This Time, We'll Do Better

by LadyTP

Summary

Sansa Tully, a totally modern girl with a profound love for all things past, finally gets to visit the famous historical Red Keep - but the guided tour turns harrowing once she steps across the mysterious threshold and finds herself in the royal court dripping with plots and treachery. Who to trust, how to get back - and most of all; could she fix things that went horribly wrong in the past?

Parallel to Sansa’s path, Arya Stark finds an unexpected friend in the Street of Steel and embarks on a journey of her own; Brienne of Tarth tries to escape false accusations only to find herself in the company of Kingslayer, the most annoying man in the Seven Kingdoms; and Lady Catelyn tries to navigate through the landscape of political intrigue in the hopes of being united with the man she loves, the man who changed from a stranger to a husband to a lover.

Canon AU time-travel story, where hopefully this time, forewarned, they will do better. Book canon, multiple POVs, plots and pairings.
And now, for something completely different!

I started this story over two years ago but didn’t post it, almost forgetting all about it…but finally stumbled into it on my hard drive again. I aim to pick up from where I stopped writing and hope that all my initial plans for this story – to be more than just a simple love story or a limited character study – come to the intended fruition. What I really want to write is a plot-driven story about how things could have turned better… I guess we’ll see how it goes!

The story will include many characters and many POVs, although Sansa is the main protagonist at least in the beginning. More tags related to characters and themes will be added as the story progresses.

EDIT 25 MAY 2019: Now that the ‘Game of Thrones' TV-show is over, might be a good time to emphasise that this fic is based on ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’ book-canon and characters, and not on the show. For all the other characters the events have unfolded as in the first book, close to the end, when modern Sansa first makes an appearance. What Sansa has learned from history is based on the end of the book canon events and some creative projections on my part - so don’t expect her to remember reading about the Night King or the Battle of Bastards or Daenery torching King's Landing like in the show - those things never happened...

Nonetheless, show-only readers should have no difficulties to get on board with this, the story events falling roughly towards the end of Season 1 for the others, and the creative projections for the future starting around Season 4-5...
The sounds of someone walking about, scraping noises of the furniture being moved, clink and clatter of something being set on the table, alerted Sansa from her deep slumber.

“Good morning, my lady. I trust your sleep was peaceful?”

She startled awake with a gasp, not only because of the presence of a stranger in the room, in her room, but also because of the odd way that stranger spoke. Formally, deferentially, with an accent that was not from Kings Landing nor from any other region of Westeros Sansa knew of.

Her heart drummed a few extra beats as her eyelids fluttered open – and then another realisation hit her. She was – as a matter of fact – not in her room. Not in her bedroom in her family’s comfortable house in White Harbour, nor in her modest hotel room on the foothills of Visenya’s Hill in King’s Landing. She was…

_Gods!_

Horrified after latching on the last recollection of her still foggy mind Sansa shot up, expecting to see a disapproving frown of a museum guard directed at her. Instead, all she saw was a freckled face of a young girl dressed in a period costume, pouring water from a jug to a basin resting on a side table against the wall. At her sudden movement, the girl turned to her and smiled, a hesitant smile but one that looked genuine nonetheless.

Sansa looked at the girl uncomprehending, then glanced down after sensing that something else was not quite right. And indeed, instead of a t-shirt and the jeans she distinctively remembered putting on that morning, what she had on now was some kind of a long white nightgown made of the softest fabric she had ever seen.

_Fuck!_

Sansa didn’t swear often, but there were times when the situation called for it. And this seemed to be one of those times.

_What on earth is going on?_

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_The Previous Day_

Hanging out in stuffy museums and crumbling historical buildings might not be the idea of fun for most young women visiting the capital for the first time on their own, but Sansa Tully was not like most young women.

She had loved history from the early age and had made it her matter to visit any noteworthy historic
sites on her — so far few and far between — travels. On her first overseas trip, she had been to Meereen and admired its Great Pyramid with statues of bronze harpies and wandered around narrow crowded lanes trying to visualise how it might have been to live in that ancient culture spanning back thousands and thousands of years. Closer to home in White Harbour she had made many visits to the ancient fortress of Wolf’s Den near the sea and to the old Manderly Castle up the hill. When she had been just a child she had used to imagine that she was a princess of old, ruling over the poetically named Merman’s Court.

Hence it was no wonder that her first port of call after arriving at King’s Landing had been its many historic sites — and the best was still ahead of her; the famous Red Keep.

Checking one last time that she had everything she needed in her bag — wallet, a little purse with a few items of makeup, a hairbrush, sunglasses, a guidebook — Sansa pushed her mobile phone into the front pocket of her jeans, plugged earplugs into her ears and pressed the play button. The ethereal sounds of one of her favourite group, ‘Silent Sisters’, started streaming through, the tunes influenced by medieval music forming a perfect backdrop for her upcoming adventure as she stepped into the corridor and locked her modest room behind her.

The place she stayed was cheap but clean, a small hostel at the lower slopes of Visenya’s Hill in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the city’s historical centre. Maybe she could have afforded to stay in a better hotel with ensuite amenities and air-conditioning instead of one with a shared bathroom along the corridor and lazy ceiling fans, but she preferred to spend her money on attractions and good food over a place where she planned to spend only a few hours in a day in any case. Besides, the location was fantastic; just by stepping outside she was swept by the sights and curiosities of the heritage-protected part of the old city.

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The tour had already assembled in front of the main gate by the time she reached it, breathless from the climb up the hill.

“I am sorry I am late!” she called to the small group of people gathered around a young woman carrying a red flag with an emblem of the Red Keep in it.

“Not at all, I only just got here myself.” The guide smiled at her pleasantly and then proceeded to introduce herself to the whole group as Layla, a native King’s Landing born and bred, a tour guide with a passion to her city’s past, and one of three proprietors of the “Red Keep Confidential” tour company.

The other participants presented themselves one after another; a young couple from Braavos on their honeymoon, an elderly lady from Wintertown visiting her children in the capital, a serious looking young man from Dorne who had just moved to the city for work, a young girl dressed in black leather with a heavy make-up and sullen demeanour, omitting to share where she was from and what she was doing in King’s Landing - and Sansa, a girl from White Harbour in the city just to experience a bit of freedom before starting her studies in the medical academy back home. The group was small but that was why Sansa had chosen that particular company; to have individual interactions with a knowledgeable guide and her fellow tour members. Anyone paying the higher than the average price of the tour must have real interest towards the topic, and Sansa liked chatting with people who shared her fascination with times past.

After a few cursory words about do’s & don’ts during the tour they started it by walking through the impressive entrance gate into the cobbled front courtyard. Sansa’s head swivelled side by side when she took in the sights around her; the tall guard towers, the massive stone fortress, the statues, the fountains, the later added more elegant houses that stood out from their mostly medieval
surroundings like flimsily dressed exotic dancers among the sturdy fully armoured warriors. The property was owned by the nation and any changes to its appearance were strictly controlled, but by the virtue of the latest additions having been built over two hundred years ago, they were nonetheless there to stay.

“And here you can see the remains of the Tower of the Hand, burned down in the year 300 by the Mad Queen Cersei, and the new tower built on top of its foundations,” the guide prattled on effortlessly, probably replicating the same litany of words she had been repeating hundreds of times already. Yet she had a way to make it new and interesting and she was responsive to all questions, to which she answered with a wealth of knowledge – once again confirming Sansa that her choice had been a correct one.

“Why was she called ‘mad queen’?” queried the Dornish man, Mateo.

“Because she was a woman who dared to defy patriarchy at the time when women were expected to be silent and subservient,” the girl in black called Melarie responded before Layla had a chance to put a word in.

“Well, maybe there was a bit of that,” the guide said diplomatically, “but mainly it was because she showed certain signs of mental instability towards the end of her family’s brief reign. Burning this tower was one thing, but she also did some regrettable political decisions on behalf of her underage son King Tommen, which came back to haunt her most profoundly.”

“Like what?” Mateo cocked his head.

“She armed the Faith Militant, which became one of the powers to topple her dynasty off the throne, and she also alienated all the powerful families of the land at the time so that when the second Targaryen conquest took place, nobody stood beside the Lannisters and the throne was easily picked by Daenerys the First.”

“That doesn’t make her mental, just a poor political strategist,” interjected the old man, Brynnan.

“True. But she was also known to have an incestuous relationship with her own twin brother who fathered all her three children, and she most likely orchestrated the death of her husband King Robert Baratheon – and she was sometimes described as screeching and shouting and spewing profanities at those who displeased her. If she was not mad to start with, she might have been so towards the end of her life – but even if she wasn’t, you know how these historical nicknames tend to stick!” Layla laughed and continued on.

And so the day went on and they visited building after another, walked the ramparts, oohed and aahed at the magnificence of the Maegor’s Holdfast and heard a story after a story about the long and often cruel past of the keep.

Sansa loved every moment of it.

She knew much of it already, being a history buff, but Layla was able to add interesting little anecdotes and tidbits into her rendition of history that made all those people from the past to seem more real, more like ordinary human beings with their faults and virtues, hopes and dreams. Enigmatic Aegon the Conqueror, who built the Red Keep with his sister-queens to whom he apparently stayed faithful throughout his life. Maegor the Cruel, who ended his own life on the very throne he had sat on while ruling the realm. Mad King Aerys, who took his joy from burning his enemies alive.

All those men…Sansa couldn’t help thinking about the stories of the women in their life and she had
a few whispered discussion about them with Melarie, an ardent feminist, whose views Sansa mostly
shared – but would not perhaps have expressed quite so vehemently. The group got into a few
heated arguments about the pros and cons of having conquerors from another continent ruling over
Westeros, but nothing too serious. After all, since the second conquest, Targaryen dynasty had
increasingly married into local noble families and in time become more Westerosi than Westerosi
themselves. Even after the formation of the republic almost hundred years ago the remaining ex-royal
family was much loved by the people.

Some rooms of the Maegor’s Holdfast held permanent exhibitions of many kinds; dresses, porcelain,
treasured old books, paintings, wall hangings and of course the famed dragon skulls, residing inside
the sealed partitions of the room. Shivers went down Sansa’s spine when she saw the size of some of
them, especially that of the famous Drogon the Black Death. She was sad that the creatures had
become extinct, but couldn’t help wondering how they could have been managed in modern days,
had any survived. Zoos, nature parks – or in the wild? Shrugging the uneasy image of coming face to
face with a fire-breathing dragon on one of her family’s camping trips, Sansa moved on.

The next room held an interactive display of all the rulers who had resided on the Iron Throne since
its forging. The group spent quite a bit of time there, its members poring through the individual
displays and debating about who was the worthiest ruler; Aegon the Conqueror himself, Daenerys
Stormborn, Jon the Peacebringer or maybe even Brandon III, the last of his family to sit in the throne
before the republic was formed with the co-operation and acquiescence by that wise, gentle man.

Still remembering the discussion about Queen Cersei Sansa focused on what was being said about
the brief days or Baratheon dynasty and its demise.

Robert Baratheon, b. 262, d. 298, reign 283-298. Crowned as the King of Seven Kingdoms after
winning the rebellion which was named after him (Link: Robert’s Rebellion), taking the Iron
Throne from Aerys II Targaryen, his first cousin once removed. In his youth future King Robert…

Sansa knew about King Robert, his brief reign being included in most histories, so she skipped him
and proceeded to what was said about his family. The entry about Queen Cersei confirmed what
Layla had already told, and soon she moved on to their children.

Pressing the next button brought forward a painting of a youth with blond curly hair - handsome,
some might say, with bright green eyes and full lips. Because he had been just a small blip in the
annals of history, many books left his brief reign out altogether, or even if they mentioned it, it was
usually not with much detail. Hence this image was the first Sansa had seen of him and she studied it
for a long time. Even from the slightly stifled posture of the official court portrait, something
disturbing radiated through; a slight sneer, a haughty gaze – and as Sansa stared at it a strange
sensation took over her; her pulse started to race and her skin crawled. Suddenly it was as she was
looking at a picture of someone she knew, and knew to be evil – not in an impersonal way like
seeing a picture of a mass murderer in the national news, but something much more personal.

Sansa had had a happy childhood and upbringing and had really never known anyone who might
have purposefully wanted to harm her or her beloved ones, so she shouldn’t really know what a
feeling like that could be. But staring at those fine features, she suddenly knew.

Disturbed, she lowered her eyes to read the entry.

Joffrey Baratheon , b. 286, d. 300, reign 298-300. Thought to be the son of King Robert Baratheon,
Joffrey inherited the throne after his death. However, the doubts about his paternity soon led to a
civil war (Link: War of the Five Kings), during which many great houses of Westeros were brought
down and made extinct (Link: Extinct noble Houses of Westeros). Later his uncle, Queen Cersei’s
twin brother Jaime Lannister, was proven to be his and his siblings’ real father. King Joffrey’s rule was short and uneasy despite his successful defence of his position from the other claimants of the throne, largely due to his unpredictable and vindictive nature. He was married to Lady Margaery from the powerful Tyrell family, but poisoned during his wedding feast by people unknown, his assassination likely being related to the dynastic battle. King Joffrey left no heirs.

Somehow Sansa was glad that he had only ruled for a short time. It was ungracious to be glad of someone’s death, but glancing at the image again and reliving the sensation of pure evil staring back at her Sansa didn’t feel too bad about her unkind thoughts.

She read the entries of the other siblings, King Tommen who likewise ruled only a short time, and Princess Myrcella. Sansa had no reaction when gazing at their images; both blond and good-looking even in their old age, after being made just ordinary citizens after the second conquest. Then she hopped into the section about extinct noble houses – eager to see what was written about House Stark.

Sansa had always known that her family roots went back a long way, although they were by no means noble or well-off. Her maternal uncle was an amateur genealogist who loved nothing better than to dig out stories and histories of his family’s background. He had even written a self-published book about the House Stark and its demise, naturally including in it his findings showing that his own family was directly linked to the famous kings in the North.

Sansa hadn’t really cared too much about any of that – until her visit to Winterfell, the ancestral home of Starks.

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She had been only fourteen then, on a summer vacation with her parents in the northern parts of Westeros. She had been left to walk through the National Trust maintained homestead at her own pace and she had taken her time going through the rooms, admiring the warm stone walls and the sturdy masonry, listening to the pre-recorded audio guide pointing out various highlights of the building and its estates. It was during that visit that her profound love for all things history had truly been evoked.

It had not been an ordinary sightseeing. Seeing the ancient statues in the crypts she had had an odd sense déjà vu; as if she would have been in that place before. The sad face of a young girl – Lyanna Stark, the sign said – wrangled her heart in a way no other statue had ever done. Walking undisturbed across the buildings and yards on that quiet day she had had an eerie feeling that she actually knew where she was going. After deciding that she wanted to see the kitchens she just walked on and unexplainably found herself taking the direct route, even without stopping to read the directions. Instinctively she had known where the old Godswood was, as well as the hot springs near it.

Not everything during that visit had been pleasant; once Sansa had found herself in an old lichyard where the ground was scattered with faded stones filled with inscriptions. Her steps had halted in front of one of the smallest stone tablet with the least amount of text. ‘Here lies Lady’ it said simply, and reading the text sadness such as she had never known had taken over her. A tight hold across her chest was suffocating and a tingling sensation behind her eyelids warned Sansa that she was about to burst into tears. And for what? She had no idea who the “Lady” was, a woman so forgotten that not even her name had been engraved to her stone, only her title.

And then there had been the incident in one of the rooms. It had been a room no different from others, just a small chamber in the wing where the family rooms had been located. She had entered it out of curiosity after seeing a glimpse of an intricate wall hanging in it and immediately a sense of
belonging had washed over her. She had felt comfortable, she had felt at home, as odd it sounded. She must have reacted somehow because one of the volunteer guides had peeked in and seeing her standing in the middle of the room with an expression of awe in her face, had chuckled, “You like it, eh?”

“What?” Sansa had been confused.

“The tapestry. It is quite exquisite.” The woman had entered and explained about the needlework involved in creating such work. Sansa had admired the fine stitches – but they too had appeared oddly familiar. She could do some rudimentary knitting and crocheting and could fix tears in her own clothes if needed, but the delicacy shown in those fine patterns was definitively beyond her skills, which made the sensation of acquaintance with such skilled work even more peculiar.

To round it all off, the woman had told her that the room had belonged to the girl whose handiwork the tapestry was – a girl with a same name as her. Sansa Stark, she had been, the eldest daughter of the last of Starks before the house’s demise. When Sansa had asked what had happened to her, the woman had shook her head sadly, telling that she didn’t know anything more than that she and all her siblings had died or disappeared during the War of Five Kings and that had been the end of once powerful family.

After they had returned back home her Uncle Tobin had been pleasantly surprised by Sansa’s newfound interest to genealogy and had patiently answered all her questions following her detailed study of his book. From it she had learned about the reasons for the downfall of once mighty family, including the accusations of treason used to justify the beheading of Lord Eddard Stark by King Joffrey and what followed after. And yes, her uncle had nodded, there had been a girl named Sansa Stark. No, she hadn’t been just any daughter of a noble house, but had been betrothed to a real prince who had later become King Joffrey himself. However, she had unfortunately been spurned before the marriage and wed to another member of that grand family instead. Yes, she had disappeared under mysterious circumstances in a scandalous affair later known as Purple Wedding where the said king had been poisoned in his own wedding. However she had surfaced again years later in the eastern part of the kingdom, in the Vale.

As a matter of fact, as her uncle proudly told Sansa, it had been her namesake’s children from her second marriage to a man from a lower noble house who provided the link of their family to the Starks. A son carrying the name of Hardyng but the blood of Starks had in due course married and begotten sons and daughters of his own, who then had married and procreated in turn. Never had any of the family members gained significant positions in the society, the noble house of Hardyng falling down in the aftermath of the second Targaryen conquest. Nonetheless, their descendants had survived and spread all over Westeros, serving as clerks and shopkeepers, craftsmen and headmasters, soldiers and artists. Apparently also Sansa’s father’s side of the family, the Tully’s, had links with the Starks, one of their ancestors having been married to the last Stark. The family inheritance of auburn hair had survived all through the centuries and as Uncle Tobin teased Sansa, her own appearance and family roots probably made her most like the Sansa Stark of the past, she having been described in some old texts as ‘a highborn maid with a fair face and auburn hair’.

Sansa had laughed with her uncle but afterwards, she had studied her image from a mirror for a long time wondering if there was anything of long gone Sansa Stark in her. ‘A fair face’ – well, she didn’t want to sound vain but she had high cheekbones, vivid blue eyes and thick auburn hair, and she knew many thought her pretty. She had also always been tall for her age and some of her friends had encouraged her to explore modelling as a career, but Sansa had never wanted to enter the industry based on as false pretences as fashion.

