her duty and return to her horse as soon as possible.

The muscled man nodded and promptly retrieved a set of keys from behind the counter. “Follow me,” he said, and then added after a moment’s hesitation, “if it please you, my lady.”

Sansa moved to follow, when her eyes passed over a grubby looking boy with wild brown hair, drinking from a cracked mug in the corner of the inn. Their eyes met and Sansa felt a shiver travel down her spine. That gaze is so familiar… she gasped and turned away in confusion. A moment later, the boy had disappeared.

“This way, milady,” Ser Gendry motioned her forward after seeing her pause.

Sansa and Mya followed Ser Gendry up a large flight of stairs and onto the second landing. Mya, despite Sansa’s earlier words, still offered a hand to Sansa when she began to claw at the railing for balance.

“I said I know a thing or two about stubbornness,” the bastard girl said wirily, when Sansa teetered precariously on her feet. “You know, you haven’t eaten for two days.”

“I haven’t?” Sansa thought back on the last several days and realized the girl was right. “Oh.” That explained the headache and dizziness.

“My uncle…” Mya started, as she took Sansa’s arm and led her up the stairs, “don’t think he ate for a solid three days after my mother died. Had to force him myself up in the mornings. I think that was his way of showing how much he loved her, you know?”

Sansa couldn’t respond as a wave of fresh pain at the loss of Sandor hit her again. She closed her eyes and fought against the tears that threatened to spill. “I know,” she whispered.

Ser Gendry stopped in front of a blue door and unlocked the room. Mya led her onto the bed while the hedge knight opened the curtains, which Sansa noted, offered her a clear view of the yard and the crossroads.

“I’ll have the cook send dinner up when it’s ready. A little boy with a red hat will bring it. Don’t mind him,” the knight said. “If he asks too many questions or loiters about, just give him a good kick and he’ll wander off.”

Mya said something and the man disappeared with a silver coin, leaving Sansa alone with the bastard girl.

“Where will you sleep?” Sansa suddenly asked, wondering if she would be forced to bunk with the other men.

“Probably in the stables. Hay can be right comfy, if you push it around just right. Someone’s got to protect the cargo,” the girl smirked again and Sansa knew she hadn’t cracked this bastard’s exterior.

“You can stay here, if you like,” Sansa offered.
The girl’s eyebrows rose and her mouth popped open in dumbfoundment. “Many thanks, my lady, but I’ve orders…”

“Nevermind,” Sansa waved a hand, “leave me.”

Sansa settled back on the covers of the bed and turned her gaze to the ceiling, waiting for Mya Stone’s steps to sound her departure. The steps never came and Sansa sighed impatiently. The inn’s wooden ceiling didn’t have many cracks for her to count. She wondered if the Maester would return with that tonic, and she could drug herself to sleep once more. The headache lessened when she lay down. Perhaps she shouldn’t eat dinner, perhaps she could fade away like this…

Sansa’s hand rose to her neckline and she took out the ring to turn it over in her hands once more.

“What was he like?”

Sansa’s eyes flew open, “Who?”

“The Hound. You said your husband was dead.”

Sansa paused and took a great, shuddering breath. The smell of the Quiet Isle returned to her, the scent of leather and sweat. Memories rose and fell like the waves she once endured, clinging to his form. “Serious. Quiet. He only really spoke if he had something to say, and he only ever did anything if he thought it was worth doing. He hated his allegiance to the Lannisters, and I think deep down, he was truly… noble.”

“How?” Mya crossed her arms. “I have a man. Well, I had a man. He’s a noble. Engaged to someone else. Wish he’d run away and marry me.”

Sansa winced and if she’d had the energy, would have curled into a ball and flung Mya out the door.

“Sorry, bad taste,” the bastard girl frowned.

Sansa’s eyes found the other girls and an air of awkwardness settled between them. Mya shuffled uncomfortably and then poked her head out of the door calling for the maid to bring a bath.

“He was funny,” Sansa said suddenly, closing her eyes, “when he wanted to be. It always surprised me, when he made me laugh. He loved to tease me…” Sansa voice choked as the maid entered, a teenage girl about the same age as Sansa was when she first left for the Red Keep. Blonde and petite, she carried each bucket of hot water as if were made of feathers.

“Have a bath and rest, my lady,” Mya filled in the silence, and after a few seconds past, helped Sansa out of the bed and out of her clothes.

The bath was warm, thankfully not hot, and Sansa slipped under the water, only emerging when she had to breath. Mya stood nearby, looking but not looking, possibly guarding the door with a hand on her shortblade. Sansa ignored the bottles and perfumes laid out for her, and instead just soaked in the water, allowing herself this brief respite.

“Maybe he’s not dead.”

“What?” Sansa’s head rolled and she stared at Mya’s stiff back.

“I don’t mean to be forward, my lady—”

“Be forward,” Sansa heart hammered wildly, “I’d rather the truth.”
“Well, it’s just,” Mya sighed, “between you and me. The rumors around the capital seem divided. Some say the Hound lay dead in the arena, others say his body was dragged, still breathing to the Sept. Some others say they seen him walking around the next day. Point is, unless you seen the body…” Mya sighed again and rolled her neck. “All I’m saying is, if it was my man. I wouldn’t believe it. Not coming from Lord Baelish. That’s all.”

Sansa sat dumbfounded in the tub, the water growing cold. A spark of hope rekindled in her heart by Mya’s words. Baelish cares for noone and nothing but himself, Sandor’s voice filled her head. Sansa had seem the lascivious looks Littlefinger gave her, when no one else was watching. What if he lied to serve his own purposes?

You believed he was dead once before, and even then, he returned, a voice whispered, will you fall for the same trick twice?

Sansa gasped and stood out of the bath, the water sloshed over the rim of the tub and onto the floor as she scrambled to gather her clothes.

“My lady?” Mya rushed to steady her.

“I need food,” she babbled throwing a dress over her head, “water. You can get these things, Mya? And a saddlebag. Which horse is fastest?”

“My Lady? Slow yourself, You’ve been faint these last several--”

“There’s no time, girl! I have to get away from here, I have to find Sandor,” Sansa grabbed the arms of the bastard and spun her around. “You’re right and I remember now!”

“Remember what?” Mya helped her into the sleeves of a dry dress and Sansa reached for her boots, fighting the wave of dizziness that threatened to overwhelm her.

“The fight. I remember what I saw last! I remember…” Sansa fell onto the bed to catch her breath, “I ran to the entrance of the pit when I saw the monster about to strike down Sandor. I had to get to him. I couldn’t let him die alone.” Mya’s brow furrowed but she saw Sansa’s brown traveling cloak around her thin frame, “When I got there, I saw him on the ground, fallen. Robert Strong was poised to kill him when someone from the shadows grabbed me. The world was spinning, there was a medicinal smell in my nose… they must have drugged me but I saw... As I grew weak I saw it!”

Sansa grabbed Mya’s hands and smiled, “I saw the sword was cloven.”

Mya looked skeptically down at her, “Ser Robert Strong’s sword?”

“Yes!” Sansa shook Mya's hands with vigor, “Dragonbone. Sandor told me about dragonbone once, when we walked the hall of the Targaryen dragon skulls.”

“Dragonbone is fireproof. Dragonbone swords are invaluable, and highly priced. Light and sharp, cutting through the best of man made steel. Arrows of dragonbone fly straighter and truer, and cut better. It is a valuable material…”

“... they can cut the best of man made steel!” Sansa exclaimed. Mya still looked confused. “I gave Sandor my dragonbone blade before the match. He used it to cleave the monster’s steel!”

“Then… the Hound might still be alive. If he rendered his opponent’s blade useless--”

“And Ser Robert Strong was already injured grievously,” Sansa gripped the other girl’s hands harder, squeezing the leather clad fingers tightly, holding onto her last hope, “He must be alive.
Sandor would not die so easily. Mya, I need your help! Lord Baelish is going to use me for my claim to the North. I must escape. Tonight.”

Mya exhaled roughly and glanced down at their entwined hands. Sansa’s iron grip prevented her from moving backwards. The highborn lady’s eyes were pleading. Mya shook her head and opened her mouth--

A horse’s scream filled the air.

Sansa dropped the bastard girl’s hands and raced to the window, almost stumbling as she did. Mya caught her and drew back the curtains. Together, they peered down onto the dimly lit street where a mess of riders had gathered, facing a line of Baelish’s guards and the knight from the Vale. A woman stood in the midst of the scuffle, looking dispassionately as her horse flailed on the ground next to her, with a gushing neck wound.

Mya propped open the window to hear the commotion below. Sansa watched the standstill with rapt eyes. The woman looked oddly familiar. Something about the way she stood...

“The Brotherhood Without Banners,” Mya breathed, “and the legendary Lady Stoneheart.”

“Who?”

“You are right, my lady, we have to get you out of here.”

Chapter End Notes

Man, am I happy with this chapter for some reason! Maybe it’s the improved weather where I am but I’m suddenly feeling a lot more positive about this story. For a while, I struggled with putting things together, and it felt like awkward filler that I was forcing myself through. So, sorry if it sucked. Now, I feel like I’m getting to the parts that I really want to write!