After that Sansa had always felt an odd sympathy for her ancestors, and Sansa Stark especially.
When her uncle had told her that she had disappeared from the written records soon after the birth of her son, likely meaning that she had died young, she had even shed some tears for her relative from the past.

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And many a night afterwards she dreamt of Winterfell; of the lichyard, of the crypt and of the cosy chamber with the beautiful wall hanging. In some of those dreams she dreamt of Sansa Stark – and on some nights, she dreamt of _being_ Sansa Stark.

Chapter End Notes

I can imagine some of my long-time fandom friends lifting their eyebrows; "LadyTP writing modern AU???” Yeah, so it seems...*nodding sheepishly* But only to begin with, I hasten to add!

If you feel like it, please do let me know your thoughts! I don’t mind constructive criticism either if you are so inclined. You can also find me on Tumblr as ladytp.
Chapter Notes

First, let me say Thank You, Thank You, thousand times Thank You for the absolutely wonderful reception of the first chapter!! Had I known time-travel is not such an overused and tired trope as I thought it might be, I might have pushed myself to start posting earlier!
*bows gracefully to all you lovely readers and commenters*

Nonetheless, I am also glad I didn’t, as this is a good time to submerge myself in writing once more. So everything happens for a reason...

I do not dwell for long in the modern era as you can see, and although I am slightly daunted by the high expectations expressed and what I put on myself as well, this chapter was a joy to write and I hope it entertains you!

Sansa

Shaking away the uneasy sensations raised by the image of the bygone young king in the interactive display, Sansa immersed herself in the rest of the tour. This time of the year was quiet and the hordes of tourists had not yet descended, meaning that their small group could spend as much as time as they wanted in each section without being ushered ahead.

Sansa enjoyed the slow pace and the opportunity to take her time and pay attention to details that might escape those in a hurry to dart from one notable sight to another. She saw the indentations in the stone steps where thousands of steps had left their mark, noticed the shapes in masonry indicating where doorways had been mortared shut or corridors expanded. She let her hand rest on the windowsill of the Round Room of the White Sword Tower, feeling the smoothness of the gnarled old wood. How many Lord Commanders of the Kingsguard had touched this very same piece of wood, she wondered. What had they thought, what kind of things had occupied their time?

The tower contained an extensive exhibition or weapons and armoury, including a life-size mannequin dressed in the famous uniform of the Kingsguard, whose headquarters the tower had been. The intricate suit of white enamelled scales, silver fastenings for breastplate and other pieces, long willowy white cloak and pure white unemblazoned shield resulted in the striking and impressive end result, especially when compared to the other ordinary looking armours and pieces of cruel looking weaponry shown.

Sansa walked slowly around the room, mind occupied with thoughts about how much blood had been shed with the armament present, when a group gathered around a perplex box caught her attention. When she reached the focus of interest she saw it to be a helm like she had never seen
before, resting in its own case separate from the others. The sign next to it proclaimed that it was a
replica of one of the most unusual helms owned by one of the past Kingsguard members, being
based on written descriptions and old designs found in one of the smithies in the Street of Steel,
where most of the exhibits in the room had been made.

The moment Sansa laid her eyes on it she had a similar queer sensation she had experienced when
looking at the picture of King Joffrey – except this time it was the opposite feeling, and even more
confusing. The helm itself looked intimidating; metal forged into a form of a snarling dog, prominent
canine teeth revealed as if ready to snap around an opponent’s throat. With the visor lowered it was
clearly intended to give an impression of its carrier being a hound ready to attack, only eye-slits
revealing something of a man behind that terrifying mask. Nonetheless, it was fine craftsmanship,
and being a modern-day replica, it shone brighter than most pieces in the room.

Yet despite its daunting appearance, it, too, felt familiar to Sansa – and comforting in a way she
couldn’t explain. Comforting…and reassuring. Almost as if she would have seen an old friend.

“Oh, that’s the Hound’s helm!” Layla declared. “Not much is known about that man to whom it
belonged, except that he served a short time in King Joffrey’s Kingsguard before disappearing from
the annals of history as so many others during those tumultuous years.”

“The…Hound?” Sansa whispered to herself.

Layla heard her just the same. “Yes, that’s what he was called – and seeing the helm it is no wonder,
is it? He was said to be a hideous monster, huge in size and dark in temper. Much like his brother
who was called The Mountain – another quite revealing nickname, would you say?”

The group muttered its acquiescence and after gawking the exhibit for a while longer, started to
move towards the handsomely decorated saddles and shields at the end of the room. Sansa didn’t
move – she couldn’t – but only stared at the helm.

“The Hound has passeth away, mocking gods was his ruthless way.”

“It is quite striking, isn’t it?” Layla had moved quietly right next to her, startling Sansa from her
ruminations. “I wouldn’t much like to meet the man wearing it in a dark alley.”

“Did… did he have a name? Besides the Hound, I mean?”

Layla frowned in concentration. “I am sure he did, but I have to confess I can’t remember if I have
ever seen it. He wasn’t very prominent figure after all. Without this unusual helm and the catchy
nicknames for him and his brother, they both probably would have been already completely
forgotten. You know, they were on the losing side and the winners write the history – the same old
story.”

“Yeah, of course.” Something in the Hound’s helm still pulled Sansa and despite Layla and the rest
of the group leaving the room for their next destination, she stayed staring at it for a long time.
Something in it called for her; a feeling, a sensation of odd intimacy.

“He hath served, servitude with no pride, he hath fought, joyless victory by his side.”

The helm didn’t offer her any answers, the eye-slits between the bared canine teeth revealing only
darkness behind them.

Don’t be ridiculous, she finally snorted to herself, turned away and followed the group.

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After some vigorous trekking along the long corridors of the Keep, culminating in a traverse through an old tunnel from the famous Black Cells to the courtyard where the stables at one time had stood, they had lunch. The tunnel was only one of the many hidden passageways built into the keep, Layla explained, discovered by chance by the builders undertaking maintenance of the old foundations. Many more had been discovered since then, but only a few were kept open for public due to health and safety concerns.

Sansa could understand such concerns easily after their small group had squeezed its way through the narrow underpass. The history of the tunnel and the depiction of its concealed opening mechanism, relying on knowing exactly how to press and pull a crude stone carving of a dragon on the wall, was exhibited under a perspex glass next to the entrance, but the mechanism itself was not in use to protect it from wear and tear.

The old stables had been replaced by a modern cafeteria, where Sansa indulged in a hearty meal of pan-fried salmon and green beans, followed by her favourite dessert of lemon cakes. Despite being a busy tourist destination the cafeteria clearly took pride in its offerings, especially the cakes being absolutely delicious with just enough lemony tartness to keep things interesting, and crowned with delicious lemon icing. Layla entertained the team with ghost stories and mysteries; weeping women roaming the corridors, a knight in a burning armour, mysterious sightings of green fire in the Blackwater Bay. None of them took the stories for real, of course, but then Layla got serious.

“All jokes aside, they say that there have been some strange things going on here. People disappearing, never to be heard of again, that sort of things.”

“No kidding?” Melarie perked up.

“Well, I personally take such tales with a spoonful of salt, but people do talk. And there have been some confirmed disappearances over the last decade.” Layla took another bite of her sandwich and chewed it methodically.

“Go on then, don’t leave it there,” Melarie urged her and the others backed her up.

“I am sure these people disappeared for all the usual reasons, you know; ran away from home, travelled somewhere without telling their family and then maybe meeting an accident or something. In any case, there was at least a young boy who vanished some five years ago. A woman who hasn’t been seen after she visited the keep some…uh, ten or more years ago. Have a look yourself.” Layla gestured towards the exhibit on the wall, consisting of newspaper clippings, photographs and written notes about strange goings-on in the keep.

Sansa nodded along with the others. She wasn’t really into horror or supernatural things but listened politely nonetheless.

“And some other people at earlier times, but those are of course much more subject to scepticism,” Layla concluded and pushed her plate away. “Shall we continue?”

“Only if you can guarantee that you get us all back safe and sound,” Mateo joked as they paid their bills. Everyone laughed, Sansa included. The elderly couple asked to be excused for the next round, choosing instead to rest for a while in the old Godswood to enjoy the fresh air and surrounding greenery instead of climbing up and down steep stairs in musty corridors.

Passing the wall exhibit Sansa glanced at the people in the pictures; a relatively recent picture of a young boy with soft brown eyes and a shy smile, a beautiful young woman dressed in a kind of mini skirt that was all the rage some forty years ago, an old black and white photo of a serious older gentleman with bushy whiskers – almost dozen persons disappeared in the Keep - allegedly. The
pictures were accompanied with faded newspaper cuttings declaring yet another innocent person being lost to the ‘Curse of the Red Keep’ and printed brief descriptions of individual cases, which Sansa didn't stop to read. She couldn’t prevent cold shivers travelling down her spine, but luckily she didn’t have time to mull over the cases for long before she had to almost run to catch up with the group.

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During the whole tour Sansa had been overwhelmed by an increasing premonition that she had seen the place before. But how was it possible, when she had never set a foot to Kings Landing? Maybe it was because of all the books she had read and websites she had visited? Sometimes the sensation carried with it positive connotations, like with the Hounds helm, but mostly she felt ill at ease.

On a previous day she had gone to see the Great Sept of Baelor and while admiring its many towers and colourful glass domes and windows, stepping out to the great steps she had felt a sudden cold chill. ‘Someone walking over my grave’, grandma Emlyn might have said, but Sansa thought nothing of it then, assuming it to be only her body’s reaction to a cooler evening breeze after the warmth of the sept.

However, now she was experiencing similar chill several times in a row; first at the entrance to the dungeons, then at the remains of the Tower of the Hand and most of all, in front of the notorious Iron Throne itself in the cavernous big hall aptly called the Great Hall.

The sight of that asymmetric monstrosity of spikes and jagged edges and twisted metal was disconcerting, and the ominous threat it exuded was almost palpable. This time however Sansa was determined to not let that despoil her enjoyment and she stared at the throne determined not to give in to her uneasiness. It must have worked, as after a while the effect of the throne ebbed away. Nervously she looked around, tempted by an impulse to get closer, all the while knowing it to be impossible due to chains separating the chair deemed too dangerous for the audience.

Sansa wasn’t sure what to think. Yes, the history of the place was dark and bloody, but why should it affect her so? Maybe she was getting a cold and these were early signs of it? She huffed in exasperation. She didn’t have time to get sick! She still had three more days before she had to go back to White Harbour and move to her own place to get ready for her independence and a new life of studying at the academy.

To distract her mind of such gloomy thoughts she sought Layla’s company at a time when she was not actively engaged in her guiding duties.

“I wonder if I might ask you something?” she started, courteously as always.

“Of course you can - that’s why I am here!” Layla had an open smile that made it easy to open a discussion with her.

“Do you by any chance happen to know anything about House Stark, from Winterfell? They used to be Wardens of the North hundreds of years ago, and before that, Kings in the North.”

Yes, Sansa had read all she had found about her ancestors, but it never hurt to ask more from people who might be in the know. Layla had mentioned that she had studied history at the Kings Landing University, specialising in the dynastic transition from the Baratheon rule back to Targaryen dynasty.

Layla smiled. “Of course I know about House Stark! Doesn’t everybody? Although I didn’t study them in detail, one simply can’t explore the era of the War of the Five Kings without stumbling into them. What do you want to know? I can’t promise you definitive answers, but you can try me!”
“Well, as it happens, my family’s origins are in that House – from hundreds of years ago,” Sansa hastened to add, lest Layla thought she was boasting just for the sake of it. “I know quite a bit about them, but I am especially curious about the oldest daughter of the line that was extinguished, Sansa Stark. There is not much written about her – probably because she was just a woman, so I wondered… Do you know anything about her?” Sansa bent slightly forward in hopeful expectation of hearing more of the woman who had plagued her thoughts so much over the years. Yet she was to be disappointed once again.

“She Stark… your namesake, even! Hmm…” Layla tapped her fingers on the window sill she was leaning to. “As you say, unfortunately women get so often erased from the history unless they do something truly remarkable. And Sansa, to my knowledge, did not… She was of course betrothed to Prince Joffrey, but that didn’t last long after the so-called treason of Lord Eddard Stark - which we all by now of course know to be absolute bull!”

Sansa’s heart sank. Well, it had been worth a try.

“I think she married a minor noble in the Vale and died soon after – I am sorry, that’s all I know.” Layla peered at Sansa under her brow. “I know for sure that she didn’t come back to Winterfell. I did my Honours thesis about House Bolton and their short rule in the North, and know much more about the goings on in Winterfell during those times.”

Sansa nodded. She was interested in Winterfell as well, but it was still just a place, not once living and breathing human being.

“It was really tragic and completely unfair how Bolton’s first gained hold of Winterfell,” Layla continued, oblivious to Sansa’s carefully hidden disappointment. “Not many people know this, but it was not by conquest or military campaign, but by the treachery of the ward of Starks, Prince Theon Greyjoy from the Iron Islands. You see, he had been handed over to Eddard Stark as a hostage after one of the Greyjoy Rebellions, but apparently over the years become more like part of the family to the Starks. He was especially close to the last King in The North, Robb Stark – Sansa’s brother, actually. But then something happened and he returned to his own family and turned against House Stark, gaining Winterfell by deception and because of his intimate knowledge of it. Yet in turn he too was betrayed and tricked to hand it to Bolton – and that’s how they gained ownership of the castle.”

Sansa tried to recall if she had ever heard of anyone named Theon Greyjoy, but the name didn’t ring a bell. House Greyjoy she knew of course – they were still a well-known family, owners of a large cargo and fishing fleet in the Irons Islands – but Theon? No, she couldn’t place the name. Just another faceless victim of the many wars that had ravaged Westeros over the years.

Layla sighed. “Not much good it did for him. His fate was probably the worst of the many players in that cursed war; he was tortured and brutalised and used as a plaything for that horrid Ramsay Bolton.” She shook her head, her mouth tightened. “I’ll tell you Sansa, during that assignment I read some things I rather hope I had never laid my eyes on… how humans can be so cruel, I never understand. You probably think he deserved all he got, and maybe he did – but then again, nobody deserves that.”

Sansa was not keen to hear what ‘that’ was, knowing a little about the reputation of House Bolton, and so they moved on, chatting about their respective visits to Winterfell, and the talk about architecture soon steered them away from less pleasant topics.

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The tour was finally approaching its end, the group winding its way through the old living quarters of the royals. Most rooms were unadorned, the bare walls revealing nothing of the richness they
might have once contained. Some were furnished, in the styles of different periods of the keep’s history. The furniture was real antique although it was not guaranteed that they actually had ever been in use in the Red Keep itself, Layla told them. Nonetheless, the impression was powerful and once again Sansa found herself imagining life in the olden days.

One room especially drew her in although it was just a simple chamber furnished with a period bed, a table and a chair, an ornamented screen blocking one corner of the room and a few other knick-knacks. Sansa was the last to inspect the room and knowing it to be almost the end of the tour she went to the window, leaned against the window sill and rested her head against the glass. The scene below was serene; a few people still lounging on the tables of the cafeteria terrace, shaded by big umbrellas decorated with the logo of a popular coffee brand; an old man emptying the bins; a dog wagging its tail and running to its owner. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. It was peaceful and once the retreating voices of conversation from the corridor had faded away she felt as if she was the only human being in the whole place, no matter how nonsensical it was.

Suddenly the air in the room became thick and heavy and she found it difficult to breathe. It also felt warmer, much warmer than anywhere else in the keep.

*Why is it so hot?*

Slightly dizzy she turned away from the window, intending to follow the others. Halfway across the room, however, another spell of dizziness came over her and she looked around to see if there was anywhere she could sit down.

*What is wrong with me?*

Seeing nothing but the antique bed and feeling her knees getting weaker by the second she pushed aside her ingrained respect for the rules and perched herself precariously at the edge of the mattress. *Dear me!* Shaking her head Sansa gave herself a few minutes, a few minutes only – and then she would leave.

*Only a few minutes.*

The temperature in the room increased and the atmosphere was even more suffocating than before.

*Only a minute…*

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Chapter End Notes

As always, your thoughts are much appreciated! I welcome con-crit too if anyone is so inclined, and don’t mind speculations about where this might be going or what might be - I welcome all views!
Lady Sansa

Chapter Notes

And here we are – back in where the canon resides and magic happens! Once again million thanks for all the wonderful and supportive comments you dear readers have left – they really do inspire and encourage!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

“My lady?”

The girl stared at her, perplexed, and Sansa realised she had cursed out loud.

Dear Gods! What is this? What has happened?

Sansa remembered feeling dizzy and needing to sit down…had she had some kind of a fit, was that why she had been laid at rest? Another frantic look confirmed her that the bed she was lying in was made with real sheets, pillow and blankets. But still…the room looked to be that very same room in the Red Keep, not a hospital room. Maybe they have first-aid stations located in historical rooms for guests who fall ill here?

Sansa was very confused. She cleared her throat – the girl must know what was going on.

“What am I doing here? Can you tell me what has happened?” The girl continued staring. “Please,” Sansa added as an afterthought.

“What do you mean, my lady?” The brown eyes were without guile and the girl swallowed nervously.

“I mean, how did I get into this bed, who changed me into this nightdress?” A quick glance at the floor where she had dropped her backpack was of no help. “And where are my things? Where is my backpack, and my mobile phone?”

The girl appeared visible anxious now, shifting on her stance.

“My lady, you undressed on your own last night. And your things, they are right there.” Pointing at the large chest at the back of the room the girl backed slowly away from the side table, pressing the water jug against her chest in a protective stance. As if making up her mind she then dropped a quick curtsey and rushed to the door. “I better go, I am needed at the kitchens. I will come to collect the dishes after you have broken your fast, my lady.”

And then she was gone.
Sansa tried to shout after her but the heavy door had already closed shut.

Even more bewildered she looked around the room again, this time in more detail. Maybe there was a phone or a buzzer she could press to get the attention of someone more willing to tell her what the hell was going on.

No buzzer, no phone. As a matter of fact, the room didn’t look suited at all for a first-aid room – she could see no modern conveniences whatsoever. Just a stone wall, floor made of colourful floor tiles… She frowned; somehow the colours of the tiles looked brighter than she remembered from before. Was it only a few hours ago? She glanced at the window revealing a clear sunny day on the outside. It had been late afternoon when the tour had been winding down, the shadows falling long, so this must mean that she had actually slept there overnight.

Tentatively she flexed her arms and rotated her head to discern if the dizziness was still there. Experiencing no signs of it she got up and swung her legs out of the bed. Still good.

As a matter of fact, she felt perfectly fine and walking around the room her annoyance grew. What kind of a first-aid officer leaves a patient alone like this? Why was there no way for her to communicate with anyone? What was wrong with that girl, surely she could have told her something?

Focussed on trying to find her clothes and her backpack she lifted the lid of the chest the girl had pointed but found nothing but old-fashioned dresses folded and laid on top of each other. They were beautiful, that much she had to admit even in her agitated state; silks and laces, elaborate embroidery and embedded gemstones. The oddest thing was how new they felt; not musty and faded like the clothes she had seen in one of the exhibitions earlier. Tentatively she pressed her nose against one dress and it smelled pleasant with a flowery scent lingering in its folds.

Yet of her belongings she found no signs. Dammit! If she could find her mobile she could call someone; her family, the tour company…

Then she heard heavy steps approaching from the corridor, scrape of metal against stone.

Good, it must be the doctor – or someone in authority.

The door opened, pushed aside with a startling bang and in stepped the largest man she had ever seen. A white armour with enamelled scales, a long white cloak – and a face that forced all air out of her lungs.

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“The hells is the matter? The maid is spewing some nonsense about her lady being not quite right. Is something wrong?”

The man was frowning but it was not the look on his face that scared the bejesus out of Sansa, but simply his face. It was horribly disfigured, one whole side showing the worst burn marks she had ever seen - in real life or on the TV screen. Tightly pulled skin, red and raw, a twisted mass of scar tissue around his left eye, and no earlobe but just a hole where it should have been. Other than that his face was gaunt with sharp cheekbones, a heavy brow and a large, hooked nose. His hair was long and dark and brushed so that it covered the side where no hair grew. And the worst of all, on his jaw Sansa could see a hint of bone showing through the mangled ruin.

She couldn’t help an involuntary deep intake of breath or widening of her eyes. The man caught it and there was a flash of anger in his eyes – deep dark grey, Sansa registered somewhat numbly.
“So what is it, little bird? A cat got your tongue? You chirp easily enough when it is your beloved prince that asks the questions.”

Sansa was frozen on her spot and couldn’t form a coherent thought for a while. Eventually, the shock of the unexpected sight subsided and with it came a shame of her own behaviour. Maybe the man was a patient too, or someone who volunteered in helping others after having gone through – what kind of trauma would leave a person like that anyway? And why hadn’t he undergone surgery to fix some of the worst effects? Surely these days and times something could be done; skin grafts, prosthetic ear…

Gathering her composure Sansa straightened herself and addressed the man in a way she hoped was courteous but also affirmative.

“Can you tell me what has happened to me and why am I here? Did I fall ill? And where are my things?”

The man stared at her with the same expression of incomprehension the girl had had. Sansa tried again.

“I attended the tour of “Red Keep Confidential”, possibly yesterday. What day is it anyway? I felt a bit dizzy and sat down…and the next thing I know I wake up in this bed, not knowing what is going on. Could you please fill me in, or if you don’t know my particular circumstances, maybe get someone here who does? A doctor, or one of the guides, anyone.”

She stopped and looked at the large man expectantly. He stared back at her for a long time, unblinking, and finally shook his head almost as to himself.

“So the girl has finally gone mad? No wonder, some would say. Too much shock for a pretty little talking bird.”

“I am sure I don’t understand what on earth you are talking about,” Sansa replied somewhat frostily. Her patience was rapidly wearing thin. “Just get me a doctor or somebody, or at least hand me my mobile. I can make the necessary calls myself if you are not going to help me.”

“Mobile what? What doctor?” The man cocked his head.

She huffed in frustration. “What the fuck is going on?! Listen, I don’t know who you are and what you are doing here. I don’t usually lose my patience but I am getting beyond that point here and you are not helping. Just find me someone who can, that’s all I ask!”

Sansa really didn’t like swearing – not because she was particularly prude or prim, but she just thought that swearwords lost the impact they were meant to have if one used them in every second sentence as some of her friends did. Yet on a right spot at a right time, she had no inhibitions.

Looking at her mysterious companion she saw that he had been taken aback by her outburst; widened eyes, raised eyebrows – and then, a slowly spreading grin that didn’t do any favours for his already twisted features.

“The little bird must be worse off than I thought! Mayhap I should get a maester to have a look at you.”

Still chuckling he turned away and in a few long strides reached the door.

“Yes! Good! Get me a doctor or your master or somebody, right away!” Sansa shouted after the large retreating back.
Left alone Sansa took once again stock of her situation. Something was not right. The setting, the odd behaviour of the two people she had seen, the appearance of the man... Something was most certainly not right. And the fact that there was nothing normal in this room, only historical things looking like they were straight out of the museum – except they were newer, brighter, shinier. It was almost as if she had stumbled through...

...time…?

Suspiciously Sansa looked up into the ceiling and into all corners of the room. Could this be a set-up? One of those hidden video programs, ‘Secret Camera’, ‘Busted!’ or alike? The producers fooling people into believing they had travelled through time, putting them into situations they thought might make funny TV, then revealing it all to the duped individual in a barrel of laughs?

She pressed her lips firmly together. If this was it, they had another thing coming. She had a vague understanding that people tricked such ways were asked to sign a waiver to show the filmed segment in the actual program, and without their approval, the producers could not air it. Well, if they thought she was going to sign anything after being kept in the dark this way, after holding her against her will for a whole night – well, they thought wrong!

“I know what this is and who you are. You can stop filming. I am getting sick and tired of this and I have no time for your games,” she said out loud to nobody in particular – the hidden microphones, mostly. Although she couldn’t see any cameras, Sansa was sure they were there, cleverly hidden into the structures. Had they drugged her somehow, had it been some kind of a stunning gas she had felt in the room yesterday, making her light-headed?

She swore to serve an earful to the producers and others complicit in this blatant trickery. If she only found his clothes! Somehow she didn’t feel quite herself in the ridiculous and flimsy – although pretty – nightgown. Gods, she wasn’t even wearing her own underwear! Instead of a practical bra and non-matching briefs, all she had on were loose panties that were tied from the sides with - she tugged at them through the fabric of the gown – some kind of non-elastic ribbons. The thought of someone undressing and dressing her while she had been unconscious made Sansa’s face flush red and renewed her anger.

Somebody is going to pay for this!

Looking around once more she spotted a long cloak hanging from a hook near the door and grabbed it. It was soft and luxurious but most of all, after she had wrapped it around herself, she felt at least a bit more dressed.

The heavy steps returned. It must be the second actor coming back to her, his looks undoubtedly the result of special effects makeup to make the situation even more absurd. Sansa lifted her chin and stared at the door. This time, she was prepared.

The sight of him was not quite as shocking as before, although his looks had certainly not improved.

“Hurry up girl, I am taking you to see the king and the queen. The stupid maid was blabbering about you to wrong ears and now they want to see you with their own eyes.” His sneer didn’t improve his looks and any sympathy Sansa might have felt for him for his condition - if it even was real – disappeared.
“It is over, I know what this is all about. You can stop acting. There is no way I am going to sign any waivers so there is no point in continuing filming. I just want my clothes and my things and I want to leave. Right now.”

She had to admit that the man was good. He didn’t break away from his character but continued that uncomprehending stare he had mastered so well.

“You heard me. And you can tell your producers that they’ll be lucky if I don’t sue their asses off because of this. Drugging, holding a person against their will, indecent touching. I may be young but I know my rights.”

Shaking his head the man ignored her. “Better put some clothes on. Are you able to dress yourself or do I have to call one of the maids?”

“Didn’t you hear me? We can stop this farce.”

“GET DRESSED. You don’t want to keep Joffrey waiting, do you?”

Sansa had to check her ears. Joffrey? Oh yes, of course, they must have chosen a particular period for their dirty game and that happened to be the brief reign of King Joffrey.

“I don’t care. Bring me my own clothes.”

“You don’t want to make me do this – but if it is your choice, so be it.”

With the speed and agility that surprised her the man grabbed the dress she had studied and abandoned on top of the casket, then her arm and yanked her towards him so hard it hurt. Pulling the cloak away he started to tug the hem of the nightgown to lift it higher. For a moment Sansa was simply too shocked to react, but when she realised that the man was not bluffing but from the looks of it had all intentions of stripping her and then forcing that gown on her, she started to struggle.

“Mmph, let me go! Get your dirty hands off me, you bastard! I’ll sue your ass off, you hear, and you’ll be lucky if you ever work in this city again!” She didn’t really know how those things worked but the threat sounded good to her ears. Unfortunately it had zero effect on her assailant, who had succeeded in lifting her shift all the way up to her waist. Gritting her teeth Sansa knew there was nothing she could and that she had no choice but to submit – for now.

“Okay okay! I’ll get dressed on my own if that is so bloody important! Let me go!” One last push and the man grunted and released his grip surprisingly easily, letting Sansa almost fall on the floor. She had a sudden revelation that it had been his intention all along – to scare her sufficiently to dress herself. He didn’t look like a man who would know much about women’s dresses, especially as complicated as the one he now threw at her.

“Make a quick work of it, we don’t have the whole day.”

Still humiliated Sansa gathered herself and got to her feet. The footage would prove how she had been treated, was all she could think. Very well, she would play along until she found someone with authority.

With trembling fingers she pulled the nightgown above her head behind the ornamented screen and tried to figure how on earth she was supposed to put the dress on. After pulling it on first the wrong way, she squirmed it into a correct position – or what she hoped was a correct position, the embroidered bodice in the front, the laces fastening the dress on the back. She tied them the best she could, her hands behind her back, straightened the hem and taking a deep breath, stepped back into the room.
The man was leaning on the wall with arms crossed over his chest. He was massive, his arms thick as tree trunks, and suddenly Sansa didn’t feel too ashamed after all for having capitulated to him. Trying to look as dignified as she could, she stared down at him – a difficult feat when in reality she had to crane her neck to look up at him.

“Take me to your people, then. And we’ll see what is what.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, please feel free to leave long comments, short comments, concrit, whatever… And/or come say hi on Tumblr (where I am ladytp)!
First of all, BIG THANK YOU for the lovely hardlyfatal, who kindly offered to beta this chapter! In the course of it, we had some interesting discussions about grammar and style and one’s pet writing quirks and such… so fascinating... I also like to thank starbird1 for pointing out some writing mistakes I did earlier, much appreciated!

And a big thank you for all the lovely comments and conjectures – in case if anyone doesn’t know (like, if they have lived under a rock or something :-) ) they are really inspiring and encouraging for a writer!

Sansa

As far as Sansa could ascertain, the room she had stayed in was indeed the same room in which she had ended up the previous day. The corridor looked the same…but there were no electric lights leading the way as before. Nor could she see the signs in the doors of certain rooms declaring them out of bounds, or the little maps dotted here and there to show people fire evacuation routes. Whoever had planned this, had done a thorough job making it look like the keep was still in its original shape.

Through many winding corridors they walked, the man’s grip hard as iron on her elbow, steering Sansa this way and that. He kept a fast pace, so fast that Sansa had to concentrate on staying on her feet and keeping up with him, the soft shoes she had found next to the bed being more slippery than her trusted joggers.

Finally they reached the last step of stairs, then the last turn and the entrance to Great Hall. The man pushed the large doors open and shoved her inside, following closely after.

WTF? Sansa had believed that latest by now the play would be over, the Great Hall being much too difficult to revert to olden times with its signage, spotlights, and the many security measures built around the throne. Yet the scene in front of her eyes belied belief; not a trace of modernity could be seen, even in the crowd of people scattered here and there. All were dressed in period costumes, walking or sitting in small groups, not paying much attention to the newcomers. And there, at the Iron Throne – not separated by a security chain – sat…

Sansa gulped and swallowed hard. It can’t be. How have they done it? This is remarkable…

A young man, a spitting image of the blond youth portray of whom Sansa had just seen in the interactive display, sat on the throne looking bored. Next to him on an ornate wooden chair sat a woman; blond, beautiful and regal, her back straight and her figure graceful and slender. As a matter of fact, she looked like she could be a model for any of the great fashion houses of Westeros.

The woman was gazing across the hall with an uninterested look before spotting Sansa and her companion at the door. Her eyes locked on them and she said something to the young man by her side. Hardly had Sansa registered their stare when she felt a hard pull and heard a low murmur.
“Move.”

With leaden feet, she stepped forward. What was going on? Where were the cameras and the producers? Or was this all just a dream, was she dreaming or hallucinating? Had she been too immersed in history and was this the consequence?

Other people in the hall started to pay attention to them, moving aside as they approached. Rather than smiling they, however, looked wary, some even having pitying looks on their faces when they regarded Sansa. It did nothing to assuage her concerns, but pushing her uneasiness aside she squared her shoulders and approached the throne.

“Sweet Sansa!” The blonde beauty’s voice was melodic but her smile seemed forced. “Step closer, dear child. What is this that I hear, you being confused and feeling poorly?”

Despite the prod of the tall man’s elbow on her side Sansa didn’t return the greeting right away. The young man looked at her and frowned.

“Something wrong with your manners, Lady Sansa? Why are you not curtseying to your king and the Queen Mother?”

“I don’t know who you are and what is going on, but whatever it is, it is time to stop. I want my own clothes, my own things, and I want to leave, right away.” Sansa forced herself to stay calm and addressed the woman, figuring that the youth could not be the one in charge.

The woman was also frowning by now.

“Lady Sansa, what are you saying? That is not the way to talk to your king, nor to me.”

“Is this a show? Are you filming? Because if this is, I refuse to sign anything or allow you to use the footage. I don’t know how you imagine you can do what you are doing, but this is…not right!”

The same puzzlement she had seen already too many times was once again pasted on the faces staring at her.

“It is Your Grace to you! Do I need to remind you of the precarious position you find yourself, my lady?” The words dropped out clipped and tense, bouncing on the hard stone floor and echoing around the cavernous hall. The young man who had said them looked furious, leaning forward on his throne. A murmur emanated from the crowd, people whispering to each other and moving closer to follow the growing spectacle.

“Girl!” a muffled sound came from her left. From the corner of her eye, Sansa saw his escort head bowed, muttering furiously to her. She looked around and the uneasiness she had registered before grew inside her.

“Well, what is it? Will you address your rightful king properly or do I have to get my Kingsguard to lend you a hand?” The youth gestured towards the men Sansa only now noticed surrounding the throne, dressed in similar outfits as her burned companion. They looked hard and unyielding and one of them, a fellow with a red beard and droopy eyes, turned towards Sansa as if ready to act on his king’s command.

While Sansa stood there unsure of what to do next, the man beside her moved.

“The girl is ill. The maid said so, too. She was talking nonsense like this to her, and to me as well. Her mind is addled, I would not put too much store on what she says.” His voice was hoarse and gravelly and he spoke with a tone of indifference, quite the opposite to the frantic whisper a moment
ago.

The boy – King Joffrey? – leaned back and regarded the burned man.

“Ill, you say? This certainly doesn’t sound like our sweet Sansa, my beloved betrothed. She would never be as discourteous as this if she was fully herself.”

“Sweet child, you had me worried. The traitorous blood runs deep and for a moment I was afraid that your father’s pride is showing in you.” The queen smiled benevolently but there was sharpness in her voice.

The king seemed to have lost his interest and waved at them. “Take her away, Hound, and get Maester Pycelle to look at her. I want her well-behaved, not insolent.”

Before Sansa had a chance to respond her escort pulled her away muttering something under his breath, and not waiting for a response dragged her back to the double doors. Sansa tried to resist but that was useless - he was much too strong for her. She threw one last look over her shoulder to see Joffrey already turned away to discuss with a slender man with a small pointed beard standing on the dais.

The Queen’s eyes followed her still, narrowed into slits.

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“Are you daft, girl?! What madness took over you just there?!” the man snarled at her while dragging her along the corridor back the way they had arrived.

*The Hound. He called him The Hound.*

None of it made any sense; the room, the maid, the burned man, the Great Hall, the ‘king’ and the ‘queen’ – and ‘the Hound’. Sansa’s mind swirled and she stumbled, almost falling down. Strong arms picked her up and hoisted her on broad shoulders and without missing a stride they were soon back in her room. There she was unceremoniously deposited on the bed and the man left without saying another word.

*Joffrey. Queen. The Hound.*

Sansa rubbed her forehead, feeling the beginnings of a headache. What madness was going on? Was she truly losing her mind? Her certainty of it being an elaborate prank started to waver; no self-respecting business would go this far. An employee of a TV-production company unleashed to forcibly detain, even strip, a member of the public, while cameras were presumably filming it? No, it couldn’t be.

But if this was not a hidden camera, what then?

Her ruminations were interrupted by a knock on the door. Afraid that her tormentor was back Sansa didn’t answer, but that was not much help as the door pushed open anyway.

However, instead of ‘The Hound’ it was an old man, slightly hunched as if the weight of his long snow-white beard was pulling him down. He wore red robes decorated with golden inlays and several heavy-looking metal chains rattled against each other on his neck and chest.

“Lady Sansa?” he croaked, eyeing her apprehensively.

Instinctively Sansa backed a few steps until she stood against the wall. The man didn’t look any
more real than the others, dressed in those ridiculous robes as he was, thin wispy hair standing out from a nearly bald head. What more horrors were going to be inflicted on her now?

“The Queen sent me to have a look at you, dear child. And I saw myself how oddly you behaved in the throne room. Most peculiarly.”

“Who are you?” Sansa asked warily, trying hard not to let her discomfort show too obviously.

“Me? Don’t you remember? Grand Maester Pycelle from the Citadel, a member of the small council by the King’s grace, serving with your lord father the Hand of the King before King Robert’s death.” He looked surprised and somewhat offended, but then his eyes narrowed.

“Did you remember King Joffrey and Queen Cersei? Do you know who you are? Do you know what is wrong with you?”

Sansa shook her head slowly and muttered about there being nothing wrong with her but her previous strength of conviction was slowly deserting her. Maybe she was ill, after all? Maybe she had hit her head and didn’t know it? Maybe she was hallucinating right now, perhaps the old man was really a doctor in a white coat and the dangling chains were actually a stethoscope?

Drained, she sat on the bed and nodded wordlessly for the man to go ahead.

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After what felt like an eternity of prodding and preening and questioning the old man straightened himself.

“Are you absolutely sure you have not fallen and hit your head against something, you poor child?” He looked almost desperate. He had examined Sansa’s eyes by lifting her eyelids and peering into her pupils, had felt her pulse on her wrist and her neck, pressed his ear against her back and asked her to cough, and performed many other examinations, some of them not making sense at all to Sansa. Where was the blood pressure monitor, why didn’t he talk about taking blood tests, surely he should mention the need for an EEG?

She didn’t like the way he held onto her a bit tighter than was necessary or the way his gnarled hand slid along her arm and to her waist. Shivers travelled down her spine but she felt too helpless to say anything or even to care too much – only registering it dully.

Sansa denied having hurt herself in any physical way, but he kept on asking. Had she experienced any signs of falling sickness, drooping of one side of her face, numbness, breathlessness? What had she been eating and drinking? Did she know who she was and where she was, what was her house and what was she doing here? To all of those questions she shook her head, except stating that she knew that her name was Sansa. At least that answer seemed to give him some satisfaction, but as for the others – she saw deep furrows forming on the man’s forehead at her vague answers for the rest.