As always, review! Let me know if you think it's awesome or so god-awful you can't stand it.
Confrontation

Chapter Summary

Sandor find the company from the Eyrie at the Crossroads Inn in the midst of a confrontation with the Brotherhood Without Banners. Sansa and Sandor are reunited.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sandor knelt on the ground and peered through the foliage at the large wooden structure of the Crossroads Inn.

The night was cold, Like all nights lately, Sandor thought wearily, and soft flurries of snow were drifting down from the darkened skies. Sandor’s hands and feet had grown slightly numb from remaining still so long, and he methodically, and nervously clenched and unclenched his fists, working to unthaw them. His cloak was wrapped thrice around his body, both to stave off warmth and to hide the large longsword and shortblade at his side. The horses had been stashed in the surrounding woods, in a hidden alcove within the trees he had found many years past, during one of Lord Tywin’s successful military campaigns.

*I either have all the luck in the world, or none a’tall,* he mused. Or it was just foolhardy determination that carried him here, from King’s Landing.

The scene before him was a beautiful distraction. He couldn’t have asked for a better circumstance. Sandor pinpointed the location of the rebel Brotherhood almost an hour earlier. It was hard to miss the large bandit company traipsing through the woods on horseback, loudly singing and on drunken tones. No Lord had come to challenge them yet because no official lord ruled these lands, as of late. The damned bastards think themselves invincible. Sandor had spotted them from the woods. He’d been watching the Kingsroad from the treetops after he’d left Stranger and Sugar near a winding creek to recover their strength.

Today, like every other day, Sandor had been unable to rest. Hellbent on finding Sansa, he wasn’t sleeping or eating. The quest for his lost wife consumed him. Thoughts of what Baelish might be doing to her, at that very moment, kept him from ever getting a restful sleep. Even if I die doing searching, he thought, I'll finally die for the right reasons.

The Brotherhood approached the Inn with ease and familiarity. *It must be a common target for these rogues.* Sandor remembered hearing fledgeling rumors about Beric Dondarion’s lost company back when he was Joffrey’s Dog. He never imagined the group would survive these many long months in the wilderness of the Kingswood. The Brotherhood had left over a hundred hanging bodies in the Riverlands. A blood painted road that the merchants and sellswords feared alike. The group’s leader was the merciless “Lady Stoneheart” and -if the rumors he’d heard from a cabbage merchant on the road were to be believed- a highborn lady turned corpse.

But more importantly, the Brotherhood had led him to the party he's been blindly searching for, the painted moons and eagles on each man’s breast made their allegiance clear. Men from the Vale. Like the Elder Brother said. Not even the great Jon Arryn rode near the Mountains of the Moon without a full armed guard, and where there was a large retinue, there might be a lord.
Littlefinger… and the bastard would keep Sansa locked up tight. Sandor’s fists clenched painfully at the thought of that snake laying a hand on Sansa's flawless skin. Who was this man? This cunning and vicious creature? Not for the first time, Sandor tried to fight images of Sansa's prone body subject to Littlefinger's greedy hands. Locked in a room somewhere, alone and defenseless. Sansa was smart, stronger than your average woman, but likely to crumble and panic under pressure. Sandor knew this because he knew her, in a way that Littlefinger never would. Does he know she's no longer a virgin? Does he suspect? Would he try to twist her words and manipulate her mind, like he'd seen him do so many times at Cersei's court?

“You must answer for the Eyrie’s crimes, the Brotherhood demands monetary compensation.”

Sandor was ripped from his vicious thoughts by the sound of a familiar voice. Thoros of Myr… Sandor’s eyes widened. I thought I’d seen the last of the Red Priest. It seemed the fat man survived. Only, not so fat anymore. In fact, Thoros looked rather ragged garbed in torn red robes that hung from his starved frame.

“Monetary compensation!” the puffed up knight spat and drew his sword, “I will not bend to this madness!”

The men behind the knight, household guards by the look of them, followed suit and drew their steel. Sandor’s eyes drifted behind the Brotherhood and toward the stables. An inconspicuous brown door rested on the eastward facing wall of the Inn. A door he’d used in a past life. While these fools hacked at each other, he could use the distraction to reach the door and the kitchen stairway that led to the upper halls. Baelish wasn’t stupid enough to keep her on the first floor landing.

Another eerie croaking sound filled the air and Thoros stepped forward.

“Lysa Arryn betrayed her kin when she withdrew her armies to the safety of the Eyrie. Abandoned a cause which she knew to be noble. The King’s death lay partially at her hands--”

“The halfman killed the King, not Lady Lysa,” the knight said with a sneer, “Don’t lay dead bodies where they don’t belong.”

“The King in the North, not the incestuous Joffrey.”

“Who gives a bleeding fuck about the King in the North! He’s dead. Their cause is dead. Tommen is King here,” one of the guards piped up. A stocky looking man with a handlebar mustache and dirty leather vest nodded in agreement, swinging his handaxe experimentally.

The knight from the Vale stepped forward boldly, as if to end this argument by force, and swung his sword, severing the neck of the woman’s mount. Thoros pulled her off the rearing beast as it fell to the ground. The beast flailing helplessly as its lifeblood pooled in the dirt, it's death witnessed by many.

While the group was transfixed by the dying horse, Sandor crept stealthily across the treeline and reached the edge of the stables. He fell into the shadows there. Now, only the road stood between him and the side door. The knighted fool was still grandstanding in front of the inn’s entrance, drawing the attention of the surrounding men and a few children who peered curiously out the inn’s windows.

“There is your King in the North,” the knight said after a pause and pointed at the horse with his steel, “I’m done with these bandits and thieves. Begone! Before we cast you all into the Seven Hells.”
Sandor lay crouched and waiting. Thoros’ reply was muffled by the sound of his own beating heart, the whistling of the snow and the crack of wood as one of the archers in the Brotherhood sent out a replying arrow. The arrow lay imbedded in the walls of the inn, a mere inch from the man’s head.

“I assure you, we have the Inn surrounded. Let us make this a peaceful exchange.”

“Exchange?” A new figure stepped onto the dim light of the Inn’s porch. “Pardon me, Ser Thoros. Your deal sounds a great deal more like a robbery, than a fair trade.”

**Littlefinger.** Sandor suppressed his boiling rage and the urge to race through the line and wrap his hands around the bastard’s throat. The sound of that man’s sugar sweet voice was enough to make his hands shake with uncontrollable anger. *But if Baelish was here, so was…*

Sandor’s eyes squinted in the dark. A movement on the upper floor caught his eye and his vision settled on the upper middle window. A flash of light red, pale skin. Blue eyes watching the scene below. Sandor stopped breathing. *Sansa.* Relief and concern flooded his veins, sending his heart into his throat while his stomach dropped to the ground at the seemingly insurmountable odds of escaping unnoticed.

*I’m so close now, I can’t let her slip away,* he growled internally and gripped the dragonbone blade. *I won’t let her slip away.*

“I am not Tywin Lannister, and gold doesn’t flow in rivers through the Vale. We are simple travelers. We need our money to eat and drink, and travel with warm clothes. I am not a rich man and I simply cannot afford to make restitutions for a war long since ended, and crimes I did not commit.”

Sansa wavered at the window before she was gone. Sandor could have sworn there was another man there with her, or possibly woman in leathers. A companion or a guard? Could he make their death quick and soundless?

The warbling, croaking sound drifted toward him again, “Lord Baelish, the exchange is really very simple. Give us your gold, and leave with your lives.”

“I am sorry, Ser Thoros,” Baelish was already stepping backward behind his guards, “I cannot accept these terms. Unless my countings gone sour, you’re outnumbered and dare I say it, outmatched.”

The knight launched himself forward at Ser Thoros at the same time the man on Baelish’s left fell to a well placed arrow between the eyes. Another arrow came from the bushed and the guards clashed with the starving Brotherhood. Sandor raced past the stables. His injured leg slowed him measurably and he cursed it over and over again in his head. Reaching the Inn’s eastward facing door, he grasped the wooden handle and wrenched the door open, ducking into the Inn’s kitchen.

The kitchen was warm and inviting, but a set of furious blue eyes made him feel less than welcome.

“Welcome to the Inn, Hound.”

---

Mya grabbed her arm harshly and pulled her towards the door. Sansa gasped in pain as her wrist twisted but it made no difference. The bastard girl’s face was determined. “The Lord told me to protect you so I’ll do my best, my lady.”

As she was talking, Mya grabbed the bag hanging on the bag of the door and then pulled her into the
hallway, making for the large staircase that they’d come up only moment before. “That woman means us harm, means everyone harm. And I would bet every one of my donkeys that she’s not interested in your title. Lady Stoneheart wants to make the world a graveyard.”

A shiver of fear raced down Sansa’s spine at Mya’s words. “Will you take me back toward King’s Landing?” Towards Sandor…?

“Seven Hells, are you mad? There might be more of them out there! I’m taking you to the Vale, where it’s safe.” Mya said with a huff.

“What? No,” Sansa protested weakly as she was pulled down the large staircase. “Mya, please.”

But Mya Stone wasn’t listening. “We’ll go out the side, by the kitchen. Take one of the horses and make for the High Pass. We’ll wait there for Hardyng’s party to join us. Coleman sent a message days ago, before we left the city. They ought to be close now.”

The common room of the inn was now vacated, little eyes and grubby hands hid beneath the floorboards and in the rafters. Waiting for the power struggle outside to be resolved. Sansa felt her heart clench in sympathy, knowing that the fate of all these little children may yet lay in the hands of the lone hedge knight, Ser Gendy.

From the front of the hall, raised voices came from the open set of large doors. Lord Baelish took one step backwards, and then another, before slamming closed the doors to the inn and spinning around, knife drawn.

Thunk, thunk, thunk. A series of three arrows could be heard impaling themselves against the inn’s walls. Sansa gasped in shock and Littlefinger’s eyes snapped to her.

“Ah, Sansa. Mya. Good. Good.” Baelish the Lord collected himself quickly and slipped the knife into his sleeve. A look of terrifying calm settled over his features, “All is in order. We’ve no time to lose. Hurry now.”

Mya withdrew from Sansa and drew the shortblade at her side, twirling it skillfully in her hand. Oh no… Sansa thought. All is in order? Had Littlefinger planned this? Was this another play in the endless Game of Thrones? Does he still serve Cersei even in death? With a look of horror, she turned to find Baelish suddenly at her side.

“Sansa,” a soft hand gripped her arm and Sansa shivered with disgust, “My lady, your life is in danger. Quickly, we must ride away from here and take shelter in the woods. Away from these vermin.”

Sansa looked back at Mya as Petyr’s grip tightened and he began to pull her into the depths of the large inn, Mya’s back turned on her and Sansa had one last glimpse of the girl throwing open the doors and rushing outside, dodging a blade thrust in her direction.

“All is in order?” Sansa whispered to herself, and then out loud, “All is in order?” she glared at the back of Lord Baelish’s head.

Wrenching her hand out of the older man’s grasp she shouted in indignation. “You knew! You knew this-that Brotherhood would come here tonight!” Sansa reeled backwards, placing a bar stool strategically between them. The eyes of the Inn's children flickered, some even disappeared, but none came to assist the maiden.

"Where are you taking me really?"
And then, Petyr Baelish seemed to change and contort himself before her eyes. Gone was the chilling calm of his aura, and the smooth, pleasant curve of his mouth. Gone was Petyr’s air of nobility and humility, replaced by an attitude of sharp arrogance. He smirked maliciously. Hands came to rest on both sides of the chair between them, and he moved it slowly out of the way. Sansa heard shouting and a loud bang as someone’s body was thrown against the inn. She swiveled her head between the door to the kitchens beyond, and the door leading to the fight still raging on outside.

“Of course I knew, Sansa,” Littlefinger said in a low voice, as though he feared they’d be overheard. It didn’t escape Sansa's notice that he didn't immediately answer her question. “Who do you think sent the ravens?”

“Ravens? To who?”

“Harold Hardyng. A raven detailing the capture of Sansa Stark and the sizeable dowry he can expecting to receive from Robyn Arryn, one of Sansa’s last living male relatives. But only a fool wouldn’t expect those ravens to be shot down by the very prolific band of outlaws that’s terrorized the Riverlands for the past year. The Brotherhood. Gold and a maiden woman. An irresistible dangling fruit.”

"Well..." Petyr smirked as if enjoying a private joke, "Whether or not you're actually a maiden remains to be seen. Or should I say, felt? All of it can be explained away by your passion for horseback, which you will learn to love ardently. Luckily, the men I chose are not intelligent men.”

“What?” Sansa's heart pounded with terror and she furrowed her brow. Backing around the counter of the inn, she kept her eyes trained on the traitorous man who was shadowing her every move. Growing closer and closer. The door to the kitchen was in her peripheral vision, perhaps if she could block the entrance behind her... “Why?”

“Why? Really Sansa, you’ve been away from the game for far too long, my dear. Follow my game, if you would. First, we escape into the woods, fleeing for our lives…”

“But why lead your men into an attack?” Sansa was backed against the open cabinet that held the horns for ale, and spotted a glass bottle near her right hand. “What purpose do their deaths serve? Wouldn't it be safer... safer to travel in numbers through the Vale.”

“Oh, dove. Tis quite obvious. A distraction,” Petyr practically purred and reached for her left arm. Sansa tensed and looked down towards her feet, unable to meet his lascivious gaze. “When we escape, not if, Harold will search hopelessly for his bride at the burned down Inn of the Crossroads while you, and I, ride for the North and Ramsay Bolton's new estate. A fortress you're quite familiar with... Winterfell.”

“The Boltons?!” Sansa’s head was filled with images of the burning of the Crossing and the dark, dour face of Lord Bolton at her father’s table. Forcing herself to remain calm, her hand inched towards the glass on her right, and she leaned into Baelish’s repulsive caress. “But why?”

A shout and another horse’s cry came from just outside the door.

“Because,” Petyr glanced nervously toward the door and muttered something to himself, “Harold has betrayed me to his aunt. Bolton made the better offer and sweetened the pot. There’s no time and so much to teach you, sweetling. So very much.”

“You’re right,” Sansa breathed. “I am so stupid. How could I not see?”
In the flickering candlelight. The image of Lord Baelish merged with the sneering face of the long-dead Joffrey. Sansa felt the cool glass with her right hand and exhaled softly.

“You save me,” Sansa said again, “From the Hound. Oh, I’m such a fool. He told me to love him. He spend all this time, trying to romance me but I never forgot your offer. I... oh, I just can’t imagine... I... I...”

Littlefinger’s eyes widened and his hand on her arm slid upward. Clearly enjoying the moment, Sansa saw Littlefinger’s eyes drift down to her lips. “He’s listening...” Thunk. Another arrow struck the side of the inn. “Yes?”

“I won't go willingly.”

Sansa swung with all her might and the glass shattered against Lord Baelish’s temple. Blood splattered against her face and chest and Petry fell to the ground, momentarily stunned. Sansa wasted no time and ran for the kitchen. She could hear Petyr’s enraged roar as he struggled to race after her.

“Whore!” he shouted just as Sansa slipped through the door and slammed it shut behind her. A burst of pain from her knee was all she needed to know she’d run her leg into something solid. It only took a moment of pause as she registered the presence of two other men in the room before it was too late.

Littlefinger burst through the door. Grabbing her round the waist, Sansa felt the sharp prick of a knife pressed against her jugular.

“Sansa,” one of the men said. A very familiar man, with a very familiar height and size and voice. Her eyes filled with tears. There he stood, covered in mud and sticks and brambles, his hair sticking to the side, highlighting his ghastly scars. He was garbed in worn black armor, the High Septon’s longsword and her dragonbone blade at his side. From his haggard expression and unshaved face, she’d guess he hadn’t rested in days. You found me. You always find me. He never looked so beautiful.

“Sandor.”

A soft cry filled the air and Sansa realized it was her, releasing a sob. Sandor snarled at the man holding the knife to her throat. The burns on the side of his face contorted into a monstrous sight. “Release her.”

Even though she was in peril, the pleasant rumble of his voice soothed her panic.

“You’re in no place to bargain,” Littlefinger said smoothly, pressing the blade tighter against Sansa’s throat. The pressure was almost unbearable and she craned her neck, desperately trying to avoid the inevitable pain but unable to take her eyes off Sandor. She felt a sharp sting and a small amount of blood trickle down her neck.

“He’s right. Don’t move, Hound,” a stranger’s deep voice said.

At that moment, Sansa fully realized that a different blade was poised at her husband’s throat. Ser Gendry stood, angrily facing the Hound, his longsword held high and proud against the older man’s throat. Sandor took a small step forward and Gendry reasserted his blade higher on the man’s chest. The non-knight froze.

“Kill him!”
“No!” Sansa cried, causing Ser Gendry’s blade to falter. “Please, Ser Gendry, you don’t understand. He is not the villain here!”

Then, suddenly, the pressure on her neck disappeared and she was pushed forward unceremoniously. Stumbling towards the one man she trusted, Sansa thrust herself between Sandor and Ser Gendry’s sword. Strong arms surrounded her quickly, halting her fall and pulling her into a broad chest. “Sansa,” his voice said near her ear and her heart jumped with joy. We’re reunited again. We’re together?

But... why did Petyr let me go? Sansa couldn’t help but think.

Sandor’s arms tensed around her as she turned to face the unknown figure in the room. The grubby boy from earlier, whose needle-like sword was poised to stab Baelish in his groin. Looking at the Lord now, Sansa could see where she’d struck him with the glass from the counter. The left side of his face was battered from brow to cheek. His right eye swollen partially shut. Never before had Littlefinger looked so ungraceful.

“Get out of here, Sansa,” the boy said, with a distinctly not-boyish voice. “Leave these men to me.”

The proud statement was laughable coming from such a skinny, slight figure, but her voice was raw and filled with confidence. Oddly enough, it was Ser Gendry who seemed most affected by the unnamed girl’s sudden involvement. He lowered his sword and blinked dumbly.

“Mi’lady Arya?”

Chapter End Notes

I changed the title of the story too! I never really liked that title but I just couldn't come up with anything good until a few days to me when the new title stuck. I'm much happier. The other one was way too long.
Arya

Chapter Summary

Sansa is reunited with Arya and Sandor. In a moment of distraction they escape the Inn only to be dragged back by the Brotherhood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Arya?” Sansa gasped, “They told me you were dead.”

Arya looked almost unrecognizable. She was covered in a thick layer of dirt and grime that could only have been accumulated over weeks of travel. Her hair was greasy and unkempt. The sword she’d kept since Winterfell was cleaner than her body and clothes, but not by much. Sansa thought she saw dried blood on it’s tip.