Letting finally go of her, he leaned back in his seat and pressed his fingers together in an arch, frowning deeply. The skin of his bald patch had brown blotches and hairs from his nostrils swayed in tune with his breathing. Discomfited by his proximity Sansa got up, walking to the window. She kicked herself mentally for not doing that sooner, but she had been so absorbed with the goings-on in the inside that she had hardly given a thought to what was happening on the outside.

Full of dread she crept forward, afraid of what she would see. Blue sky, green treetops…and then, a glance down the yard.

NO!
Sansa jerked back, shocked, then leaned forward again, pressing her nose against the thick glass that was milky and full of bubbles in a way old glass often was.

Where the day before she had seen a cafeteria and big umbrellas and modern metal bins, today she saw only small stone cottages leaning against sturdy walls like kittens on their mother’s tits. The elegant late-addition buildings had disappeared and in their place she saw wooden structures, huts of some sort. The cobblestones were the same, but the bitumen paths crossing the grassed areas were no more. The yard was not particularly full, but she could see men on horseback strolling by lazily, a woman carrying baskets hurrying between the buildings, a few enormous shaggy-haired hounds skirting the edges of the buildings.

And when she raised her eyes beyond the wall, the skyline filled with skyscrapers at the new part of the city had changed to one of undulating hills and treetops. Tightly packed hovels were still populating the old part of the city as before, but somehow the sight was more crowded than before. Wisps of smoke reached towards the clouds from many chimneys and she traced not a single modern building, electricity pole, advertising board or a mobile phone tower wherever she looked.

Sansa’s breath shorted and she clenched her fists so tightly her nails dug deep into her skin, but she didn’t even notice it.

NO!

Despite the horrible sensation of not being able to fill her lungs with enough air, so tight was the iron press on her chest, Sansa fumbled back to the bed and threw herself on it, back against the headboard. Old man Pycelle startled and looked up at her questioningly.

Where am I, and how did I get here? Thoughts chased each other inside her head like rabid ferrets as Sansa lifted her knees against her chest and pressed her head between her legs. Breathe.

As she tried to calm herself and chase away the dizziness Sansa realised that her question was probably not formulated correctly. When am I - and how did I get here?

The old man muttered something to himself, or to Sansa. She caught a word here and there; ‘king’, ‘queen’, ‘odd ailment’, ‘memory loss’…

As distressed as Sansa was, her blood went cold from the growing awareness of how just a short time ago she had defied two of the most powerful people in the realm. If this was real, if what she was afraid of had really happened… Oh gods!

Sansa wasn’t quite sure but she thought she recalled that at the time of early Targaryen reign and the short period of Baratheons, the king’s word was the law and those who incurred the monarch’s wrath didn’t usually last long. If she was - and again she drew a sharp breath and felt dizzy all over again – Sansa Stark…

“What it is, child? Are you having… eer…another bout?”

As the old maester made to stand up Sansa suddenly knew with crystal-clear clarity what she had to do. What was her only chance. She didn’t know what the hell had happened and how it had been possible and what was going to happen next – all she knew was that she had to buy some time. Time to think it all over, time to consider her options, time she needed to be alone.

She swallowed hard and lifted her head to see Pycelle hovering expectantly above her. If she could...
convince this strange old man, maybe she had a chance…

“I…I just realised that as a matter fact I did hurt myself this night past,” she whispered softly.

“You did? How?”

“I don’t know for sure. All I remember is that I was looking out of the window and then I turned around…and I must have tripped over and…” Sansa gestured vaguely in the direction of the window recess “…and then everything went black.”

“It did?” Pycelle brightened up considerably, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I can feel it in my head, I must have hit it badly.” Sansa pressed her fingers at the back of her head and made a face.

“Yes, yes, surely so.” Knobbly fingers brushed through her hair and pressed at the site she had indicated. Sansa squirmed away making exaggerated noises of distress she hoped would make him loosen his grip on her.

They did. Pycelle didn’t try to prevent her when she pulled away and stretched herself on the bed.

“I remember… blackness, dizziness, and then I saw someone…” She opened her eyes as wide as she could and gasped. “Was I taken to King Joffrey? I am not sure, but…oh gods, did I behave disrespectfully? Words just came out of my mouth, I couldn’t control them.” She started to cry. It doesn’t hurt to try the oldest trick in the world.

“There, there, do not distress yourself. I daresay, - and I was convinced all along - that it is the injury to your head that has inflicted you with this rare condition. You have lost your memory, that’s all. It can happen as a result of rare trauma.” He looked around the room, probably pondering how that innocent looking lady’s chamber had been able to inflict such harm on anyone. “I will inform His Grace about the situation immediately. And I am sure you can’t be held responsible for what you have said or done since the accident – if you didn’t know yourself what you were doing.”

“You are so kind, maester. I know I am in good hands with you,” Sansa mustered through her tears, continuing to snuffle and rub her hands across her eyes. She was relieved of the turn of events.

Pycelle tottered around for a while telling her how he would send her a potion that would clear her mind and compressions for her head, and how she should stay in her bed for a while, and that he would leave now and send a maid for her. Sansa made some noncommittal noises and buried herself deeper under the cover, praying that he would just go.

Eventually he did; one more nervous cough at the door, creak of the hinges, a slam.

And Sansa was finally alone - alone in some undetermined time in the past, hundreds of years and then some from when she had been the day before.
Audience with the Queen

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay with this chapter; I undertook a bit of travel, then caught up with things accumulated during; you know, real life and stuff…

Apologies also for messing around with images lately; apparently according to some discussions I have seen in Tumblr, the writers are doing a really bad thing by inserting images into fics and making it so hard for the readers to read the fic in all the formats of their choosing. I have always liked to play with images, although they have never been instrumental and absolute to the story itself, but as that is apparently thoughtless and unkind towards the readers, I am trying to figure out the way they can still be there but not in a bad way. *sigh*.

And finally, my warmest thank you again to Hardlyfatal for betaing this! And especially for her patience while I am trying to figure out Google Docs and their user interface… aaarggghh! :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

It didn’t matter which way Sansa turned the events around in her head; it simply did not make any sense. Time travel – that was not real. It was just stories and fantasies, making entertaining television or selling lots of books. People did not just go through the curtains of time.

And yet… here she was, most assuredly in the era of the War of the Five Kings. And the teen she had seen on the throne was most assuredly King Joffrey Baratheon, the first of his name. And she was assumed to be Lady Sansa of House Stark, from the North, from Winterfell.

Or was she truly Sansa Stark?

And Sansa Stark was betrothed to the king, and her father was a condemned traitor.

The rest of that day and the next, Sansa walked back and forth the length of her chamber a hundred times, forcing her mind focus on everything she knew about the situation she had been so unexpectedly thrown into. Yes, Lord Eddark Stark had been executed and there had been a war as a consequence – and in its aftermath, House Stark had fallen to its knees, never to rise up again.

A cold chill enveloped her at the thought. Of course she didn’t really know anyone from that family, they were not really her parents or her siblings. But when she imagined how she would feel if it were her real father and family, she felt tightness in her chest and tears welling up in her eyes. No family deserved such a fate, and no country deserved such chaos such as the one resulting from the events being played out at this time. Westeros had suffered deeply, and the wounds inflicted on it had taken a long time to heal.
Sansa’s father was a regional director of a farm equipment manufacturer and spent his days either on the road across Westeros or at home working in his home office. They were close, sharing common sense and an appreciation of reading and history. Her mother was a no-nonsense person, a legal secretary in a big law firm, who took care of the household when the man of the house was away. Sansa’s special bond with her had grown especially during those times, when they had run the household together, Sansa helping out from a young age. She also had one younger brother who was still at school, and once again, the siblings got along just fine even though their interests lay in opposing directions.

Sansa had always been a happy child, even all through her adolescence. None of those teenage altercations and shouting matches she knew some of her friends went through with theirs. Their small family could be probably considered very dull and insulated… but also very happy.

She wondered what her parents were doing at the very moment. She had disappeared unexpectedly, just like that, and right now they must be grappling with fear of what had happened to her. All the horror stories about abductions, assaults… She prayed that they would stay strong – as she hoped herself to be able to be.

Sansa also remembered clearly the discussion in the cafeteria, where Layla had told them about disappearances from the Red Keep. There had been a young boy some five years ago, and a woman before that – and others before them. Had they all gone back through time, she wondered, or had they indeed just run away or met an unfortunate fate without anyone witnessing it?

She wished she had stopped to read the articles properly – maybe some of them had come back, eventually? Maybe they had had stories to tell? Then she shook her head, knowing that had that been the case, surely Layla would have mentioned it.

Several times a day, her maid came to her room with trays of food and poultices and foul-tasting potions, courtesy of Grand Maester Pycelle. Sansa tried to cajole her into a discussion but she was wary – friendly, but wary in a way that told her she was being thought at least as an oddity, possibly even a raving lunatic. She tried to expel that notion by treating her kindly and over a few visits, the girl started to relax somewhat.

It seemed that everyone in the keep knew by now that Sansa had lost her memory so she tried to extract as much information as she could from her maid – Jessa was her name - under the pretence of needing it to get her memories back. As she found out bit by bit, Jessa was born and bred in King’s Landing and had been in the service of the court for years, and thus knew her share of the court gossip. Although she was not much help in the matters of state, at least Sansa gained some insights of the goings on in the courts and most importantly, a description of what was her usual daily routine. The latter seemed to be not much; mostly staying in her rooms sewing or reading, attending the Queen and her ladies for sessions of more sewing and quiet contemplation, participating in courtly functions when the king demanded so – none of those though forthcoming during her recuperation.

Grand Maester Pycelle came to see her again but didn’t have much to say. Sansa assured him she had started to recall some things, but most of it was still a blur. The maester listened to her politely, nodding along, but after he left, Sansa had a distinct impression that whether she actually recovered her memory or not probably wouldn’t make a big difference. She was a noble young maiden, expected to be demure and obey her elders, and that she could do just as well whether she remembered her past or not. After all, it was not as if she were a brain surgeon expected to perform an operation without having a clue how to do it.

Such attitude gave her more leeway, that was true, but it also frustrated Sansa. She was a person, not
a chattel – but she kept her opinions to herself, figuring it was not the time nor place to air them freely.

On the third day, Sansa received a visitor: Queen Cersei herself. She had sent a basket of fruit the previous day, which Sansa had gobbled with a good appetite. The food she was being served was fine but a bit monotonous, she having been used to a varied diet of different cuisines: spicy aromas from across the Narrow Sea, earthy flavours from the North, and herbaceous concoctions from Dorne. She missed especially fresh fruit, and hence the Queen’s basket had been such a joy. On the other hand, though, food was the least of her worries.

“And how are you faring, dear Sansa?” The queen walked in as if she owned the room and sat down on the only chair without an invitation. Trying to recall her maid’s instructions Sansa bent her knees and bowed her head in an approximation of a courtly curtsey. From the expression on the queen’s face, her attempt had not been exactly the success she had hoped.

“Your Grace, I can not express enough my shame of the way I behaved the last time we met,” she started a well-rehearsed speech.

“Yes, yes.” The queen waved her graceful pale hand in a dismissive gesture. “Grand Maester Pycelle has told me about your accident. Most unfortunate, but the main thing is that you are otherwise well.” Her eyes trained sharply on Sansa. “Or are you?”

“Oh yes, I am quite well – besides the loss of my memory,” Sansa hastened to assure. She felt like a horse for sale under the scrutiny of its prospective buyer considering if she were worth the investment. Not a good feeling, but she tried to ignore it and continued, determined to go through what she had planned to say.

“I do apologise sincerely and hope that you know that I meant nothing with my mad ramblings – which I assure you I don’t even recall myself.” Sansa was ready to plead and grovel, as long as it brought her the time she needed to think about her next move. By that point, she had gathered that the king and the queen didn’t suffer opposition lightly. And it cost her nothing, just a bit of an effort in acting stakes.

“I believe you, dear. Besides, even if what you said was your true mind, it doesn’t really matter. You are my son’s intended and you will marry and learn your duty, just like all noble wives do.” There was bitterness in the queen’s voice she didn’t even bother to hide. Sansa was not surprised, based on what she knew about the unhappy woman. “Mad Queen Cersei”, as she was to be called by later generations.

Ironically, it seemed that on this visit the queen suspected her of the same. She leaned towards Sansa and proceeded to grill her. ‘Name the Seven.’ ‘If I need seven yards of cloth for a wall hanging and I have to furnish three chambers, each with four walls, how much fabric do I need?’ ‘How many fingers do I have raised up?’ ‘Can I fly across the Narrow Sea?’

Apparently, she wanted to make sure the old maester had not missed anything, but luckily Sansa was able to answer all the questions correctly, either based on her school lessons or plain common sense. She was sorely tempted to reply to the last question that yes, both Air Essos and Westeros Airlines flew back and forth between the continents several times a day, but of course she knew better than that.

Finally, the queen seemed satisfied. She looked around the room, noticing the needlework on the table. Sansa had found the half-finished embroidery with motifs of lions and castles and had made
some half-hearted attempts with it, soon giving up after seeing how her crude stitches had made a travesty of the fine work preceding it. Again distaste on the queen’s face was clear as day.

“You may not have lost your mental faculties, but you have become quite cumbersome in your craft and in your manners,” she commented haughtily.

Sansa felt the deep flush creeping up her cheeks. That’s because I have learned better things in my life than doing bloody needlework and preening about in a dress! She bowed her head and said nothing.

“You also speak oddly – is something wrong with your tongue?” Cersei leaned back in her seat, frowning. “You speak like a peasant. Not that I am overly familiar with peasant speech, but I’d imagine it would sound like you – harsh and without finesse. That will simply not do for a princess.”

Sansa didn’t know what to say, or how to say it. She couldn’t deny that her modern accent might appear different to the ears more used to old-fashioned flourish and intonations – so that might be yet another area where she would have put in extra effort to maintain her façade.

She groaned internally. Pretending to be something she was not had never sat well with her – and here she was playing a role she was utterly unfamiliar with. Yet she had no options but to keep playing.

Forcing a fake smile on her face she nodded thoughtfully and murmured something about the lingering effects of her head wound. Cersei tapped her fingers impatiently against the arm of the chair, then seemingly made a decision.

“I will send one of my ladies to remind you how a real lady and a future queen must purport herself. I hope your good manners come back to you soon – they being one of the things that commended you to Your Grace in the first place.” The queen stood up; the audience was apparently at the end. “And even if you don’t remember, you learned them once and can surely learn them again.”

“Yes, Your Grace. I will work day and night to be worthy of your son, the king.” Hey, I am getting pretty good at this! All the time Sansa had spent at the amateur theatre during her school years had apparently not gone to waste.

After her visitor had left in a swish of red and gold skirts, Sansa stared at the wall for a long time. So far, it had been more of an abstract thought, her betrothal to the king. But now… she simply had to get out of here! Then she remembered that the real Sansa Stark had actually never married the king, but had been wedded to another… a fate that didn’t particularly appeal to her, either.

She scrunched up her nose, trying to remember who that ‘other’ was, but came up with nothing. It had been a relative to the King, of that she was pretty sure. Couldn’t have been his brother, young Prince Tommen, who was much too young for marriage. It was… Sansa strained her memory for any footnotes or references in the book her uncle had written. King’s uncle, his grandfather? Gods, Sansa recalled reading that the famous Warden of the West and Hand of the King, Lord Tywin Lannister, had been cold-blooded and ruthless – and he was also very old… Surely not him? As for Joffrey’s uncles, there was Jaime Lannister, Queen Cersei’s twin. Sansa pursed her lips. What kind of a man slept with his twin sister and cuckolded the very king he was supposed to serve?

But there had also been another uncle. What had been his name? Tybald? Tywan? Something starting with ‘Ty’, she was sure of it. Sansa had heard many mentions of Jaime from her maid, but only one offhand mention about the Queen’s other brother, the Imp – but suddenly it came to her; Tyrion! And with that, a brief mention in a book about the Targaryen dynasty describing the second invasion by Queen Daenerys flashed in her mind; ‘Tyrion Lannister, Hand of the Queen’.
That Tyrion Lannister?!? The dwarf, who had turned against his own family? Had Sansa Stark been married to him?

Having learned how high the stakes in the game of thrones were, Sansa knew that her birthright as the eldest daughter of House Stark was of enormous value to anyway wanting to make a move in the political hotbed of intrigue and plotting. She had heard rumours of Stannis Baratheon having started to gather troops and ships in his own lands, and was well aware of the advancement of Stark troops deeper into the South. Eddard Stark’s allegations had unsettled the position of King Joffrey, who needed to stabilise his throne by any means necessary. All these players would gain from having secured Sansa Stark on their side - or at least from preventing the other side benefiting from her connections.

So if she was not going to be married to Joffrey, it would make sense to marry her to the second-most eligible Lannister – who, because of Jaime Lannister’s ineligibility as a member of the Kingsguard, happened to be his brother.

The Imp.

Sansa recoiled at the thought. Although she knew that the marriage had been short, superseded by a second marriage later, it didn’t help her much in the situation where the first marriage hung in front of her as a real prospect and inevitability.

Or was it?

Exasperated, she continued her lonely circuit across the room.

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The queen was true to her word; later that same day Lady Arella Brax showed up at her door. She was a tall, thin woman with sharp features and stiff manners, but she was very matter-of-fact and pragmatic about her task and had the patience of a mother cat teaching its offspring to hunt. Just as well, as initially Sansa found the bows and scrapes and gracious movements hard. However, to her own surprise after a while her movements really did become more natural and graceful. They even tried a few steps of courtly dances and again after a hesitant start Sansa soon picked it up. It was almost as if she had done that before… but of course she hadn’t. Not even any of the theatre productions she had featured in had had this kind of choreography.

How strange.

With the needlework it was the same; after Lady Brax had shown her the basics and she had practised them for a while, Sansa found her confidence returning and soon it was as if some invisible force guided her fingers. Row after row of neat stitches of even size.

Very strange.

Her tutor was seemingly satisfied with the results and after each session advised her to keep on practising on her own. “We shall make a true lady out of you again, Lady Sansa,” were the words she kept on repeating.

Sansa didn’t bear her a grudge; she was doing as she was told, and at least the skills she taught were likely to be useful to her in this situation – and they filled her time nicely enough. Yet on many evenings, Sansa couldn’t fall asleep, thinking of the lessons of the day, curtseys, dancing, and needlepoint. Was that the life of a lady? She shifted uncomfortably on the soft mattress and concluded that she couldn’t imagine anything worse than becoming a meek and obedient little wife
Oddly, for a moment she felt a pang of sympathy towards Queen Cersei.

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Her next visitor came with prewarning, heavy steps of iron-studded boots hitting against the stone, followed by a loud knock.

Sansa pulled herself to her full height. She knew now who she was – well, kind of – and no member of the Kingsguard was going to bully her.

“Enter,” she said with a loud voice.

The door opened but the man behind it didn’t step in. He was, if possible, even scarier looking than before, dressed in full armour and carrying - Sansa’s eyes bulged - a helm in the shape of a snarling hound under his arm. She should have known it, but still… The helm looked almost as shiny and new as the replica in the exhibition – but this must be the original.

The Hound didn’t register her astonishment but launched into his matter without preamble.

“The king is coming to see you soon. Can I trust that you don’t do anything stupid?” ‘like the last time’, hung in the air without him needing to say the words.

“Eerr… yes, of course. I mean, I won’t be doing anything stupid.” Sansa was taken aback by his brusque manners.

“Make sure you don’t.” And then he was gone.

Sansa was puzzled about the purpose of his visit, but knowing that the king was on his way gave her some extra time to make sure she looked her finest. She combed her hair once more and pulled it back with simple hairpins – ‘in the Northern style’, Jessa had informed her. Nervously, she smoothed her dress and glanced at the looking glass on her desk. She wondered how it was possible that she looked so much like Sansa Stark – the face that stared back at her was the very same face she had seen in the bathroom mirror for all her life.

More noises from the corridor, a rumble of many marching feet. Once again she prepared herself.

Kings and queens didn’t need to knock, apparently. The Hound pushed her door open and in sauntered the one true king of the Seven Kingdoms. Sansa fell into a practised curtsey, staying down longer than she had been taught – just in case.

“Better, much better,” the king said. His eyes were clear and green and actually quite beautiful as he looked down at her when Sansa finally raised her eyes.

“Your Grace.”

Sansa gave him the same practised speech of contrition and regret she had given to Queen Cersei. The response was pretty much the same too; dismissive without real warmth. The king’s suspicions were identical too.

“You are not stupid now, are you?”

“No, Your Grace. My mind is working, it’s only that I don’t remember many things.” Sansa stammered lightly, caught off guard by the rudeness of the question. “The knock on my head has
caused it. I am sure eventually it will all come back to me, or at least I can relearn things.”

“Hmmmph. Just as well that you didn’t hit your face. I like you pretty. Your mind doesn’t matter so much.”

What a bastard! Gritting her teeth, Sansa made the request she had been planning since the queen’s visit. “Your Grace, if I may beg your indulgence, I would like to have your permission to talk with the members of your court. They might be able to assist me in my attempts to regain my memory.”

She waited patiently, her head bowed and her hands demurely on her lap. She wasn’t quite sure what advantage it might convey, but she needed to do something; she had to find out more about the lay of the land. If nothing else, at least it might help her to pass some time in new company – the forced isolation in her room with only Lady Brax visiting her was starting to get on her nerves.

King Joffrey waved his hand – is that something that runs in the family or have he and Cersei practised it? flashed absurdly through Sansa’s mind. “Permission granted. But only with the members of the court the future queen can be expected to consort with.”

“With all due respect, how can I know that?” she murmured using her most deferential tone of voice.

Joffrey glanced at her, visibly annoyed. “Ask someone! Talk to the Queen Mother or Lord Varys. They will tell you what is appropriate and what is not.”

As abruptly as Queen Cersei, King Joffrey stood up, apparently having concluded that he had done his duty for his betrothed – or satisfied his curiosity? – and departed with the slightest of nods and a murmured ‘Lady Sansa’ before walking out of the door. The three Kingsguard members who had accompanied him followed him in single file.

The Hound was the last one to leave and out of impulse, Sansa ran after him, touching his sleeve.

“Ser, if I may…”

His look of hostility pierced her and Sansa gulped.

“Don’t call me ‘ser’. Never.”

“Aaah…no, of course not. But… could I talk to you for a moment? Please?” She was still resting her hand on his arm and he looked at it as if trying to decide what to do with it. The footsteps of the procession had already turned around the nearest corner.

“I’ll come back later.” The Hound shook her hand off and strolled to follow the others.

Sansa stared after him. She should have been upset about his crudeness and how he clearly held her in contempt, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that this man, despite his vulgarity, might be the only one who could tell her with honesty more about what kind of a viper’s nest she had stumbled into.

Chapter End Notes

Should it strike you so, feel free to leave long comments, short comments, concrit, whatever… :-) And/or come say hi on Tumblr (ladytp)!
As it seems I haven’t mentioned this before, Sansa in this story has been aged up. As we saw in the modern part of this story, she was just about to enter the academy, which I set as an equivalent of a university in modern Westeros- so she is definitively not a child, and nor was old!Sansa. However, for anyone who thinks this statement signifies some sexy times ahead in this chapter; sorry to disappoint you – this is a slow burn fic and things take their time…like some things do…:- )

Nonetheless, this chapter is all about Sansa and Sandor, finally - I hope you enjoy nonetheless!

As before, million 'thank you's for Hardlyfatal for patiently betaing this work!

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Sansa

It was much, much later when the Hound returned. Sansa had eaten her evening meal on her own, as usual, and Jessa had prepared her bed after having helped her into the nightgown and brushed her hair until it shone and fell softly around her shoulders. After being left alone, Sansa wrapped herself into an evening robe made of heavy brocade and consequently felt quite appropriately dressed and didn’t hesitate when she heard a faint scratch on the door.

This time there was no resentment or open hostility on the Hound’s face when he raised his head, but he did narrow his eyes at the sight of her. Yet as Sansa gestured him to step in, he obeyed.

If he had hesitated at seeing her, Sansa was once again left speechless at the sight of him. Having abandoned his Kingsguard attire, possibly because he was off duty, his choice of clothing was simple and non-descriptive; dark-brown trousers of rough-looking fabric and black leather coat of some sort, a sword hanging from a sworbelt on his side. Still, despite his lack of armour, he was massive and towered over her even from a few steps away. The only exception to his sombre looks was a yellow tunic, the front of which was decorated with silhouettes of three black dogs.

“Three hounds shall remain in his shield...”

Sansa swallowed and walked back to her bed not even noticing if he followed her or not.

It can’t be him! It simply can’t!

“You are a stupid little bird still, aren’t you? Inviting a man into your room dressed like that.” There was an odd combination of threat and frustration in his tone, but the insolence of his words woke Sansa from her ruminations. She glanced at her robe and its long sleeves and high collar.

“Like what? This is hardly indecent, surely you can’t see anything?” she quipped before remembering that she needed to ask this man some questions and it might not be a good idea to
He emitted a brief dry snort. “Aye, but I can imagine.”

Pushing aside the discussion about modesty and propriety Sansa tried to make amends. It had worked with the king and the queen, so surely it would work with this man.

“I apologise for the way I behaved the first time we met. I was stricken by my injury and didn’t know what I was saying.”

The Hound stared at her for a long time, assessing her thoughtfully. To her relief his eyes focused on her face and didn’t wander lower to help him ‘imagine’, but at the same time, there was something openly insolent in the way he did it. She met his stare head on and didn’t budge.

Then he took a step towards her, then another, and one more, and soon stood right next to her – so close that Sansa had to crane her neck to keep up with the eye contact.

“You are not afraid of me?” His tone had changed and he lifted his eyebrows slightly.

“No. Should I be? I really didn’t mean it when I called you those names, I was just freaking out. Please forgive me.”

He considered her for a moment, not moving.

“Freaking out?”

_Dammit, Sansa cursed silently, I did it again!_

She had caught Jessa and Lady Brax staring at her uncomprehendingly a few times after she had used expressions normal to her, but obviously not in use at this time. Having lost her train of thought didn’t make much sense for one who had no concept of a train, and complaining about not having enough bandwidth to cope with all her lessons likewise didn’t mean anything for a person unfamiliar with computers – or modern slang.

She _really_ had to start paying attention to her vocabulary. Just another thing to add to her ever-growing list of things to remember in this strange _new_ - _old_ – world. She sighed.

The Hound didn’t seem to want to press the point though but shrugged his shoulders, which were as massive as anything else in him. “I have been called worse.”

“What is your name, anyway? I heard the king call you ‘Hound’, but that is not your real name, is it?”

“Clegane is the name. You really don’t remember anything?”

_Clegane, Clegane... it didn’t ring any bells in Sansa’s head. “What else – just Clegane?”_

His eyes widened - the only sign of emotion behind that otherwise stony face.

_“Sandor_ Clegane. The Hound. The Dog. Anything but _ser._” The last word was said with a mocking emphasis. Sansa was curious about it but decided that whatever lay behind such derision, now was not the time to explore it.

_“Well, Sandor – may I call you Sandor? – I am indeed sorry for being so mean to you, especially as you were so good to me.”_
Another raise of eyebrows, thick and dark, and Sansa hastened to continue. “In the throne room, when I was challenging the king and the queen. You tried to warn me and then stepped in and told them I was ill. I thank you for that.”

Sansa had been wondering why he had done it – especially as he otherwise seemed to be thoroughly annoyed with her. Well, whatever it was, he had made her a good turn and she intended to let him know that she appreciated it.

The Hound was still standing so close that Sansa could smell him; horse, leather, smoke, unwashed body – not sweaty, but just that undeterminable scent of a human being. Not necessarily unpleasant. She had looked at his face when she had talked, and after finishing looked at him expectantly. He, however, seemed less interested in what she was saying than studying her reactions.

“My face – it doesn’t frighten you?”

Sansa winced. Of course it had been a shock at first, but now she mostly felt sorry for him. Whatever had caused the burns must have been terrible. She shook her head.

“No, it truly doesn’t. Does it hurt still? What happened?”

That made him react; he took a few steps back and blinked. Sansa couldn’t avoid the impression that he might have used his appearance as a weapon of intimidation more than once before, and having now found that it didn’t work on her, he was left somewhat bewildered. Wracking her brain she recalled another snippet from her history readings; how in the times past, bodily afflictions and illnesses had been deemed as punishments from the gods for something evil the bearer had done - and as such basically their own fault. Barbarous thinking for modern times, of course, but these were not modern times, after all.

“You don’t remember that, either?” The Hound recovered his bearings quickly enough.

“That? I am so sorry, but honestly, I don’t have many recollections at all. And hence I asked you to come, I thought maybe you could help me by telling me more about what is happening.”

Finally she had gotten to the bottom of what it was that she was after. Sansa was going to exhaust all the avenues that were open to her, including other members of the court, but this man was as good start as any. Maybe even better, judging from his help in the throne room.

And if he really is that Hound, then… Sansa shook her head, dismissing the thought.

“I have seen this kind of thing before, you know. In a battle, a man receiving such a blow on his head that if he survives, he is left afflicted for the rest of his life.”

“Really?” Sansa pretended to be interested although she knew that her situation was surely not comparable.

“Aye. Although some may recover after some time and go back to normal, most will stay drooling idiots for as long as they live. Which is usually not long.”

“Ah, that is good to know. I am no doc…maester myself, so can’t say exactly what is typical for my condition. But I’d like to think that I have all my senses intact… although I don’t recall much.”

“Mayhap you do, mayhap you don’t. But you did better today, chirping your courtesies to the king – and not cussing like a cur.” Some sort of humour seemed to have returned to the man, although it was carefully disguised. His words, however, reminded Sansa about something else that bothered her, especially after seeing the three dogs on his attire.
“You have called me a ‘little bird’ a few times now. Why is that?” Sansa pointed him towards the chair, but he declined and leaned against the wall instead. He crossed his arms over his chest and his countenance reminded her of a school principal settling to hear excuses from misbehaving kids. She sat down on her bed, determined to appear relaxed and confident.

“Hmmph. Sure enough, I guess you don’t remember that, either. It is because you are like one of those pretty little talking birds from the Summer Isles, repeating all the pretty little words your elders have taught you to recite.”

He didn’t seem to feel any shame for talking to his future queen like that. As annoyed as part of Sansa was, she was also curious. In her admittedly limited experience in these times, it was not common for people to be so brusque – except the king and the queen, of course. The impression of courtly manners and social interactions she had received from Lady Brax had been rather different.

“Oh, so I am like that?” she responded, deciding to ignore any insult to her person for now. “What else should I know? Who are my friends, who are my enemies? Am I here of my own will or could I leave if I wanted?”

The Hound snorted. “You have no friends here. Enemies? They are all your enemies. If you play your part well, if you smile and smell sweet and be the king’s lady love, you may survive. Your home... forget about going back there.”

“Where is my family?”

“The last I heard, your brother has left Winterfell for the capital. A fool’s errand, if you ask me. Don’t count on him coming to your rescue.”

My brother?

Carefully, repeatedly pleading to the broken threads of her memory, Sansa proceeded to ask him more questions. Which brother? What about her mother? How many siblings did she have and where were they? Were there any Northern lords left in the court who might look after her interests? When was the wedding between herself and the king going to take place?

Some he answered, some he didn’t, but after a while Sansa started to get a better idea about her situation. It felt odd to think that she had so many siblings after having only one back in her real life; baby Rickon, sister Arya, brother Bran – who had just suffered a serious accident – and the eldest brother Robb, who had recently left with his troops to avenge his father. Her own brother was at age with Bran, and spookily enough, he too was called Brandon. An old family name, Sansa had been told – so at least something had travelled through the centuries, even if the main connection with House Stark and her family had been broken.

And she had a bastard brother Jon.

An eerie recognition sparked inside her at hearing it. Jon. This was the start of the end of the rule of House Baratheon, its culmination being the return of the Targaryens; first Queen Daenerys, later ruling together with her nephew King Jon. Sansa rubbed her temples trying to concentrate. Jon Snow, he had been called before his true birthright had been revealed in the aftermath of the war. He was the trueborn son of Queen Daenerys's brother Rhaegar Targaryen and a daughter of House Stark. Lyarra, Lyene...what was her name again? Lyanna - yes that's what it was! Lyanna Stark, who had run away with Prince Rhaegar, and died in childbirth. He had been raised in the North...

My bastard brother is the future king of Westeros!
Sansa’s hand flew to her mouth and she almost missed what the Hound said next about her relatives in the Riverlands and the Vale.

Pushing aside the startling revelation about the future king being her brother and nobody knowing about his true lineage, Sansa made a few more enquiries and found out that said brother was likely serving at the Wall by now. Having heard that the Hound had visited Winterfell not that long ago, she proceeded with a barrage of questions about the place, enthralled to hear more about the place she had visited earlier – later – and felt so oddly familiar with.

When it came to her sister, the Hound was initially vague but soon admitted that she had disappeared at the time of their father’s arrest and had not been seen since. Despite her attempts, Sansa couldn’t for the life of her remember any details about a girl named Arya Stark. Women were so often omitted from historical records that it shouldn’t have surprised her, but now, being in the middle of it all, she was suddenly anxious about the fate of this lost footnote in the written history.

Eventually, Sansa was running out of questions. One more entered her head, this time not about her but about him, and so she enquired whether he had any siblings. The Hound’s demeanour darkened immediately and for a moment she thought he wasn’t going to answer, but finally he muttered under his breath something about a brother called ‘the Mountain’. If Sansa had never seen pure unadulterated hate before, she saw it now in every fibre of his body, the tone of his voice, the seething vehemence just from saying the name.

She moved on quickly to safer waters and now having gathered quite enough to think about, she thanked the mighty warrior once again. She had continued calling him simply ‘Sandor’, not knowing what another name to use, and every time she had said his name he had flinched as if unaccustomed to the sound of it. Yet he was much calmer than when he’d first arrived and not nearly as angry at her as he had been the few times they had met, so overall Sansa was happy about the outcome of the evening.

But knowing what she knew – what she suspected – she couldn’t help stealing looks in his direction, as discreetly as possible. He was scary looking and big, and besides the hideous scars, traces of permanent scowl on his face made him look ferocious and uninviting. And yet…

After a moment of shared silence, the Hound pushed himself away from the wall and cleared his throat.

“I better leave. A member of the Kingsguard staying alone in the chamber of the king’s betrothed is an invitation for trouble. I shouldn’t have come. You shouldn’t have asked.”

Why did you, then? Sansa was silent.

“I trust you have some answers now, so you don’t have to go ask them from the wrong kind of people.” He was already at the door, holding the latch when he turned to her. “Just a warning; don’t be so forward with the others. Don’t be so trusting. Pay heed to your surroundings and remember that you are not among friends.”

Sansa nodded solemnly but couldn’t help asking.

“Are you the right kind of people, then?”

He flashed his teeth – either in a sneer or in an approximation of a smile, Sansa couldn’t guess.

“I’m the worst kind.”

She was about to thank him once more for his valuable assistance when he stepped out of the door
Sansa tossed and turned in her bed, worked up not only from all the new information flooding her mind but also because of... the Hound. She wished she had her mobile phone with her. Obviously not to call anyone - it was not like there would have been any telecommunication towers dotting Westeros countryside or other phones anywhere to receive her call - but just to listen to a song. One of her favourite songs, ‘The Lament for the Hound’ by her favourite group, The Silent Sisters.

It was actually because of that very song she had found the all-female a cappella choir in the first place. Once she had made up her mind to study medicine, she had naturally become interested in the history of medicine and had read many books about it. History of surgery, use of medicinal plants in times gone by, those kinds of things.

During that intense period, Sansa had found an old treatise written by a well-known brother of the Seven, famous for his healing skills. Besides being recognised as one of the forefathers of modern medicine, he had also been a leader of a monastic group of silent brothers on the Quiet Isle, where small, stubborn remains of the order had remained until modern times. His real name was not known, but all of posterity recognised him simply as The Elder Brother.

During a few hot summer weeks, Sansa had pored through the book, wincing when reading about rudimentary surgical operations, marvelling about the ingenuity of using various herbs to replace modern medications, and overall being in awe with the man’s skill. That he had seemingly also fancied himself as some kind of a poet was obvious from the scribbled poems his original manuscript had been dotted with, many of them faithfully transcribed into the printed version as an appendix. Some of the poems had been lamenting the nature of the beast within a human form, futility of war, beauty of nature, but one especially had caught her attention.

Sansa stared at the ceiling, orange rays of torchlight beaming through the window throwing flickering shadows on it, trying to remember the words.

*The Hound hath passeth away*

mocking gods was his ruthless way.

At first, she hadn’t realised what or who the Hound was. Brief notes accompanying the poem suggested it might have been one of the many broken men the Elder Brother had nursed during his decades on the Quiet Isle.

*He hath served, servitude with no pride*

he hath fought, joyless victory by his side.

*He didst not love, nor wast he loved*

deeply he drank, his pain in barrel drowned.
It surely sounded as someone in pain, wretched in his suffering – a man with a joyless past of depression and futility. Sansa had read about the miserable years of wars that had more than once clutched the countryside into their hard grip. Desperate times, desperate people – but this had been a story about one man in particular; a man who had fought and served one or more of the rulers of the time and not been happy about it. A man whom nobody loved, and who loved nobody. Except...