“I was dead. Then, I was noone. Then, I had a lot of faces. Came back for revenge. Now get out.”

Arya, her little sister. The face that had haunted her dreams ever since she disappeared from King's Landing years ago. Sansa wanted to cry more than ever. Another Stark. Just when she thought she lost it all.

Arya was different, there was no denying it. The way she stood, crouched in the shadows. Tense and poised to strike with a vicious sneer on her lip. But she was Arya, and they were family.

“Lady Arya?” Ser Gendry suddenly spoke up, he looked liked he’d seen a ghost. “Thought… thought you’d gone North.”

“Sansa,” Sandor suddenly whispered in her ear, drawing her attentions away from her sister and the knight, “We need to move. Now. The boy’s lowered his sword,” he pulled lightly on her arm.

“Now, San.”

No, Sansa heart was split down the middle. She couldn’t leave Arya. Not now. Not when they’d just found one another again. But the danger of staying here was too great. We can disappear together, Sansa thought hopefully, like we should have all those years ago.

“Arya,” Sansa tried her hand with her long-lost sister. “Arya we need to leave this place. Come with me and Sandor. We’ll escape. We’ll escape together.”

Arya ignored her. Does she hold any affection for me anymore? Sansa despaired. Instead, Arya's eyes fell on the motionless Ser Gendry, who looked even more confused at this turn of events. “Gendry, keep this bastard still. He can’t be trusted.”

A moment of hesitation occurred before Ser Gendry moved. Grabbing a bundle of rope hanging from a hook in the ceiling, he made quick work of subduing Lord Baelish. The noise from the earlier scuffle outside had died down. Mute shouts and the occasional bang of a door could be heard from outside the kitchen. Sansa wondered what the Brotherhood or Lord Baelish's soldiers were doing. They'd made it into the inn. How long until they were found?
“Time to cross a man off my list,” Arya smiled for the first time and stepped away from Littlefinger. It wasn’t a true smile but a twisted thing born out of anger and malice that caused Sansa to shiver. Arya approached them stealthily, like a cat prowling its prey. Before Sansa could blink, Sandor pushed her behind him and Arya drew her sword.

“You killed Mycah.”

Sandor raised his hands in a gesture of peace against Arya’s raised weapon, but said nothing. Sansa saw the murderous glint in Arya’s eyes and swallowed thickly.

“Arya… Arya please listen to me, as your sister,” Sansa gripped Sandor’s tunic unconsciously drawing him closer, “Your only remaining family. The Hound isn’t responsible for Mycah’s death. Joffrey was responsible. Joffrey and Cersei were to blame for everything. And me. If I had only told the truth—” she broke off as more tears tracked her cheeks, “Arya, I’m so sorry!”

Arya remained deathly silent. The only indication she had been listening was a twitch of her lip.

“Lady Arya,” Sandor spoke softly, his whisper tainted with the promise of violence, “Your anger is justified and you can try to kill me afterwards if it please you, but allow me to direct your anger towards a more deserving man.”

Arya’s hawk-like eyes were watching the scarred side of his face as it twitched and jumped, “Littlefinger. It was Littlefinger who betrayed Eddard Stark in the throne room, when he came to rightfully remove Joffrey from the Iron Throne. He promised your father the Goldcloak’s swords and gave him a knife in the back. Baelish’s treacherous ways allowed your father to be imprisoned. I know because I witnessed it, and so did a hundred others.”

“What?” Sansa gasped and her hand flew up to her heart. Sandor never told her that before. “I… why... why didn’t you tell me? I never knew.”

Sandor looked down at her. His voice had risen during his appeal to Arya, but it softened to a whisper now as their eyes met, “I should have, I admit it. I am... sorry, but I didn’t want you to live a life of revenge, a life of hatred. Just look,” he glanced at Arya, “Look at what it did to your sister.”

Arya stood shaking, her vengeful wrath now directed at the Lord in the corner, who was still bound by Ser Gendry’s rope. The Lord began to sweat now, pulling at his bonds and testing their strength.

Sansa saw the whites of her sister’s eyes. Arya’s lips and teeth morphed into a snarl and the hand gripping her skinny blade shook with unrestrained rage.

“Is it true?” she asked the Lord, deathly quiet.

“No,” Baelish said. “Lies. All lies. Fed to you by a true demon. The Hound wants your sister for himself. He wants to rape her and steal her inheritance. Your inheritance. I am the only one truly on your side. I was your mother’s greatest friend. I have been trying to deliver Winterfell to your family for years.”

“Silence. Don’t you know I can smell a lie? Valar Morghulis.”

And she struck. Sansa screamed. Sandor pushed her backwards and towards the door.

Arya stabbed again, and again, and again. Forceful, bone breaking stabs that she executed with the grace of a seasoned assassin. Baelish’s cry of pain was broken by the stream of blood that appeared in his mouth, choking him, and drowning his cries. Sansa watched in horror while her non-knight tugged desperately on her arm. Forcefully. “SANSA!” he shouted and Sansa finally allowed herself
to be dragged away.

“Arya?! Arya! He’s dead. Just stop!” were her last cries before the door slammed shut behind them.

Sansa’s vision shifted and turned upside down as she was lifted over Sandor’s shoulder. She stopped crying for her sister, realizing the futility of it all when Arya clearly didn’t care enough to hear. Sandor immediately began to run, jostling her up and down painfully on his shoulder. His gait wasn’t smooth or straight, but it was effective.

Sansa shuddered. All she could see was Arya stabbing Baelish - the sound of flesh being torn - over and over again. The rage in her noble features.

“HALT! YOU THERE!”

Sandor cursed and picked up his pace. Sansa almost insisted she be let down to run, but a wave of dizziness struck her and she also feared any break might allow their pursuers the right opportunity. Sandor leapt over a decaying log and Sansa’s stomach was painfully thrust into his shoulder.

“Stop!” A voice cried in front of them, and they must not have been alone because Sandor slowed and stopped.

She was slowly righted. Sansa took a few deep breaths and blinked to adjust her senses. A tall archer with a bright yellow cloak stood opposing them, his longbow knocked and drawn and aimed for Sandor’s eye. Sansa swallowed thickly when she noticed a handful of other ragged men similarly armed and ready to attack. With one arm, Sandor tugged her behind him.

Sansa complied but it was futile. Men with arrows and swords began to circle the pair, closing in slowly until a dozen swords and arrows were pointed at Sandor's jugular. Sansa's heart leapt into her throat when an arrow came to rest between her eyes. They were surrounded and outnumbered.

“Who’s this?” the man in the yellow cloak asked, eyeing the two of them. “You,” he gestured with his arrowhead toward Sandor, “I recognize by that fucking hideous scar. I’d have to be blind not to see that atrocity.”

“Let us pass,” Sansa found her voice, weak as it was, before Sandor had the chance to respond. “We play no part in this quarrel.”

“We all play a part in this quarrel, woman,” the man sneered. ”If you're breathing in Westeros, you're a part of this quarrel.”

“Do you have any jewelry?” Sandor slowly bent down and whispered in her ear, but not softly enough.

“Oh no, Hound,” the archer laughed and nudged the companion on his left, who grinned maliciously, “you’re not buying your way out of this one. You’re going to see Lady Stoneheart. She’ll hand over your sentence and let me say, I’m looking forward to learnin’ it. Death by hanging? Or shall we burn you and your lady-love alive?”

The archer took one step forward, then another. Sandor backed away until he was pressed against her front.

"Nooo, Lem. Leave the lady-love alone," came a voice from behind her, "I'm sure we can find employment for her within our numbers."

Sansa flushed and was surrounded by the Brotherhood's crude laughter.
“Who is your lady?” Sansa's voice shook with fear and she prayed these men wouldn't notice, “Tell me her name. Let me see her. Let me speak to her.”

“What’s all this?” an older man in red robes approached from the direction of the Inn. His appearance seemed to break the haze of violence that had settled over the group and Sansa exhaled in relief. A few men even sheathed their swords and lowered their bows. "Well?"

The snow blew around the group furiously in the following silence. Flakes stuck to her hair. A cold wind disturbed her cloak as well as the clothes of the others. She saw a few men shiver and look at the inn with longing, all except one. Sansa's eyes were drawn to him. He looked familiar...

“Won’t say who they are,” the archer gritted his teeth, as if he was loathe to speak, “but I know a Dog when I see one.”

Sandor's fists curled and uncurled in her dress. The man's voice was full of hatred. A murmur of agreement rippled through the Brotherhood and Sansa knew this crowd wanted the Hound's blood.

"A hound is a hound," said one.

"We should kill him now," said another, "before he kills us in our sleep."

“And you, girl. Who’re you?” the red priest ignored the voices and stepped closer. He was closer now, close enough that she could see snowflakes sticking to his grey beard. Sandor tightened his grip on her arm in silent warning but Sansa was not so certain. She'd seen his face before. In fact, a few of these men seemed eerily familiar.

The man who never shivered... the only one not bothered by the cold. Sansa recognized him from her childhood. Leaning forward, she tried to see beyond the beard and heavy winter clothes. Sandor’s hand fell from her arm to her wrist, silently begging her not to stray too far from his reach.

He was thin and gruff looking. His brow creased in confusion as Sansa studied his face. The resemblance was unmistakable.


The northerner stiffened noticeably. “Aye, that’s me. Or, that's who I was. Do I know yeh, lady?”

“It is I... Sansa.”

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Minutes later, Sansa and Sandor were escorted forcibly to the Inn at the Crossroads.

Once inside, Sansa saw a blood-covered Ser Gendry righting chairs and closing shutters. The damage to the Inn was not substantial and Sansa was certain the Inn had seen worse, judging from the pleasant smiles on the children's faces as they greeting the archers and the red priest. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Gendry speak in low tones to the man in the yellow cloak - that one the other's called "Lem" - and then gesture to the kitchens. Their conversation was brief and amicable. Sansa made the briefest of eye contact with the Knight of the Hollow Hill and he nodded in her direction before jogging up the Inn's stairs. Was he part of the Brotherhood? Was this how Ser Gendry protected these children?

On the steps of the Inn - where they'd taken Sandor's weapons - Sansa heard some mumblings about “hangin’ in the woods”, and she wondered if this lady would show them any mercy at all. Would she speak with me? She hoped Mya Stone survived.
Before she had time to see or hear anything more, they were pushed into an empty room. She heard the door lock behind them and they were left alone to await the arrival of the mysterious Lady Stoneheart.

Sandor immediately collapsed on the bed, clutching his leg.

“Sansa,” he gasped.

Wide-eyed and breathless, he pulled her into an embrace. Sansa followed him onto the bed and then sat, half in his lap, and closed her eyes. Taking several deep, shaky breaths, she soaked in the feelings of warmth and safety that came attached to Sandor. The smell of him, the solidity of his chest, the scratch of his beard. She felt a shaking hand run through her hair and he hugged her tighter, “I thought I lost you.”

“I thought I lost you too…” Sansa squeezed her eyes against the sudden tears.

The rhythmic beat of his heart lulled her into a trance and for a while, they were lost in the embrace, tugging and pulling at each other to attain a greater level of closeness.

“Littlefinger…” Sansa broke the silence and this time, failed to hold back her tears, "he told me you were dead.”

Sandor snorted and shifted her in his arms so he could look her in the eye.

"Did you believe it?"

"I only believed him because I couldn't remember," Sansa cried, suddenly ashamed for the past seven days of misery. If she had known, if she had suspected that he was hunting her, she would have run for him. I am so weak... she thought helplessly. "From whatever drug they used to drag me away. I didn't recall the cloven blade until today.”

He stared into the depths of her eyes, into her very soul, as if trying to ascertain whether she spoke the truth. Slowly, he nodded.

“None of this is your fault. It was his... and he’s dead now.” Sandor growled. Pulling away from her slightly, his right hand rose to cup her face gently. A shiver traveled down her spine at his intense gaze, eyes of steel begging her to listen and understand, “But we may still be in danger. We need to escape. This Brotherhood cannot be trusted. Thoros of Myr might have been an honorable man many years ago, but Lady Stoneheart is aptly named. She is no Mother of Mercy.”

“B-but,” Sansa shuddered and he pulled her close once more, kissing her brow. “My sister…”

Sandor sighed and loosened his hold on her upper body. Gently, he extracted himself from her arms and left the bed. Sansa almost reached for him again, but then she noticed the pronounced limp in his leg. The leg he'd been clutching...

"You're hurt!” Sansa moved to touch his injured leg.

Sandor hissed and swatted away her hand. A look of pain graced his features. "It's nothing," he said through gritted teeth, but he continued to shift all his weight onto his healthy leg. He averted his eyes. Sansa wanted to shake some sense into him. How could he not tend to his wound first? How much pain he had endured? First, chasing after her abductors and then attempting to rescue her from Baelish. How long had he been silently suffering?
"Is it from the trial?"

"I said it's nothing," he snapped and snarled. "I've experienced worse, Sansa."

_Why must it always comes back to those burns_, she despaired. _Will Gregor ever be dead?_ Outwardly, she nodded to show that she understood. She knew that voice. It was the Hound's voice and it was pointless arguing with him in this state. She would have to wait until later to harass him, until he relented and let her help. _He can be so damned stubborn sometimes._

"Your sister..." Sandor shrugged away from her gaze and checked the door, "That's what revenge does." He fiddled with the lock for a while before a loud pounding came with a warning from the guard. After that, he crossed quickly to the solitary window of the Inn and ran his hands around the perimeter of the window. It was bolted shut. "That’s the power of death and killing. It's why I never told you about Baelish."

"You should have," Sansa folded her arms, "I deserved to know for so... for so many reasons."

"I know," he turned to her and she could see the regret in his eyes, "I couldn't. Please, don't ask, Sansa. I never found the words. I didn't want to spoil our time together. You know I'm not good with words. I couldn't..." he sighed and ran a frazzled hand over his face.

"All my life, I wanted to kill my brother. I lived to see his blood on my blade. And I succeeded... after a fashion. But the way I lived before you, before the Quiet Isle. The constant hatred and fear and anger. The consuming rage. I couldn't... give that to you. Not after everything you suffered - how could I bring up the past and drag you back to that place? I didn't want to lose you, not after I'd just had you!"

Sandor cursed. Sansa could read the anguish and frustration written across his face. Tongue-tied and uncomfortable, he turned away from her and she had a moment to collect herself. Taking a deep breath, she realized she didn't blame him entirely for keeping this secret. After learning about her mother's and brother's death she'd been nearly inconsolable. After her father's death, she'd nearly drown in the Blackwater. Would Baelish's betrayal been the last straw?

"Do you think Arya escaped the Inn?" Sansa sighed and changed the subject, she didn't want to talk about Petyr Baelish or Gregor Clegane, "Would she help us leave?"

"You heard her," Sandor said, with a hint of relief in his voice that she hadn't pressed the issue, and after checking a few of the floorboards he clarified, "she wants me dead."

Sandor returned and knelt before her feet. Despite their circumstances, she felt overjoyed by the simple fact that that they were together again. He was so close. Close enough to touch. Taking one of his hands gently, she whispered, "I wouldn’t allow her to kill you."

"It’s not that simple, San," Sandor’s countenance darkened and his gaze fell to the floor. "Although, I appreciate your protection. I believe your sister acts for her own reasons now. I’ve heard that phrase before. Valar Morghulis..." he trailed off with a distracted look on his face.

"All men must die…" Sansa knew her High Valyrian as a student of Maester Luwin.

"She’s chosen death," Sandor said softly, "lost herself to the madness. I saw it in her eyes. She barely cared for your presence."

His words hurt, but they rang with the truth. Sansa recalled the look on Arya’s face when she pleaded with her. Cold. Indifferent. Another mask. Arya wasn’t looking to rekindle their familial bonds and that rejection stung. _At least I know she’s alive_, Sansa closed her eyes and sighed, _and I
can erase that guilt.

“Your sister’s survived this long, and she certainly wasn’t helpless,” Sandor whispered. “We can’t help her. We need to help ourselves.”

Sansa sniffed. She knew it was true, but it wasn't easy to accept. Images of Arya raced through her mind. Arya, dancing with her blade. Arya, chasing cats in the Red Keep. Arya, running through the snow with Nymeria. Reluctantly, she nodded. “I know, she's always been strong. Wild and independent. I know it in my heart, but it's hard for me to simply... leave her. I think... I believe that we - you and I - need to stay together. That is most important to me.”

Reaching down, she clasped both of his larger, scarred hands between her own. They stared at one another silently, indulging in a private moment. Sansa traced the sight of his burns with her eyes, and she was oddly comforted by their presence. Sandor was so flawed and yet perfectly sculpted in other ways. Brutal and honest. She could feel his power in the sinews of his hands and knuckles. Despite the injury to his leg, she would always see him as a bulwark of strength. Turning his hand over, she kissed his palm as she used to when they were married on the Quiet Isle. We are still married, she reminded herself.

“I am loyal to you, and none other,” Sandor leaned forward. He paused and then gently, almost tentatively, placed a kiss on her lips. “My wife.”

Sansa closed her eyes. A chaste kiss from Sandor? She hadn't thought it possible. She was so shocked, she did not reciprocate immediately and he withdrew almost sheepishly. Sansa felt her jaw go slack and her shoulders dropped. Sandor could be so frustrating at moments, and then so terribly sweet.

“As I am loyal to you,” she imbued her words with as much passion as she could and met his lips for an even more fervent kiss. He jerked lightly when she returned his affections and she smiled against his lips.

Will he ever truly believe that he's won my love and adoration?

"You won't lose me to vengeance, Sandor. I promise.”

"You can't promise that..." he broke away from her lips suddenly and shook his head. "I'll still lose you to something else. If it's not Cersei, it's Littlefinger, or this Brotherhood. How many men do I have to kill? How many battles must be fought until we're free?"

Sansa traced the leather skin of his scars gently until his resolve broke and he pressed his burnt skin into her palm. She could feel the tension in his jaw and neck that refused to release. An exhaustion had crept over his body and soul. He was dirty, and wet, and cold, and defeated. The image of a beaten dog. Sansa stroked from one side of his face to the other, tracing his burns and his beard, memorizing all the edges of his features as she had done many times before.

"I don't know," she admitted, more to herself than to him, but he heard it and looked up, "All I want is to run away from these people, and never return. I wish the world was just you and I. I wish we could build a great keep like Winterfell, and hide away there at the top of the world, and damn everyone else."