As the next lines suggested, he was also a man who hadn’t even gained comfort from his family, instead, dreaming of kinslaying, which had been one of the biggest taboos in the society where everything depended on one’s family.

To slay his kin hath been his dream

yet deposed by vision more supreme.

But then...

Little bird with hair of auburn, eyes of blue

fallen warrior’s love for fair maiden was true.

…but he had also dared to dream of something better. Of love. Of a fair maiden’s love. That was the most touching part of the poem; lines that many times had made Sansa’s eyes blur with unshed tears whether she had read them from the book or heard them sung in the traditional medieval lamenting style The Silent Sisters were known for. Every time she heard the song - probably the most played in her music collection - when she reached that particular part, an overwhelming sadness engulfed her for the nameless man of the past. So much pain, so much yearning.

There had been no happy ending for the two in the poem, no assurances of the ill-fated man ever finding peace with his lady love. There had been however something - something uplifting at the end, which had left Sansa with a hopeful outlook for the unnamed warrior.

Three hounds shall still remain in his shield

bar the beast inside the man hath at long last healed.

So he had healed in the end… before his death? Or was the death of the Hound an allegorical reference to the beast in him dying? That twist in the poem had been one more reason for Sansa to be intrigued by it, both in text and in song. However, now she had a completely new angle to ponder on.

Three hounds…those in his shield…of his sigil? Three hounds – three dogs?

And who was the mysterious maiden with blue eyes and auburn hair – who was she, had she ever loved him back? Despite some modern interpretations suggesting that it could have been a fellow brother, love between men having lost its shame a long time ago, there was something in the description of a ‘little bird’ that gave it a definitive feminine aura. Hence Sansa was convinced it must have been a woman that bitter man had once loved.

The Hound…three hounds…auburn hair… blue eyes… little bird?

When Sansa finally fell asleep her dreams were restless, images of snarling hounds and chittering birds alternating between those of a hooded man and a silent penitent – who after turning towards her changed into a reflection of a burned man.
As this fic overall is going to be a story about more than just these two, the next chapter is going to be told from the POV of another character. Who? you may ask. Well, we'll see!

Comments, as always, are welcomed; anything you want to say...
The Street Urchin

Chapter Notes

Welcome Arya!! This is the first chapter in another person’s POV, but will not be the last… Now that Sansa has recovered from the initial shock of being transported back in time and has started to find her bearings, it is time to take a step back and see how the other ‘players’ in the game of thrones are faring…

EDIT AFTER POSTING: Arya in this fic has been aged up from the canon. And please, steer your minds away from the gutter, as it is NOT done because of some sexy shenanigans in the near future, but simply because she is going through some stuff and doing and observing things that are more suited to someone with a few more years under her belt than the canon child Arya. Just like GRRM himself, I rue the missing 5-year gap he planned for the books - but unlike him, I can change that - this is an AU fic after all! I leave her age numerically undefined, but let's say she is still a girl, but one on the cusp of womanhood.

EDIT AFTER FIRST EDIT: I have been in remiss not mentioning the valuable contribution and help I have received from the kind Hardlyfatal, who has betaed this chapter... Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya

She was hungry; hungry in a way she had never been before. Not enough to manifest itself only as a grumbling of her belly, this hunger gnawed at her and her innards worse than a rat trapped in a leather pouch. Or at least that’s what Arya imagined.

It had been weeks since that horrible day in the Red Keep when she had run for her life, not knowing what was happening and why. Since the day she had killed that boy.

His image came to her sometimes in her dreams, accusing and hard. At first, it had made Arya whimper and wake up in a cold sweat, but lately she had started to fight back. It was your fault. You shouldn’t have tried to stop me. A quiet determination and realisation that either she let that incident eat her alive, or she conquered it and concentrated on more pressing matters at hand, finally saw her achieving some resemblance of peace.

She slept wherever she could find a quiet spot; in alleyways, in abandoned shacks, under the market tables after the markets had shut down and throngs of people moved away. She ate the same way, whatever she could find, steal or barter. Sometimes middle-aged women took pity on her and gave her a piece of bread, sometimes she sang in the street and held her hand palm turned up, a few coins here and there being dropped into it by passers-by.

Yet there was never enough food, never a peaceful-enough resting place. Arya had been approached by men with beady eyes who smiled at her and asked where her parents were and would she like to
come with them for a proper meal and a rest. As much as her stomach protested when she declined such offers, she was wary enough of them to do so.

That very night Arya was coming from the Fishmonger’s Square towards Visenya’s Hill, planning to scout for a place for the night among the small stalls selling memorabilia for the famous Great Sept of Baelor almost at the top of the hill. She walked along the Street of Steel fast and with determination as always, having found it the best way to avoid unwanted attraction. Nonetheless, even that didn’t seem to help her this time.

“Oi boy, what’s the hurry?” A few youths approached her from the opposite direction. They were as unkempt as she was, but it didn’t create any camaraderie between them - quite the opposite. They were all fleas in the shaggy hide of Kings Landing, trying to eke their living from that beast, and that made them competitors.

“’Tis not a boy, ’tis a girl,” one of them called. The others laughed.

‘Oi girl, no such hurry. What do you have there? We can take it off you, you know, lighten your load.”

Arya assessed the situation in her head. She had a small fish hidden inside her tunic, confiscated from the fishmonger who had unwisely turned his back on her for a moment – just long enough for her to grab the catch and hide it. It was a hard-won piece and the only food she was likely to have that evening. She simply couldn’t hand it away.

Yet it seemed she might not have much choice in the matter. She was but one and they were four, all bigger than her. Yet Arya determined not to give up without a fight.

The boys got closer and circled around her. A frantic look, a hissed curse that would have made her septa shriek in horror, but to no avail.

“Hand it here and we’ll not hurt you.”

“Never, you scums!”

“As you wish - we’ll just have to take it by force, then.”

The boys approached cautiously but steadily, smirking as they did. Suddenly they all stopped as one, looking at something behind her, smirks wiped off their face.

“Nobody is taken anything from her. Unless you want to feel the kiss of a real war hammer, forged on the best anvil and the hottest fire in the whole street,” a steady voice said behind her.

Alarmed, Arya glanced behind her shoulder and saw a boy – nay, a young man - standing there. He was tall and broad and his jet black hair was thick and unkempt, pointing in all directions. He stared at the mob and something in his piercing blue eyes made even the unruliest of the lot to look down uncertainly. Or maybe it was not his eyes but the huge war hammer he was holding in his hand, poised to strike, its weight straining his arms so his muscles trembled slightly under his skin as he maintained his hold.

The boys looked at each other unsure, then all at once turned and run away, sounds of their retreating footsteps gradually disappearing as did the boys themselves.

Part of Arya was relieved, but after averting one danger she had to now concentrate on a new one. Did the smith – as that he apparently was, the impression fortified by the fact that he was shirtless with a heavy leather apron hanging from his waist – want the fish for himself? Warily she stared at
him, ready to bolt.

“You can go now. Wouldn’t go that direction, however.” The youth lowered the hammer and had a
good look at Arya, his eyes taking in her dishevelled appearance. “I would run straight home if I was
you. No good comes from a young girl like you running around on your own.”

“I… I don’t have a home.” The words were thick in her throat. Arya hadn’t talked with anyone about
her situation but somehow the young man’s words had caught her off guard.

“Well, wherever you live then. Shush, go.” He waved at her and turned away.

“I don’t live anywhere. I don’t have anywhere to go.”

Arya didn’t know what made her say so. It was actually the worst thing she could have revealed to a
stranger; that she was all alone with nobody to look after her or care where she was. Yet… he had
stood up for her and Arya had been alone for so long – she, who had always made friends easily and
been surrounded by family, friends and people of her house. Besides, there was something oddly
familiar about the smith, something about his looks. Arya tried to remember if she had seen him
before somewhere, maybe in the court, one of the craftsmen that came to do their trade or sell their
goods in the keep? But no, nothing came to her mind.

He looked at her again, furrowing his brow. His high cheekbones and square jaw were covered with
a shadow of a beard, but it was not as rough as Arya had seen on her father – but neither as thin and
fuzzy as Robb’s had been when he had first started to sprout a few hairs on his face, of which he had
been ridiculously proud.

“Sorry to hear that. But I still wouldn’t linger long here, especially with the night coming.”

Arya made up her mind. She still couldn’t say what made her trust this boy more than any others –
maybe she was only tired and lonely, maybe she saw something in him she hadn’t seen in the others.
She pushed her hand inside her tunic and pulled her fish out.

“I have a fish. I could share it with you.”

The fish was raw and ungutted and hang limply in her hand, its bulging round eyes glazed over by a
thin film of death. The smith stared at it warily.

“It’s a good fish, especially if you have somewhere to cook it,” Arya continued dangling it in front of
her, as a bait.

“If? Of course you have to cook it.”

“If you have nowhere to cook, it is good raw as well.” Arya had eaten many a fish raw, as where
would a street urchin like her find a place to prepare her meals? At first, she had been dubious about
the prospect, but hunger had a way to shed one’s prejudices rather quickly.

The youth wrinkled his nose in disgust. Then he shrugged his shoulders, evidently having made up
his mind.

“I work in a smithy just over there,” he pointed at a shopfront on the other side of the street, “and my
master is away. I guess there’s no harm in you roasting your fish near the furnace.”

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And so Arya found herself a place of her own in the bustling city of King’s Landing, and eventually
something even better than that: a friend.

The boy’s name was Gendry – just Gendry – and after sharing the end results of Arya’s inept attempts to roast the fish in the heat of the smith’s kiln he had reluctantly agreed to let Arya sleep in the attic of the smithy for that night. Arya had told him her true name, only leaving her surname out, and if Gendry thought her to be another bastard like him she wasn’t going to correct him.

The next day she had left early to find more food and had returned that evening with a pigeon she had caught with her own hands, and again Gendry had let her use the kiln. And sleep in the attic.

And so it was how it continued; Arya finally having a place she could anchor herself and return to night after night. At first, Gendry had been mistrusting and had kept a keen eye on her lest she was planning to do some thievery – the consequences of which the smith had warned her about in earnest while fingering a sharp dagger in his hands as if to better bring home his message. Arya assured him that she was not going to be as stupid as to squander the only good turn life had handed her for a while, and grudgingly he had seen the sense in it.

Gendry slept in a small room at the back of the smithy and took overall charge of maintaining the premises, one of the biggest and well-known shops in the whole street. His master Tobho Mott was a famous armourer with clients from all the noblest houses, and although he spent time in his shop, he was also away a lot and every evening retired to his own house a few streets away from the hurly burly of the Street of Steel. Coincidentally this happened also to be a time when he had only one live-in apprentice, his other apprentices and workers either living with their own families or boarding with other young men in one of the many boarding houses.

All this was perfect for Arya, and the little attic where she could climb from the outside, through the roof, became her home away from home.

Many evenings over the meals – sometimes sharing Arya’s haul, sometimes Gendry’s portions from his apprenticeship arrangement – they swapped stories and discussed the day’s events. Gendry was not as talkative as Arya but he was a good listener, and once his natural wariness started to thaw, he could be quite witty. He had a streak of stubbornness and mistrust of high lords, but Arya couldn’t really begrudge him for that.

Arya still didn’t know what was happening in the court and to her father and sister, and so she spent a considerable amount of time chatting with shopkeepers, fishmongers and their assistants, servants, beggars and basically anyone who could tell her the gossip. From those sources she heard that Lord Eddard had indeed been arrested and declared a traitor, but nobody knew – or cared – about his daughters. The news of the movements of his son from the North reached her one day, but they were too vague for her to make any sense of. Apparently, troops from Winterfell had started to descend towards the South, but for what purpose was everyone’s guess.

Gendry didn’t follow the news of the realm so Arya couldn’t pester him for them, but obviously he was still curious to know what had brought a young girl like her into a situation where she had no home or family. She told him a cover story skirting close enough truth to be passable; a story how her father had been in the service of a high lord and they had lived in the castle up in the North – to explain her speech that stood out from the parlance of the King’s Landing poor - and how she had escaped when her father had been arrested.

“Arrested? What did he do?” Gendry had been alarmed. “Thief, was he?”

“No, nothing like that! My father is the most honest man there is,” Arya had raised her voice in anger. A thief! An insult to her father if there ever was one.
“Well, why then?”

Arya had been stumped for a moment. How to cover the politics of the royal court in a way that would make sense to a smith’s apprentice? In the end, she had resorted to vagueness.

“He was a retainer to a Northern lord who had powerful enemies, who didn’t like the way he valued truth and honesty. That lord wanted to reveal something they wanted to keep hidden, and they wanted to silence him. Hence the arrests of him and his men on trumped-up charges.”

That seemed to have been easy enough for Gendry to understand.

“Young father was in the service of the Hand of the King? Everyone knows about his arrest. Fewer people know why, and even fewer care.” He had prodded at the fire with an iron poker. ’Powerful people make their own rules. I don’t know much about my father but I do know that he was one of them. My mother told me that he gave her some coin, in the beginning, to take care of me, but as years went by the coins dried up. And then she died.” He had looked into the flames for a long time, probably thinking of his absent father, one of the powerful people who made smallfolk’s life miserable.

Arya had looked at him with pity – not having a mother of a father was unthinkable for her – when it suddenly had struck her why Gendry had seemed so familiar to her at first. The black hair, the blue eyes, the set of broad shoulders… she had seen two men in the court with that resemblance, the other still young and handsome, the other older and past his prime. Renly and Robert Baratheon.

Arya had studied him anew and indeed, if she squinted her eyes and imagined him dressed in one of those fabulous enamelled armours and wearing a helmet adorned with golden antlers…a spitting image of Renly Baratheon. But surely he couldn’t be the father, being only some years older than Gendry? And if not…then, it had to be King Robert, the famous wencher with bastards all over Westeros. Arya was not supposed to know about those things, but as Old Nan always said, small kettles had big ears, and she had heard her share of the gossip.

For a while, Arya fretted whether she should tell Gendry about her discovery, but realising that it would lead to too many uncomfortable questions about how did she know about the looks of the dead king and his brother, she decided not to. Besides, it was not as if it would make any difference anyway – King Robert had not been a devoted father when he had been alive and for sure his kin was not likely to treat his bastards any better.

And so she hid that secret deep where her other secrets were buried; the secret of her home and her family, the secret of her longing and the fact that even after all her success of having survived in the mean alleys of Flea Bottom only using her wit and endurance, she was still just a young girl far away from home.

And she kept on returning to Tobho Mott’s smithy every night for a meal - and a rest - and a friend.

Chapter End Notes

So what do you all feel about seeing Arya here? And where would Arya be without Gendry… I know, it is very obvious, but what can I do – they are meant for each other!
The Spider and the Little Bird

Chapter Notes

One more new player – the plot thickens, as they say… And Sansa gets a surprise.

EDIT AFTER POSTING: Where are my manners?!?! Once again I unforgivably forgot to thank Hardlyfatal for graciously betaing this chapter - thank you very much!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Varys

Lord Varys slid along the corridor in his usual effortless manner-- for a man of his size and bulk, surprisingly smoothly. The impression was like a duck floating in a pond, for all the world appearing serene and calm, but for a knowing eye, revealing furious paddling under the surface.

That was an analogy he had often heard said about him, and to many people’s surprise, he didn’t mind it. As a matter of fact, Varys gained odd satisfaction from it, partially because it happened to be true. Calm, serene, even nonchalant on occasion – and yet, all the time his mind was turning over hundreds of pieces in the puzzle, fitting them this way and that, trying to either force them to fit his many laborious schemes, or if not possible, alter his schemes to fit the pieces.

And so it was this very day; Varys trying to fit the latest unexpected piece into the fabric of his making.

Sansa Stark had lost her memory.

In all honesty, it was not a big or significant piece. Women, especially as young and malleable as this one, didn’t move the fates of the realm. She would still wed the Baratheon brat, the marriage complicating the relationships between the houses of Lannister and Stark after Lord Stark had broken it by revealing his hand so early and so foolishly. If everything went as Varys saw it, it would serve to bind those houses into a deadly struggle, however, without crippling the whole realm, making it ripe for the picking of the new ruler.

Yet he had to be sure. If anything, Varys valued his attention to details, no matter how small or insignificant looking. And that’s why he was here now, fast approaching the chamber of the said lady.

A soft knock, an equally softly-voiced invite to step in, and he found himself opposite the maiden of auburn hair and bright blue eyes. Not being afflicted by any base feelings towards the fairer sex, Varys was nonetheless an admirer of beauty in whichever shape or form it presented itself – and this form was very beautiful indeed. He bowed respectfully and enquired after the lady’s health.

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A good while later, Lord Varys found himself still in that very same room, engaged in a curious
game of cat and mouse. Lady Sansa was certainly courteous, although sometimes her good manners slipped and she made some rudimentary mistakes and word choices. However, he had heard about it from many sources and could appreciate the effect of a head injury to one’s normal behaviour. No, it was not her misuse of words or her less than perfectly flowing courtly discourse that bothered Varys – it was something else.

She had asked many questions, explaining that it was her way of trying to gain back her memories, and that too Varys could understand, and had tried to answer as truthfully as possible whenever it didn’t impact his own machinations. Yes, regrettably Lady Arya had not been seen for while – a real regret, as in truth Varys would have preferred to keep all the pieces on the board where he knew where to reach them rather than let them slip away. True, the wedding day of the lovely couple – Lady Sansa and King Joffrey – had not been set yet, but was only a matter of time. No, unfortunately there were no Northern lords in the capital as the honourable Lord Eddard Stark had not seen it fit to drag any of his vassals away from their lands when he himself had made the long journey to the South.

These were all normal and reasonable questions, but then the girl started to make more peculiar queries. Having apparently been informed of Varys’s position as the procurer and keeper of information she proceeded into the area of the general political situation. That alone would have been odd enough for a young girl who previously had not shown interest in such matters, but her line of questioning was what really intrigued Varys.

She asked about the Targaryens, about the stability of King Joffrey’s rule, and then quite bafflingly about the abduction of her aunt Lyanna by Rhaegar Targaryen. Gods, even Varys himself had almost forgotten that unfortunate incident that had initiated the whole mess in the first place. He sighed silently, looking at the girl and wondering what it was in women that bewitched even the sanest of men. And heavens knew that Rhaegar had never been exactly sane - although eminently more sensible than his father the Mad King.

Distracted, Varys dragged himself back to the present.

“...I only ask because of the concern for my future lord husband the king, you see. If the threat of Targaryen usurpers is real, I assume you would be the first one to know, Lord Varys?” Unblinking gaze from blue eyes didn’t let go of him.

How could she know? Surely she doesn’t have knowledge of the girl across the sea…unless Lord Eddard told her?

Flashing his most sincere smile – which could be quite convincing when he really put his mind to it – Varys proceeded to assure her that King Joffrey’s reign was quite safe and no impostor or usurper would dare to challenge it. Lady Sansa nodded in acquiescence but the look on her face spoke of something else. For anyone else her mask of polite deference would have been impermeable, but Varys was not anyone else. He had made his living by reading other people, and looking at the demure lady in front of him he knew that things were not quite as they seemed to be. There was knowing, scepticism, even rebelliousness hidden behind those smooth cheeks.

Besides her questions, there was also something odd in the girl herself. Not the lapse of manners or behaviour alone, but an attitude – a self-confidence he had not noticed in her before. It was almost as if she were more experienced than was possible for a young maiden of noble birth, carefully sheltered and schooled under the protection of her elders, and trained to put her trust in her parents, her betrothed and her good-mother – basically in anyone else but herself.

Eventually, after some more mental duelling and skirting around issues, Lord Varys extracted himself from that enticing company; he needed to think. And so after effusive wishes for her swift recovery
he bowed to her the last time, closed the door behind him, and started back to his rooms.

As Varys walked, he found himself unconsciously rubbing his hands together in a gesture he knew from experience to be associated with deep concentration on his part. Deep furrows criss-crossed his forehead as he started to work on his puzzle again.

*Lady Sansa might be a bigger piece in the game than I gave her credit for.*

**Sansa**

Over the next several days Sansa focussed on trying to find her place in that new and unknown world. She still couldn’t accept that she had *really* travelled back in time, and secretly every morning, just on the cusp of waking up, she cherished a hope that she would do so back in her own time, that she would find herself back in the historical keep with her modern conveniences all around her.

She imagined getting out of the keep as fast as possible and calling her parents; maybe they would have no idea that anything had been amiss, and would only be curious about how she found the capital. And then she would pack her bags in that cheap motel and fly back home on the first available flight… and forget this nightmare altogether.

But then she woke up once again to the sounds of the maid’s movements and the clattering of a breakfast tray, and disappointment overwhelmed her and her spirits sank.

Yet every morning, she gathered herself and got up to assess what she could do in a situation as bizarre as it was unbelievable. What *should* she do? Should she try to escape the upheavals she knew to be on their way - the war and chaos - and if so, to where? Could she run away to Essos, or even further away? But how? She had no money, no means to travel, no family, friends or support of any kind. And times were different. A young woman on her own was everyone’s prey, and no law and order would protect her.

And even if she escaped and somehow survived, how was she going to find her way back to her own time? Sansa *wanted* to get back, wanted to return to her safe old life, to her family and friends, to an existence where she had meaning, a place, a purpose.

After waiting in vain for the moment to come that would take her there, she started to suspect that it might never happen there, in that place. Maybe it only worked in one direction? Her thoughts went back to her visit in Winterfell and the eerie feeling she had had in the room that had belonged to Sansa Stark. Looking back, she realised that she had had the same feeling of dizziness and disorientation and the sensation of suffocating warmth she had experienced that day in the Red Keep – but the arrival of the volunteer guide had broken the spell.

Had that woman not come to talk to her as she did, would she have done the time-leap then? Were both of those locations - places where Sansa of the past had spent significant amounts of time - some kind of ‘wormholes’ or ‘portals’ that allowed her to cross the dimensions of time? And if so… if she returned to Winterfell now, could she go back?? That thought, initially dismissed from her mind as soon as it had emerged as frivolous and naive, started to play in her head more and more as the days went by.

And then there was a new question that started to haunt Sansa.

Should she – *could* she - try to avert the evil that was coming?

*Could history be changed? And if she did so, what consequences would it have? The whole concept...*
of time travel was so confusing. She had read some novels and seen movies about it, and all of them had had a different angle of how much changing the past affected the future. One popular franchise, “Forward to the Future”, had consisted of several movies moving back and forth in time, presenting many different scenarios of how things were changed by the main characters’ actions. The protagonists had blithely crossed the barriers of time from modern days to the heady days of the start of definable youth culture in Westeros, then even further back to the conquest of the Far North, then fast-forwarded to the futuristic period of floating houses and space travel… It had never made any logical sense to Sansa, but that was entertainment and was not supposed to. But this was not an imagined story. This was real.

In any case, she was not really in a position to do anything as long as she languished in the court as a trophy of the Lannisters. Sansa had soon enough grasped the essence of her situation, aided by her previous knowledge about how the events had turned, and knew herself to be practically a prisoner. Now the question was only whether she could do something about it. Or was she going to stand by and let the tides of history bob her helplessly in their stream; to see the start of another war, the demise of House Stark, fulfil her own fate as married first to one, then another noble, give birth to a son who would eventually become one of her own ancestors… and then disappear from the annals of time as a minor footnote. Die, perhaps, young and lost.

Sansa Stark certainly had a lot to think about.

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Sansa spent more time with Lady Brax and as before, absorbed her teachings with the most curious ease. She practiced her speech, her word choices and her manners as well as singing, dancing, sewing and playing a curious instrument called the high harp. Sansa did it partially as an attempt to keep up with the role she was supposed to play, partially because it amused her. It was not as if she had more important things to do.

She also had audiences with some members of the court who Queen Cersei recommended: Lord Varys and Pycelle; the man with a pointed beard she had seen King Joffrey talking to that first day, Lord Petyr Baelish; and a few other of Cersei’s ladies. All the information Sansa gained was helpful, but sometimes she became exasperated by the way how everyone seemed to skirt around issues, speaking with hidden meanings or false courtesy.

Lord Baelish especially creeped her out. He had been courteous to a fault, smiling and flattering her beauty and telling her how much she reminded him of her mother. That was a line of thought Sansa was happy to follow though, asking more about her presumed mother from the man who professed to have been her foster brother at the Riverrun. Through him, she gained a picture of a rare beauty and wit, a woman who had been cruelly sent to the frozen North to marry a stern lord. Hearing that, Sansa wondered if her mother was as bitter as Cersei of her fate – was that the lot of all women in those times?

When they had eventually parted, Baelish had lifted Sansa’s hand on his lips and kissed it while looking intensely at her under his brow. His behaviour was so over the top it was almost comical, and Sansa couldn’t help recalling one of her teachers in secondary school. He had been all too interested in his young female charges, and had become a laughing stock to all because of that. Yet she had gritted her teeth and curtsied and smiled – one never knew when ‘an old friend’ could become useful.

There was one person who never tried to hide his thoughts, however: the Hound.

Sansa’s meetings with him were not organised by the Queen – she probably would have been highly agitated if she knew about their existence. No, they were mostly stolen moments when he escorted
her back from one of her audiences, a few minutes spent lingering at her door before she had to go in.

She had invited him back to visit her but he had declined, muttering about it not being wise. Yet when they did have a chance to talk he was refreshingly straightforward with his words, never trying to hide behind a courtesy or a double meaning. From him, Sansa learned more about the undercurrents of the court: who had real power, who was just a lickspittle, who were allies, who were enemies, who had powerful backing, and who were represented only by themselves.

As the days passed, Sansa found herself more and more looking forward to her brief brushes with the Hound, despite the fact that his manners never seemed to improve when it came to her. His behaviour was always the same, somewhat aloof and somewhat agitated, sometimes punctuated with a glimpse of sarcasm. Nonetheless, he never actively refused her questions or approaches to start a discussion, so Sansa tried to accept him as he was and be satisfied with what he was ready to divulge.

Yet another day arrived and Sansa received an invitation to attend the court. The message was brought to her by the Kingsguard member who had been the first to respond to Joffrey’s threat of having his guards teach her manners on that first fateful day. Meryn Trant was his name, she knew by now, and she didn’t like him a bit. Yet she followed him, wondering why the king had called for her. Had she been deemed rehabilitated enough to be presented to the court again?

The Great Hall was as she remembered from the last time; big, cavernous, with throngs of well-dressed people milling on the floor. Well, at least this time she knew how to act. Sansa dropped into a deep curtsey in front of the throne, spreading her voluminous skirts around her in a well-practiced gesture, feeling only a bit self-conscious and ridiculous.

“Your Grace, it is an honour to be here again.”

“Lady Sansa. I am glad to see you so well recovered from your unfortunate accident. My mother the Queen assures me that at least your good manners have returned to you, even if not all your memories.” The King’s tone didn’t leave it unclear which one of the two he considered more important, eyeing Sansa appreciatively when she rose up from her knee-punishing acrobatics.

He was wearing a magnificent coat of red and gold, adorned with embroidered lions rampant on his chest. Queen Cersei was sitting on her own chair with an outfit only slightly overshadowed by that of her son, smiling benevolently at Sansa, her green eyes narrowed like those of a cat.

“Your Grace is too kind,” Sansa murmured.

“Yes, quite so, I am too kind,” King Joffrey replied nonchalantly, sweeping his gaze across the vast hall, then lifting himself up in that uncomfortable looking throne and raising his voice so that it could be overheard through the whole room. The room was already silent so his voice carried clearly.

“Your King is generous and merciful. Didn’t I accede to the sweet words of my one true lady love when she so earnestly pleaded clemency for her traitorous father? She was here in this room pleading for his life only a short time ago, and although any other king might not have contemplated forgiveness for anyone who had undertaken such an act of betrayal, I was moved by her gracious appeal.”

Sansa listened to him unsure of where his speech was going. From the sounds of it, it was almost as her father had not already been executed.
“And hence a week from this day the traitor will be allowed to publicly confess his crimes and beg for my forgiveness. And if I will be suitably convinced of his sincerity, he will be allowed to take the black and spend the rest of his days as a brother of the Night’s Watch.”

The crowd cheered at this and shouts of ‘Good King Joffrey’ and ‘Merciful King Joffrey’ filled the room. Sansa heard none of them, though, as all blood had drained from her face and her heart was palpitating at the speed of thousand beats. Her knees felt weak and for a moment she was sure she was going to faint, to collapse on the hard stone floor of the throne room like a doll whose strings had been cut.

*My father – Lord Eddard Stark - is alive!*
Lady Mother

Chapter Notes

Better later than never – to gift this fic to the fabulous and talented DKNC! I LOVE her canon-based sprawling fics, which have had a big influence on me and actually inspired me to start writing this fic – so I want to thank her so much for that... Once again I am also grateful to Hardlyfatal for tirelessly betaing this chapter!

Thank you ladies!

(Note also updated tags - another new character makes an appearance...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Catelyn

Catelyn felt an approaching headache circling her, and not even closing her eyes and rubbing her brow was enough to keep it at bay.

Why are sons so stubborn?

She had had yet another disagreement with Robb, prevented disintegrating into a shouting match only by her years of being schooled in self-control and diplomacy, even with her own children.

Catelyn shifted in her seat, just a flimsy tent stool. Being on the road meant that living conditions were simple, but at least she had the luxury of privacy in her own tent, unlike many others in the campaign trail.

Her thoughts trailed back to the discussion after the war council earlier that day. After all the lords had left, she had asked Robb for a private word. Her request was a basic courtesy to the man her son had grown up to be, although Catelyn would never stop thinking of him as the boy whose nose she had wiped clean not that long time. Yet she wouldn’t dream of offering counsel for him in front of his men like he was still a young boy to be tutored by his mother.

Robb had wanted to send Theon Greyjoy to his father to ask him to join his forces with Robb in the newly started campaign. Catelyn didn’t want to think of it as a full-blown war as yet - she simply couldn’t. Wouldn’t. Wars were cruel, they had broken her world once before already – this one must not escalate to that. For that, and for other reasons, she had opposed Robb’s suggestion vehemently. Also, she didn’t really trust young Theon. Not that she expected him to outright betray them, knowing how much he loved and idolised Robb. Nonetheless, he was weak and often unsure of himself despite all his outward cockiness, which could be exploited by someone unscrupulous enough, Catelyn suspected. And Balon Greyjoy was, if nothing else, scrupulous and cunning.

They had argued, they had presented their cases, they had disagreed, but they had not reached an understanding. Finally, Catelyn had left, entreating Robb not to take any hasty actions, which he had promised. He still had healthy respect and appreciation of his mother, instilled in him by his father, but Catelyn wondered how long it would last. He was, after all, surrounded by people who looked at
him seeing only their invincible commander, not a confused young man who had been thrust into an unreasonable position much too young.

And then there was the news of Ned. Still held in the black cells, waiting for a trial against trumped-up charges of treason. Catelyn sighed.

Oh Ned... I wish you were here!

And to top it all off, there was the issue of the Kingslayer: what to do with him. Catelyn swore to not let this one go quite as easily as his brother, the Imp. She had already the beginning of a plan in her mind – a plan that would also resolve the issue of approaching the Greyjoys, at least for the time being. All she needed was to convince Robb to agree to it.

Oh well, no time for rest – too much to do. She stood up, patted down her skirts and pulled the flap of the tent aside. Time to start putting her plan into action.

Jaime Lannister was not quite as dashing as the last time Catelyn had seen him in Winterfell. He was dirty, dishevelled, a bloody gash in his forehead smearing blood on his face – and yet he was just as cocky as if he would have been sitting in the high seat in the Lannisport great hall, rather than languishing on the muddy ground, tied up to a pole.

“Lady Stark, always a pleasure to see you! I trust this outing in the woods has been to your enjoyment?” A smile that looked only slightly forced spread on the golden warrior’s handsome face as he saw Catelyn and Robb approaching – just the two of them. This discussion was best to be had in private.

“Shut up, Kingslayer.” Robb had no time for fake pleasantries, and Catelyn took guilty satisfaction of witnessing the well-deserved put-down of that arrogant man.

“My, my, we are in a bad mood, aren’t we?” The Kingslayer’s smirking continued unabated.

“’We’ are not anything – except you are my prisoner and besides the pleasure of seeing you there tied like a hog on a spit, I now have to think of how to best use you,” Robb responded calmly.

“I confess I’d rather Lady Catelyn would ‘use’ me than you, as comely as you are. I assure you I am at my best when being ‘used’ by a handsome lady like her.” Jaime bowed his head in Catelyn’s direction, his lips curling into a sardonic smile again.

Catelyn started to regret ever presenting Robb her suggestion. It was going to be a long and tedious journey if the Kingslayer was going to keep up like this.

Robb ignored the last barb and stared at his opponent thoughtfully, his brows knitted together. Finally he spoke.

“I am going to send you to Lord Stannis. It is time the Starks and Baratheons renew their alliance, and what better way to smoothe the way than to show our trust in him by offering our most valuable possession to his safekeeping? Until we know how best to benefit from you, that is. Besides, I can be sure that with Stannis, you’ll have no chances to slip away – Dragonstone has much deeper dungeons than these woods or even Riverrun.”

If Jaime was surprised, he didn’t let it show.

“I can’t afford men to send you on your way right now, but as soon as I have, I will trust your
transport to a hand-picked team of my best men. They will be led by the one I trust most in the whole wide world.” Robb turned to Catelyn. “My mother, Lady Catelyn.”

“And I will tolerate no base jokes nor sarcasm from you, Kingslayer. If necessary, I will have you gagged – it makes no difference to me how you arrive in Dragonstone, as long as you do.” Catelyn’s voice was cold. She wanted this part to be over already, and couldn’t wait to leave the presence of that unpleasant man. He had been defeated and taken hostage – didn’t he have common sense to tone down his behaviour?

Jaime blinked, for once thrown off balance. Catelyn could almost see the machinations in his head behind his frozen countenance; was it an insult to be trusted to a woman? Or an honour, if the woman in question was Robb’s most trusted advisor and the Lady of Winterfell? Then his expression changed.

“As long as we are chatting amicably amongst friends, have there been any news of my brother, Tyrion? We heard he was accosted by you a while back, Lady Catelyn, but no word of his whereabouts since then. He wouldn’t happen to be here, now?” He looked up. The defiance was still there, but mixed with something else. Something that made him look almost human.

Catelyn remembered that he was rather close to his brother, as strange as it sounded. The dwarf and the warrior – nobody would have thought it odd had Jaime eschewed his company, like their sister did. Yet during their stay in Winterfell, Catelyn had noticed the protective stance Jaime took over Tyrion, and the seemingly good-humoured discussions and laughs the brothers shared. For the first time, she felt just a smidgen of sympathy. The bond between siblings was meant to be strong, and to see that the Kingslayer had it made him feel more like a human and less like the arrogant rogue he was. But then again, there was his sister and the rumours…

“He is not in my possession anymore. He was charged, demanded a trial by battle, and won it. I released him a while ago and he is probably on his way to the capital or to Lannisport or wherever he wants. I don’t care.” Catelyn didn’t enjoy having to admit her defeat.

“Tyrion won a trial by battle?” The wide-eyed look on Jaime’s face would have been amusing if the subject had not been so vexing.

“Not him. A sellsword fought in his stead.”

The smile that now spread on Jaime’s face exasperated Catelyn. To be tricked like that, and not even by her own doing, but by Lysa’s foolish actions… Well, what was done was done and couldn’t be helped. And in any case, with Jaime they had an even better hostage. A valuable asset.

“Until the convoy sets on its way, you will be housed in a tent in the middle of the camp. It will be guarded at all times and the cage and shackles will remain – but I’ll not have it said I have left a prisoner under my care to succumb to poor treatment. You’d better get rest while you can. It is going to be hard riding ahead for you once you leave, Kingslayer.”

“Oh, I don’t mind, as long as I have such a lovely company to ride with.” Jaime bent his head again, his devil-may-care mask fully back on. Catelyn didn’t dignify it with a comment but turned away, mentally calculating the days she would have to spend in the company of that annoying man.

“I hope he is worth it,” she muttered to Robb as they walked away.

“He’d better be – we could really use Stannis in our corner,” his son said with a sigh. “Whatever you do, don’t let him escape, mother.”
Catelyn tried to ignore the implied rebuke, knowing Robb didn’t truly mean it.

“I promise, I won’t,” she said instead, sneaking her hand to touch his shoulder instead. Nothing wrong with a mother simply touching her beloved son, surely?

Sansa

Sansa didn’t know how she managed to get through the rest of that evening, nodding and smiling to her betrothed, Queen Cersei and the many other well-wishers who thronged around her.

He is alive.

Sansa searched the eyes of those with whom she had discoursed earlier, at a loss as to why none of them had deemed it worthwhile to mention her that tiny little detail, that insignificant little snippet of information.

Lord Eddard Stark lives still.

That changed everything. She wasn’t yet sure how, but she knew it.

The Hound – Sandor - escorted her to her room that evening, but she was angry at him as well. Even he, so outspoken and straight, had held that crucial piece of information from her. Sansa was planning to bide her time before accosting him, but as soon as they were out of the earshot of the others, she couldn’t hold back any longer.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me that he was alive?” Sansa turned angrily to her escort, dressed in his snowy-white Kingsguard armour, his heavy weapons clanging against each other as he walked.