"A keep..." Sandor hesitated, a strange glint in his eye. "Perhaps..."

"Yes?" Sansa stroked a thumb over the burnt edges of his lips.

"Nothing," he shook his head and her hand fell. Sansa's heart thumped painfully in her chest as he
severed their connection. "You should get some rest. We've a long night ahead of us."

"What will you do? What will we do?"

"I'll do whatever I do best. Leave the Brotherhood to me."

He rose and walked towards the window, distancing himself from her. The limp in his leg was still pronounced and she wished there was something she could do to make him relent and rest. Sansa couldn't help but be reminded of all those many nights in the Red Keep, nights when she would attempt to draw him closer, and he would run away frightened. How far have we really come? she thought tiredly. Will I ever be know his innermost thoughts and feelings?

With that thought, she lay down to rest, though she knew it was useless. Sleep would never come without him by her side and right then, Sandor felt leagues away.

Chapter End Notes

I watched Season 5 the other day with a friend and I couldn't help but wish we could see Gendry again, even briefly. Wonder if that rowboat ever made it?
Lady Stoneheart

Chapter Summary

Sandor and Sansa meet Lady Stoneheart.

The wait grew longer, and longer, and longer. It was well past nightfall when Sansa finally fell asleep in his arms. Sandor looked down at her pale form. Earlier, she’d asked him for food and to his shame, he only had a bread roll in his pocket. She quickly scarfed that down and asked for more. There wasn’t. He searched the room afterwards and found an abandoned pitcher of water as well as some carrots in a bag, but nothing else. Sandor gave the carrots to Sansa after she confessed to starving herself out of spite during her time with Baelish.

My lady wolf… Sandor couldn’t help but smile. Although it stung his pride that he couldn’t provide for her in this simple way. What type of husband allowed his wife to starve? Although he knew it wasn’t truly his fault - Sansa had chosen not to eat - he wanted to rectify her hunger now that they were together. And yet, once again, all he had to offer her was his body as warmth. No lands, no lordship, no castle, no army… not even a damn sweetroll. None of the things she deserved. Only himself.

Right before she fell asleep in his arms. Sandor confessed to Sansa the location of the horses. “If we get separated, promise me you’ll take them. Take them and run.”

Attempting to convey the urgency of the situation through his voice, he wondered if Sansa would truly abandon him for her own safety in the moment of crisis that was to come. Sandor now knew she had run to him in the arena, when his brother’s corpse moved to make the final blow. Seven Hells, she had run for the opportunity to die with him! Would she be able to turn tail and flee when the moment came again?

“Run where?” Sansa had asked.

He didn’t answered immediately. His heart clenched painfully at her imploring gaze. “The Quiet Isle…” he finally muttered. Except the Isle was past the Saltpans and the road was far too dangerous for a single person to travel, let alone a woman. The Elder Brother might take her in but… it wasn’t fitting. Again, Sandor cursed the Boltons and their bloody treachery. Sansa deserved Winterfell. A fortress. A kingdom.

Churning feelings of culpability rose and fell in his chest. He never wanted to be a lord, he never took oaths before Sansa. Never wanted to marry and shoulder this burden. In his past life, Sandor was more than glad to be the executioner if it meant he wasn’t the judge. Lords and Kings made decisions. Sandor was no lord. Sandor was no King. He wasn’t even the Hound anymore, although that personality lurked far beneath the surface. The Hound was always waiting to strike when he was helpless, but lately he hadn’t had need for that power. Sansa calmed him in ways he couldn’t describe, and made him anxious in ways he couldn’t for the life of him explain.

Sansa was nestled under his chin, her breath hitting his neck in deep and even intervals. The sound of the wind howling and shutters banging miraculously did not disturb her sleep. Sandor watched the steady rise and fall of her chest. The snowfall from earlier had turned into an early winter storm and he’d wrapped his cloak around her shoulders to stave off the chill that was creeping into the room. It
didn’t matter if he was cold. The cold kept him awake.

The four candles that’d been lit when they arrived had dwindled to three. Sandor saw his shadow, joined with Sansa, slowly disappear fade into darkness. He hoped their shadows would be happy there for the time being. *If only we could so easily disappear.*

Distantly, he could hear the conversations of the Brotherhood in the common room. He’d tried to eavesdrop but their voices were too muffled to distinguish anything of important and he couldn’t risk waking Sansa after she’d just fallen asleep. She shifted once more and he sighed.

Sandor ran a hand through her red hair, soothing himself and her. Even in sleep, she looked as tired as he felt. Her beauty had not changed, nor would it ever in his eyes, only dimmed in the face of exhaustion. Earlier, when they'd first entered the room, he was afraid she would faint after the incident with her sister. *Arya…* Sandor’s mind conjured images of the thin, wild mannered girl from Winterfell. The dirty girl who'd chased cats and balanced on her toes.

During their time as man and wife on the Quiet Isle, Sansa had confessed her great desire to be reunited with her sister. How she longed for another chance at sisterhood. Another Stark who had suffered the same losses. They’d only just begun to repair their relationship when suddenly, Ned Stark had been taken prisoner and the Seven Kingdoms had been plunged into chaos. Arya had disappeared.

Sandor promised they’d look for her eventually. Damn him! At the time, he’d wanted nothing more than to please Sansa and all her whims. The way she smiled and embraced him after that promise, without an ounce of fear or apprehension. The way she’d run a hand down his arm. Sandor would have promised to conquer all the Seven Kingdoms for only that, or a kiss, or a repeat of their wedding night.

But he shouldn’t promise her anything.

The last several weeks had been taxing. A brutal reminder of the pecking order, but the kind of shock a dog needed to relearn what he’d forgotten. The world was cruel. Leaving the Quiet Isle only to be held as prisoners of the Faith. The trial. Sansa’s drugged kidnapping and their subsequent horrific escape from the Inn only to be captured by the Brotherhood and Lady Stoneheart.

Lady Stoneheart. The name alone gave him reason to pause. He knew nothing about her motivation, her lineage or her powers. He only had the sense that she was ruthless and cruel. Keeping Sansa as a political piece was one decision that he could understand, but allowing the Hound to live? Thoros of Myr held no love for him. Why give the Lady his judgement? Why not just hang him in the woods with the others?

It gave him a ridiculous hope for negotiation. These men wanted him alive for the moment and that was better than nothing at all. Sandor had a poor strategic mind for the Game of Thrones, but a good mind for military might. He’d led his own campaigns for Lord Tywin before, and later for Joffrey. If he was cautious and persuasive, with Sansa’s help, they might just make it out of here alive.

The man Sansa identified before, Harwin. A guard who was once loyal to House Stark. Sandor thought there was the potential for an alliance there, but he was clearly not a man of consequence and Harwin seemed invested in the Brotherhood. He’d barely lifted a hand to go to his former Lady. Sansa couldn’t hope for one man’s loyalty.

Thoros was an old… acquaintance… from the reign of King Robert, but Sandor couldn’t hope for Thoros’ understanding. Sandor respected the red priest’s strength - the only man capable of besting the Hound in the tourneys due to that damned flaming sword - and he was certain that Thoros held
no great grudge against him for his actions as a Lannister Dog, but there was no camaraderie between the two. Sandor never outwardly mocked his Red God, but he’d always turned his burned face away from the drunken priest, preferring to keep his distance.

To sum it up, they had no allies in this Inn. Sandor pinched his nose in frustration.

Not for the first time, Sandor wondered about Brienne and her squire’s whereabouts. The lady-knight had ridden ahead of him. With a three day advantage, there wasn’t a chance she’d missed the company from the Vale. Where in the Seven Hells was she? Admittedly, he hadn’t been initially fond of the larger woman. Brienne had attempted to drive Sansa out of his arms, believing he was a monster. That fact wasn’t easy to forgive, nor was her condemnation of his character or the numerous suspicious glances. Fortunately, Sansa hadn’t fallen for such tricks and because of her compassionate heart, she’d taken the lady-knight into her confidence and made an ally out of an enemy. Brienne had proven her loyalty. To an extent.

Gods, what would he do without Sansa? Distractedly, he ran a thumb down her perfect nose and over soft lips.

The best plan he could devise would be to sell his sword once more and become a member of these outcasts, if they would accept him as a mercenary. He had a sharp sword, strong arms and strong legs, when they were healed. They’d be fools not to accept such an offer.

And yet… fools they might just be. He doubted these men would easily accept Joffrey’s Dog at their table. Would their pride and sense of honor win out? Sandor had seen their faces and heard their insults as he was pushed and prodded none too kindly. He’d never met a damn one of them. Never known them. Never fought against them. Never burned their villages or raped their women. His brother was the real monster they hated, but they were too blinded by his scars to see that simple truth. As always.

He would have to earn their respect, and that would be no easy task. But it was possible given the right opportunity.

Sansa whimpered in her sleep. A nightmare had taken her. Trembling, he barely heard her whisper of "now" before she began to shake. Her hands tightened around the lace of his leather jerkin and her leaned down to whisper platitudes in her ear. Finally, she settled and he congratulated himself for finally doing something right in the middle of this mess.

For her sake, Sandor would try. Make more oaths and promises he couldn’t keep.

A twinge of pain jolted him out of his thoughts. Sansa's knee had rubbed against his thigh directly over his still healing wound. The leg had improved but the stress of the last several days ride had torn the muscle almost anew and the pain was constant. He needed a healer again, that much was certain, but the wound would have to wait. The Elder Brother would be furious at his negligence.

It couldn’t be avoided, Sandor gritted his teeth against another wave of pain. Looking down at Sansa he couldn’t regret his decision either.

A voice could be heard approaching their room and Sandor stilled. Sansa was still fast asleep in his arms. He loathed waking her, but the voices stopped outside their door and he could hear the jingle of keys. Placing a hand on her shoulder, he shook her gently. “Sansa, we’ve company.”

Sansa’s blue eyes flew open and she looked around with confusion. Sandor’s heart thudded painfully when she smiled briefly in his direction before the events of the night returned. The fog cleared from her eyes and a serious expression graced her noble features. “How long…” she started, but silenced
herself when the door opened.

The familiar hulk of Lady Brienne filled the entrance to the room, quickly followed by a sullen looking Podrick Payne.

“Brienne!” Sansa gasped and found her footing on the floor, rising to meet her old friend. Sandor let her slip out of his hands. Truth be told, he was also close to leaping for joy at the sight of the ugly lady. Finally, he wanted to shake the lady-knight, where in the Seven Hells have you been?

Lady Brienne gave Sansa a half-hearted smile and polite bow, stopping Sansa from embracing her. Sansa froze with her arms outstretched and returned the bow with a polite curtsey.

“Podrick! So good to see you alive and well,” Sansa folded her hands and took a step back, her eyes anxiously sweeping over their figures.

Podrick mimicked Brienne’s short bow. Sandor wasn’t positive what had happened to the bumbling squire in King’s Landing - with the High Septon - but the boy much thinner and his eyes held a haunted quality. He agreed that the boy was alive… but well?

Sandor spied the High Septon’s longsword and the dragonbone blade in Podrick’s arms. His hands itched to be reunited with his weapons, but he stopped himself from leaping across the room to grasp them again. Eyeing the lady-knight and her squire, he couldn't help but wonder about their sudden appearance. Were they in league with the Brotherhood?

“Lady Brienne,” he rasped. His throat felt dry and he wished he had water to wet it with. “Pod.”

Brienne rose and looked at him with wide eyes, startled by the rather formal address. The Hound normally called her “wench” or “woman”, even just “Brienne”, but rarely “Lady Brienne”. She nodded in acknowledgement.

“Clegane,” she opted to call him, instead of “Hound”

Sansa took a deep breath and he knew she was preparing to launch into a series of questions but Sandor’s hand on her wrist gave her reason to pause. Several men and a dark lady filed into the room. Hooded and cloaked, the sight of the lady’s uneven gait gave him reason to pause. The leader of the Brotherhood was escorted by the man in the yellow cloak who'd ambushed them, the northman Sansa identified as Harwin, and the archer from before. The red priest appeared last and closed the door behind him.

Thoros’ eyes briefly bore into his own and Sandor knew not to look away. It was a measuring stare. With the door closed, they were all nearly bathed in darkness. The candlelight grossly insufficient as every man and woman appeared as nothing more than a shadow. Thoros moved first. The red priest set a unlit candelabra on a rickety old table, and then circled the room slowly, lighting errant candles with a flick of his wrist. A magical stunt or a trick of the light? Sandor didn’t know, but he saw no matches in the priest's hands. The effect was instantaneous as both parties were soon bathed in light and they were soon able to survey each other.

The lady in black stepped forward. A hood covered her facial features, giving her an air of mystery and danger. Sandor fought against his instinctual desire to pull Sansa away from this creature. Something was not right about this woman. She smelled like a graveyear. Underneath her cloak and hood Sandor could see pale and slightly deformed skin.

The stench of rot grew more prominent in the air. Sandor wanted to snarl like the Hound he once was as Lady Stoneheart crept closer once more. The Lady’s iridescent eyes were staring at Sansa in
fascination.

Sandor’s hand tightened around Sansa’s wrist. Stoneheart's eyes were attracted to the movement and her gaze settled on the point of contact between them. Sandor almost released his hold on his wife. Those eyes were filled with such hatred. Such malice.

Lady Stoneheart raised a hand to her throat. Sandor couldn’t help but focus on the dirty, broken, and blood stained nails as raspy, almost unintelligible voice filled the room. Sandor only understood the sound of their names, “Sansa” and “Hound”.

“Lady Stoneheart welcomes you, Lady Sansa, into her company. She is happy to see you, and wants to lay rest to the rumors about you and the Hound,” Thoros spoke after a moment’s pause.

Sandor’s eyes flickered between Thoros to the Lady. Who could understand that jargin?

Sansa dropped into a swift curtsey. Sandor had to marvel at the perfection of that single act. Even in danger, his Little Bird could charm the Stranger himself with such graceful movements.

“Lady Stoneheart,” Sansa began smoothly, “I thank you for your welcome and your hospitality. I would also lay rest to the rumor surrounding myself and my disappearance from the capital.”

“If I may, my lady,” Brienne spoke up for the first time, her voice weary and lifeless. Sandor couldn’t help but note how listless the normally passionate lady-knight had become. What had transpired between herself and the Brotherhood? How did she come to know these characters? “I’ve informed Lady Stoneheart, your mother, of what has transpired since your departure from King’s Landing, many months ago.”

“My… my mother?” Sandor clenched his fist as he saw Sansa’s eyelids flutter.

*What new game is this?* Sandor snarled to himself. The urge to reach for his swords renewed itself, and he fought against the Hound’s baser instincts.

Sansa looked close to fainting. The lady took another step closer and the smell of death washed over them again. Sandor began to have a sneaking suspicion, as he likened that smell to the once living corpse of his brother.

*The Gods couldn’t have created two of them?* His nostrils curled in disgust.

“My mother is dead. She died at the Twins.”

Sansa’s voice was frail. Lady Brienne had lowered her head. Suddenly, the memory of the lady-knight’s arrival at the Quiet Isle returned to him, and he recalled that Lady Brienne first swore an oath to Lady Catelyn.

“Yes, Lady Catelyn is dead,” Thoros of Myr stepped forward with his lit candle, “but the Lord of Light has mercifully brought her back from death to serve his will. Beric Dondarrion transferred his lifeforce to her in one last act of mercy, and Lady Stoneheart was born on the banks of the Green Fork.”

“Sssansaa,” the lady hissed and croaked, lowering her cloak to reveal a face more scarred than his own. Sandor recoiled slightly in shock. Twas the face of Lady Catelyn, of that there was no doubt, but changed. Mutilated. The lady’s skin appeared sickly, and Sandor surmised her body had been submerged in water for a long period of time. What remained of her hair was chalk white, and her face was a network of clawmarks, connected and completed by the gaping wound in her throat. “C-c-come.”
The lady held out her hand to Sansa, who stood unmoving. Sandor still had a hold on his wife's wrist that he wasn’t willing to part with. Fortunately, Sansa remained frozen in shock but Sandor wanted nothing more than to shield her from this horror. It was one thing to bring back the body of his brother, who’d already been a monster, but to torment Sansa with the dead face of her beloved mother? Sandor edged closer to his wife, and subsequently, the swords at Podrick’s sides.

Brienne caught his eye and gave a slight shake of her head, no. Sandor stared at her. What was she planning? He debated for a moment internally. Should he trust this woman? Could he trust this woman?

“Sssansaa,” the diseased Catelyn Stark croaked again.

Sansa took a small step backwards and her back bumped against his chest. Sandor could feel her body shaking. “No… no,” she whispered in horror. “Wh-what are you?”

Once again, the Lady raised a hand to her throat and this time, without a hood, Sandor could see her struggle to close the open wound at her neck so that she could speak. A trickle of blood and something viscous and yellow trailed over her hand and down her neck. She may have had the face of Lady Catelyn, but she was definitely a corpse. The entire display was unnatural and he slightly felt sick to his stomach at the sight. Everything was repulsive about this incarnation of Lady Catelyn - her scent, her skin, those eyes, the throat, the shambiling way she walked - she wasn’t right.

Sansa visibly shirked away from her dead mother. She was now pressed completely against his front, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the other men in the room. Brienne was used to such displays of affection and protection between them, but the men - Harwin and “Lem” - shot him a nasty glare. Thoros hid his emotions well, but a brief speculative look crossed his face before it was blank once more.

More croaking and hissing.

“Lady Stoneheart rose after the kiss of fire,” Thoros of Myr translated plainly, “she has been seeking justice for the lives lost during the War of Five Kings.”

The red priest looked mildly unhappy to be saying those last words, as if he was forced to swallow something unpleasant. Interesting, Sandor thought, could it be possible that the lady’s leadership has been called into question before?

From her robes, the Lady withdrew a wooden circle. A prayer wheel of the Faith of the Seven. Sandor recognized the wooden structure from his time on the Quiet Isle. However, Sansa seemed to be particularly affected by its presence, judging by her shaky gasp. The wheel was extended towards Sansa.

“You wanted nothing more than to be Queen. You begged me for a betrothal to Joffrey, Lannister swine.”

Sansa’s hand outstretched towards the wheel. A finger almost touched it’s edge before she retracted it, as if burnt. A long, tense moment passed as Sansa stared at the wheel, and then the face of the corpse in front of her. No one dare interrupt the fragile moment.

Finally, Sansa reached for him. Sandor’s right hand on her wrist was suddenly held in a vice gripe. She swayed lightly on her feet, shocked by her mother’s gruesome presence, no doubt.

“M-mother? Wh-what happened to you? Your face…?”

The corpse responded the only way it knew how, and Thoros was forced to translate Lady
Stoneheart’s words.

Thoros wove the tale of Lady Catelyn’s revival, starting with the Red Wedding. The massacre was retold in full, from Lady Catelyn’s perspective, and the lady spared her daughter no gruesome detail. Sansa listened with rapt horror as her mother detailed her awakening, the loyalty of the Brotherhood, and her subsequent initiative to wipe out any remaining Stark opposers. She listed the many deaths she’d accomplished and the trickery she used to lure Lannister and Frey soldiers into her hanging traps. Like a black widow, Sandor thought.

“I vowed to get revenge. For my son, Robb, and my husband. I will not rest until they’ve all paid with blood.”

With that final statement, Lady Stoneheart fell silent. During the story, Sansa had dropped all pretense of not seeking comfort, and both her hands were clutching his arm. Her head was shaking in disbelief. Red Gods. Living Dead. Hanging man after man.

Sandor was also apprehensive, but for other reasons. Lady Stoneheart had proven she followed no man’s laws. A sinking feeling in his stomach told him that she wouldn’t forgive his association with the Lannisters so easily. He would already be dead without his association to Sansa.

“I… I find this very difficult to believe and yet,” Sansa swallowed, but to her credit, soldiered on admirably, “I also cannot deny the evidence in front of me. The proof you’ve provided and your resemblance to my mother.”

“I am your mother, Sansa.”

The Lady extended another hand, this time containing a rolled up piece of parchment. Sansa shakily took the proffered piece of paper, cringing when she made contact with the dead woman’s blotchy skin.

Sansa unrolled the tiny scroll and gasped. The Spider had remained good on his word and delivered Sansa’s cryptic message many months ago. Sandor vaguely recalled the charcoal missive they’d sent on the beach, with the boy that Varys employed. Had she kept the letter hidden on her person all this time? Surely, that bespoke of the affection a mother still held for her daughter.

Mama,

I have run out the back door with the Dog. Do not fear for me, I am safe. I hope to see you soon.

Peaches

Sansa’s eyes watered. “I didn’t think you’d received this,” she whispered. “I never knew. The Red Wedding occurred and I thought all was lost.”

“The Gods have given me a second chance to right the wrongs we suffered, Sansa.”

Suddenly, he was jerked backwards. Sansa was pulled away from him and he yelped in pain as Lem punched his injured thigh. He saw stars in his vision and heard Sansa yell.

“NO! Mother, you don’t understand!”

“What is there to understand?” Thoros translated blithely, “He is a Dog.”

When his vision cleared he was being held back by the northman, Harwin, the archer, and the man in yellow. It crossed his mind that they must consider him a considerable threat if they deemed it
necessary for three men to hold him down. Brienne and Podrick still had not moved, but the pair looked rather distressed at this turn of events. Sansa was pulling at Harwin’s arms and trying, but failing, to insert herself between him and the other men. Sandor knew it was fruitless, but his heart warmed at the visible display of devotion. *Let them see how she refuses to cooperate,* he thought triumphantly, *I am no maiden thief.*

“Sssseparate thhhhhem,” Lady Stoneheart said and the archer placed an arm between himself and Sansa but the lady was having none of it.

“NO! No, wait! Let me speak!” Sansa pulled at the archer’s arm and after failing to physically stop the proceedings, spun around toward her mother. “Sandor didn’t kidnap me. I went willingly with him. He saved me from Joffrey and the Kingsguard. He was my only protector in that prison! Please mother! I would have died without him. He saved my life!”

Sansa had gripped the collar of his tunic with both hands and refused to let go. The men attempting to separate them looked both confused and conflicted as they attempted to follow Lady Stoneheart’s order without upsetting or accidentally striking her daughter, but they’d run out of room and could no longer drag Sandor without taking her with them. They obviously had not been expecting Sansa to interfere.

Lady Stoneheart hisses frantically.

“He’s filled your head with lies,” Thoros translated, a note of sympathy in his voice, “he is the Kingsguard you ran from. He is a Lannister man. Have you forgotten they killed your father?”

“I didn’t kill Ned Stark,” Sandor spoke for the first time, breaking the illusion of his compliance. The archer jerked him violently at a warning to stay quiet but Sandor paid him no heed. They wouldn’t do anything to him with Sansa clinging to his tunic. His wife’s grip tightened at his words and she turned panicked blue eyes on him. “Joffrey did, and I abandoned him during the Blackwater. I saved your daughter from torture and death.”

Sandor tried to instill as much confidence in his voice as possible, despite the immediate danger. *I am not afraid of these green boys,* his gaze narrowed for a moment on the swords that Podrick still carried, before he quickly looked away, mind working furiously. Sansa was nodding her head furiously in agreement.

Lady Stoneheart was clearly enraged at his response. A series of harsh groans and hisses emitted from her mouth. Sandor noticed a few tears slip down Sansa’s cheeks.

“If that is true,” Thoros spoke for the lady, “why did you not bring my daughter to me immediately? You knew the location of her brother’s armies and yet you secreted her away for your own pleasure. You ruined her reputation across Westeros and demeaned her as a lady,” Thoros shot an apologetic look at Sansa for his next words, “You dishonored her as your whore, and manipulated her against her family.”

A shocked silence followed Lady Stoneheart’s words as Sansa opened and closed her mouth, too offended to muster a response. Meanwhile, Sandor cringed. *You dishonored her as your whore,* echoed in his head. A wave of guilt washed over him. That was how the rest of the Seven Kingdom’s saw his actions, he knew, but it was difficult to hear his worst fears articulated by this woman, who so clearly despised him. Sansa was dishonored. Not physically by rape, but in the eyes of other lords and ladies, she had lowered herself. Lady Stoneheart's words held a kernel a truth. A truth he’d been unwilling to face.

The man called Lem punched his leg again to drive home Lady Stoneheart's words. Sandor couldn’t
help but cry out in pain. Seven Hells that hurt! He closed his eyes against the wave of nausea that followed, only opening them when a slapping sound filtered through his concentration. He felt a set of two hands release him.

Sansa right hand was suspended in air and she was glaring at the yellow cloaked member of the Brotherhood. A look of consternation crossed Lem’s face but to Sander’s surprise, it wasn’t the yellow cloaked man man who’d released his hold, it was the northman. Harwin had taken a step back and now surveyed the scene with an expression of resignation.

“I take no part in this,” he stated simply and left the room.

Lady Stoneheart’s eyes followed him and she hissed something unintelligible at her husband’s once-loyal guard. Harwin froze and then spoke, “then I will leave. It is past time I returned north.”

And with that, the man was gone. Sandor envied him his easy escape. He was still held strongly by the two other men, neither were as willing to abandon their post as the northman, and they remained unmoved by Sansa’s actions.

Lady Stoneheart hissed and Thoros filled in the words, “Sansa, let go. You must abandon this farce.”

“Mother…” Sansa was crying in earnest now, unable to hold back her tears. Sandor battled internal feelings of anger and injustice, but knew it was best to keep his mouth shut. Sansa was the only person who stood a chance in convincing the Lady Stoneheart of his innocence. “You’ve only heard lies,” she said softly, with a genuine plea, “I fell in love with the Hound. Joffrey held me captive for years. He ordered the Kingsguard to strip me and beat me. Sandor was the only one of them who refused to raise a hand against me. He saved me from rape during the riot when Joffrey ordered that I be left for dead. He defied the King! We escaped together and I married him on the Quiet Isle afterwards. He never touched me without my consent.”

Lady Stoneheart’s remained a stone. Admittedly, it was difficult to ascertain if she was experiencing any emotion at all. The lady’s face never changed expression. It seemed she was full of hate.

“Please, mother. You wanted me to be happy. You told me, when I asked to go to King’s Landing, that you wanted me to be happy.” Sansa took a shuddering breath, “If you ever held any love for me, you’ll release him.”

A long silence followed. The archer and Lem loosened their hold, but not without shooting him equally disdainful looks, clearly under the impression that he’d coerced Sansa into such a confession of love. Sandor didn’t care what those sods thought, as long as Lady Stoneheart could be convinced of his worth.

“I can fight for you,” Sandor spoke for the second time, and all eyes turned to him. “My sword sentenced Cersei Lannister to death. I hold no love for my former masters, or the Freys, and the Boltons deserve death for what they’ve done.”

“No!” Sansa’s eyes were wide and fearful. “No. I won’t let you be a dog again. Not for my mother. Not for anyone.”

Sandor fell silent. Gazing into her eyes he couldn’t deny that it would never be his wish to serve anyone in that manner ever again, but what choice did they have? He would sell his soul, if it guaranteed safe passage for them.

“You want me to arm you?” the Lady’s lip curled as Thoros translated her croaks. “No. Never. If my daughter cannot be dissuaded of your falsehood now, she will be later. With time, I will mold her in
the successor of my work. I will separate you, and soon, she will see reason. Soon, she will call for your death. Now. Put him in the cages.”

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