He glanced at her, unfazed as usual. “You never asked.”

“I never asked?!” Sansa was speechless. “Of course I asked! I asked about everything that could be important! That my father was still alive rather than dead probably seemed unimportant to you, but for me it is extremely significant!”

That infuriating man only shrugged his shoulders. “Languishing in the black cells, injured and without friends, accused of high treason – one might as well be dead already.”

“But he is not! And he is not going to be! Didn’t you hear what Joffrey said?” Every now and then, Sansa forgot the correct decorum and addressed people with their first names. So far she had done that only with Sandor, who usually looked at her quizzically as he did now, raising his eyebrow.

“Did he, then?”

“Yes!” Sansa was seething, but seeing how little impact her outburst had on him, she lifted her chin and walked faster.

They walked on in silence, until something he had said made Sansa stop. Sandor had followed her so closely that he almost bumped into her, and Sansa had a distinctive fleeting expression of overpowering strength and even tighter control of it in the way he halted, towering above her, then withdrew.

“What did you say?”

“What?”
Sansa turned to him fully. It was his habit to be cynical, mistrusting, but the way he had challenged her statement had carried something else in it.

“You questioned whether Joffrey was going to be true to his word. I know you did, don’t you try to deny it!”

Sandor sighed and looked up, almost rolling his eyes.

“Are you really so daft, girl?”

“I’d like to think I’m not, but I find it hard to see what is so daft to take the word of the king, spoken in front of his whole court, for anything else than what it seems to be.” Sansa crossed her arms and stared him down – or up, as it rather was.

Sandor hadn’t seemed to be taken aback by her outburst, and neither did he act defensively now that she had openly challenged him. Sansa found it refreshing and real, which only reinforced her determination to get to the bottom of this. He, if anyone, would speak truly to her.

Sandor seemed to think of his next words carefully, looking at a spot above her head for a while before responding.

“You don’t know Joffrey much, do you? Even before your accident you didn’t, did you?”

Sansa started to open her mouth but then snapped it shut. She had no knowledge of the relationship between Joffrey and the real Sansa – but it didn’t seem very warm or intimate. Not like it should be between betrothed.

“It is true, I don’t know him much,” she said, her posture rigid.

“I have been with him ever since he was a babe, and let me tell you, ‘merciful’ is not the word I’d use to describe him.”

“But he said he was going to make him beg for mercy! And then let him take the black. Why would he kill him, then, when he would be out of the picture altogether anyway?”

Sansa had heard enough during her lessons in the court to know what ‘taking the black’ meant. Besides, everyone in Westeros – her Westeros - were familiar with that old and famous brotherhood of the North. It had been disbanded as an active military order several decades ago, but its history lived on. The order’s new reincarnation as forest rangers preserving the vast national parks of the North had invigorated it, and Sansa had only fond memories of it. Hence Joffrey’s announcement had felt such a relief. Sure, it was akin to a deportation, a way to get rid of a troublesome member of the society. Permanent, indisputable – but not as bad as being dead. It could work.

“Why would he exert revenge on someone who publicly dismissed him, denied his kingship, and even worse, named him a bastard of most abominable kind?” Sandor shrugged.

“Because…” Sansa started to explain how not executing Eddard Stark would preserve the peace, avert or at least minimise the threat of the Northern forces marching towards the capital that very moment, and overall be good for the realm, when it hit her.

_The king never released him._

_Lord Eddard Stark was executed at the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor._

It had happened once, it was going to happen again. Whatever Joffrey had said, he hadn’t meant it.
And Sandor Clegane had seen through it, even without the benefit of the hindsight, as she had.

She didn’t finish what she had intended to say, but stayed silent. What Joffrey had said, had been only for show. Why, she couldn’t guess, but it seemed that logic or strategy was not Joffrey’s strongest suit, and with all the advisors around him, including the Queen and the Small Council, maybe he was just playing for time.

“I… I see what you mean,” she said finally, all her rage having deflated and leaving her feeling hollow. Once again, this man had shown her the truth, even more so than he himself probably realised. For him this was still just a conjecture; for Sansa it was an affirmation.

“Maybe not so daft after all,” he muttered and grabbed her arm – not unkindly, but firmly, turning her around to the direction of her rooms.

Sansa acquiesced without protest and moved on. She needed to be alone as soon as possible, she had to think.

The rest of the way passed in silence and outside her room, when Sandor opened the door for her, Sansa mumbled her thanks to him quietly, her shoulders slumped. Both of them knew it was not for escorting her to her rooms, but neither acknowledged it. Just as Sandor didn’t acknowledge her thanks, only brushing past her and closing the door shut without another word.

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After having cooled down from her anger, Sansa had to admit to herself that she had not exactly asked about her father from any of the people she had conversed with. She had only assumed that he had been executed already, and it had never come up that he hadn’t.

Gloomily, she reflected back to what she knew about the honourable Lord Eddard Stark. As was well known, it was the victors who wrote the history, and being that member of House Stark, under whose watch the demise of that old lineage had started, the history books had not been kind to him. She knew that he had been the last real Lord Stark, had ridden to the capital to serve briefly as the Hand of the King, and after King Robert’s death, had been executed for treason. His eldest son’s reign as the Lord, then the King in the North, had been so brief that the texts usually passed it by with only brief mentions.

That Eddard Stark’s execution had been based on unjust accusations by the false king had been later confirmed by contemporary chronicles and modern historians alike. Yet that hadn’t meant much, once the downfall of that magnificent house had been concluded, and the second conquest of Targaryens had wiped all the old arguments aside.

What shall I do?

Yet another night went by without much sleep for Sansa, she pondering and turning all possible options and scenarios of what she should do – what she could try to do – in her head. There were many, some more impossible than others, but as the pale light peered through the milky glass she finally knew the path ahead.

Chapter End Notes
All kinds of comments are appreciated, should you feel so inclined…
Once more, a new character is introduced to the mix…

“Where is this going?” I hear you ask. “When are we going to get more Sansan?” some may ask. Well, I have tried to convey that this is going to be a fic with multiple characters, multiple POVs and multiple plot points. However, modern Sansa and her story are still the central theme all through this… so I hope the readers don’t find all the other characters and events distracting. Maybe hopefully even some of you might enjoy the non-Sansan angles of this story?

Also, please note that accordingly some new tags have been applied… Thank you Hardlyfatal for betaing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Brienne**

Brienne’s heart was thumping a thousand beats a stride in her chest, her lungs were burning and the edges of her vision had started to blur – but still, she kept on running. Aimlessly, erratically, with no notion of where she was heading and caring even less.

All she could think of was the sight of Renly lying on the floor motionless, his eyes staring ahead vacantly. She had held him in her arms and tried frantically to shake him awake, to make him open those beautiful eyes, to smirk at her and chastise her how she really had no reason to be so worried – but he never did.

Even when the guards had busted in - alarmed by her cries - her first thought had been that they would help her to find who had done the unthinkable. Instead, they had turned against her, shouted for reinforcements, called her a cold-blooded killer and raised their swords. She had had to drop Renly, and an instinct had driven her to raise her own weapon and defend herself. And all the time she had been shouting shrilly how they were terribly wrong, how they needed to call the others and find the real killer, how she would never…

…they hadn’t listened to her.

As shocked and dejected as Brienne had been, a small practical part of her brain had told her to get out of there; leave Renly and the camp and go – just go. And so she had sliced the back wall of the tent open and ducked out, ran towards the woods and continued running ever since.

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Eventually, she had to slow down, exhausted. Her armour was not designed for sprints and the knowledge of the hopelessness of her situation made her stumble – that, and the fatigue coursing through her veins. There was no way out. The king’s troops were probably already on her tail and
without a horse, she simply didn’t have a chance. Huffing, she stopped and leaned forward, her hands on her knees, gulping deep lungfuls of airs, despair filling her chest.

Then she heard a horse approaching – not from behind, but from ahead.

She raised her head and peered ahead, detecting one of the scouts that had been sent to examine the planned battle ground returning, not in a hurry but at a steady trot. The rider saw her, recognised her rainbow cloak and pulled the reins, slowing the horse down until when he reached Brienne, he stopped it altogether.

“What is it? Do you have a message for me?”

A broad face frowning in confusion, a surprised gasp – the man didn’t have time to register what was happening before Brienne had pulled him down from the saddle. She threw him by the roadside and in one desperate move mounted the horse and turned it around. If the man was still conscious after suffering the fall on his head, he would have seen only the dust raised by the horse’s hooves as Brienne galloped away – further and further away from the nightmare she had been plunged into.

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After riding too hard and too long, until her borrowed horse started to snort and stumble, Brienne was forced to slow her pace and take to the woods. The air there was rich with the fragrance of leaves and damp ground, the remains of the rain from days ago still slowly releasing its heady vapours. The coolness under the canopy felt soothing, the dappled light through the branches providing an illusion of sanctuary, of protection. The only sounds reaching her ears were the chorus of songbirds and their rustling in the trees. Those, and the sounds of running water finally permeating through her stupor, attracted her attention.

She was disorientated, she had no real plan, only the deep-seated instinct of survival directing her actions. Water was one of those ingrained needs, and she found herself drawn towards it. Whether in the end it was her or the horse’s doing, they soon found themselves next to a small creek some distance away from the main road. Next to the stream was a clearing of green grass and small saplings, and there Brienne let the horse loose to graze and drink its fill while she slowly keeled over on the ground.

All her strength left her and only grief and emptiness remained - and the warrior maid broke down, curled on her side on the soft grass and let the tears come.

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Brienne didn’t know how much time had passed when she woke up, sore and hurting. The horse, looking noticeably better and well rested, nudged her forehead and the warm breath from its nostrils tickled her.

It was dusk, the sun almost below the horizon already. Gingerly Brienne sat up, wiped the dried tears and snot from her face with the back of her hand, and surveyed the little expanse where they were ensconced. It was beautiful - just like the secret places on her home island she had used to hide after escaping the tedious lessons of how to become a lady. Most important of all, it was protected by the dense foliage so that they would be unnoticed by any pursuers.

Having had some time to think during the ride, she had concluded that there was simply no way anyone would believe her to be innocent. Only she had been in the tent with Renly, helping him into his armour. Only she had seen the dark shadow appear out of nowhere and plunge a ghost sword through Renly’s chest before disappearing. Even in her dazed state she had seen no wound in her
king, noticed no bleeding. It would be understandable for anyone to conclude that she must have strangled him or broken his neck.

Just the thought that someone could think her capable of doing such an abominable deed for someone she loved more than anyone in the world made tears come again. Defiantly, Brienne blinked her eyes to keep them at bay.

Her behind felt cold, moisture from the ground seeping in from wherever hard armour had not protected her; thighs, buttocks, back of her head. Her stomach grumbled and such a mundane mark of living was yet another cruel reminder of how Renly would never need another meal, never need another drink.

Brienne sighed. She really ought to decide what to do next, but her mind was blank. She certainly couldn’t go back to Renly’s camp, unless she had a death wish. She could go home – but that would be the first place where those bent on revenging the king’s death would search for her. That’s what she would do, had she found someone else in her position.

Maybe she could seek service in the company of another high lord? Stannis Baratheon she dismissed immediately. Even without a firm proof, she knew the shadow was somehow linked to him. Brienne remembered the red woman by his side the previous day, remembered all the campfire gossip about the strange magic she possessed. And Renly had made it quite clear that he was not going to give up his quest for kingship despite Stannis’s protestations - so Stannis must have chosen a coward’s way to deal with his brother.

Brienne clenched her jaw. She would deal with Stannis later.

The burst of energy surging through her body, raised by the cold anger towards Stannis and the red woman, however soon dissipated and Brienne was left cold and hungry and tired once again.

She couldn’t go to Lannisters, having campaigned against them. Tyrells would be unlikely to receive her either, Loras having lost his constant companion and best friend in Renly. Dorne was an option, but she didn’t know the Dornish ways and their exotic life was alien to her.

Her deductions left her really with only one option, House Stark. Houses Arryn and Tully were in alliance with them due to blood relations, and if she turned to either, they would have to consider what the Starks would say about the matter.

Still pondering her options, Brienne got up and searched the saddlebags, and to her satisfaction found some bread and cheese, even a half-full skin of wine. Settling down to eat her meal she tried to recall what she knew about that Northern house.

They were stern, well-respected and honourable, everyone knew that. They were also ready to fight for their rights, as the march of the Young Wolf towards the capital to free his lord father proved. Brienne had heard enough talk around Renly’s council to know that most people considered the accusations against the Hand of the King to be unfounded. The current monarch, however, seemed no more inclined to justice than King Aegon had been, the last time the fate of Lord Stark and his heir had been in the king’s hands.

Their search for justice appealed to Brienne. She, too, wanted justice; to find out Renly’s killers – be it Stannis Baratheon or his witch – and punish them. Brienne pressed her lips into a tight line.

She had a lot to think about.

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After a sleepless night during which Brienne was visited by nightmarish visions of the shadow and Renly’s body slumped down on the floor, his eyes vacant but still staring at her accusingly, she woke up. Not exactly refreshed, but with a plan and a purpose.

She was going to ride north and find Robb Stark.

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Brienne’s journey was slow but blessedly uneventful. Slow, because of the need to stay away from the main roads to avoid search parties sent after her. She was also forced to feed herself mostly from the land with small game and fish as she went, having left so unprepared and being under the threat of capture at all times. She was still too close to Renly’s power base to show herself openly, so her nights were spent in abandoned barns or hovels, days skirting around settlements and other travellers.

It was a lonely existence, and more than once she lay listlessly all through the night, staring at a starry sky or a cracked ceiling, wondering how her life had turned so upside down in such a short time. If she had been wrong in her pursuit to become a warrior - a knight, even - and if her father and her disapproving septa had been right all along.

The stars had no answers for her.

Things got easier once she left the Kingswood, and the coin she had on her person when she had escaped finally turned out useful. She still didn’t dare to visit the inns or trading posts for necessities for her and the horse, knowing how her size and looks would raise unwanted attention anywhere. Instead, she took up the habit of waiting near such place until she saw someone amiable and honest-looking walking by, then asked that person to get her what she needed. She lowered her voice in an attempt to pass as just another masterless hedge knight wandering the countryside in search of employment, and more often than not her transactions proceeded without an incident.

During her slow sojourn, she learned to appreciate the horse the fate had put into her hands. She was a young and spirited mare with white socks and a wide white blaze down the middle of her face. Not knowing her name – or even if she had one – Brienne named her just that, Blaze, and more often than was probably wise she found herself talking to her as if she was a human.

Was she being wise throwing in her lot with a house she hardly knew and had no previous affiliation? What should she have done the day Renly died? What she would do to Stannis and his red woman when she finally got her hand on them! That sort of talk.

Maybe Brienne was crazy, maybe not, but Blaze listened to her patiently and only snorted in return every now and then.

And then, not far from Whispering Woods where the Stark host had last been seen according to talk she had heard along the way, she was accosted on the road by men wearing direwolf sigil of the North in their shields - as she had known she would be. She lay down her arms without a protest and asked to be taken to see Robb Stark.

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“My lord, we met… a person on the road, who says she has a need to talk to you.” A sideways glance towards Brienne from the soldier who had led the party told her he wasn’t quite sure what to call her.

Well, ‘person’ was better than some other names she had been called, Brienne thought, waiting patiently for the young man thus addressed to shift his attention to her.
She had been taken to a camp bustling with activity, men and horses going this way or that, weaving through a field of tents raised on a high terrain. At one time the clearing might have been covered with grass, but hundreds of boots and hooves had turned it into a hardened ground. Brienne’s head swivelled left and right, observing neatly organised rows of carts and supplies and pack animals, the ubiquitous direwolf sigils and banners flying in the breeze.

The men escorting her had been polite but uncommunicative, not answering any of her questions, but Brienne wasn’t concerned. At least she was finally going to have a chance to offer her sword to a worthy house. She clutched Blaze’s reins tighter in her hand and walked on, head raised high.

The tent she was escorted to was large, with tables and chairs and coffers and parchments strewn around – it was clearly a command centre of the campaign. Several people were milling around, most of them bearing the hard look of the North; shaggy beards and weathered faces, strong and tall. To her surprise, there were women present too; one short and stout with grey hair, another much younger, tall and lanky. Both were wearing chain mail, which made Brienne feel immediately better about her own situation. Maybe she wouldn’t be considered such a freak here as in the more genteel South.

The third woman in the room was femininely dressed with auburn hair, blue eyes and regal presence. She must be Lady Stark, Brienne surmised. That she had a place in the command room was also a positive revelation; Queen Margaery would have never ventured into such clearly manly domain.

“Welcome to our camp. What is your name?” The young man – Robb Stark – spoke, his head tilted to the side, his eyes taking in Brienne’s appearance from head to toe. He was rather pleasant looking, if somewhat young, with thick auburn hair, blue eyes, and open demeanour – although Brienne couldn’t help noticing bags under his eyes and lines of worry on his otherwise smooth forehead. He didn’t blink, he didn’t sneer – all Brienne could detect was mild curiosity.

“Brienne of Tarth, my lord,” she bowed her head.

“And why is it that you want to speak with me?” Everybody’s attention in the room was now on Brienne, and she tried to ignore it to the best of her ability.

“I would like to…”

“THAT IS HER! KINGSLAYER! She murdered King Renly in cold blood!” An angry shout interrupted her, and all eyes turned to a man who had called out. Brienne turned too and seeing him her stomach sank. She recognised the man – the bulbous nose, long face and jet black hair. She didn’t recall his name, but she remembered seeing him in Renly’s tent a few times.

“No, it was not me,” she stammered, but nobody paid any attention to her anymore.

The man made his way from the back of the tent to stand in front of Robb Stark.

“It is her. I saw her many times with King Renly – it is impossible to mistake her for anyone else.” His lips peeled back in a snarl. “She killed him on the day of the intended battle and ran like a coward she is. Ser Loras sent men after her but she was nowhere to be found. And here she shows up, bold as brass, thinking she can get away with her filthy crime by ingratiating herself with another house!”

People in the room had started to murmur and point at her, and Robb Stark’s gaze flickered between Brienne and her accuser. Lady Stark had moved closer to her son, Brienne noticed, staring at her intently.
“Is this true?” she asked, her question addressed to Brienne.

“No, my lady, it is not true at all! King Renly was killed by a shadow, there was magic involved! I saw it with my own eyes, I would have never ever harmed him!” Brienne could have sobbed, except she was not going to show any weakness in front of all these people.

“She would say something like that, of course. Don’t believe her! Give her to me and I’ll take her back to answer for her crimes!” her accuser protested.

“You would take her back where? The last I heard, Renly’s troops have dispersed, most of them joining Stannis Baratheon.” Robb Stark frowned. He cast a quick look at his mother and as if an unspoken message had been exchanged between the two, he continued.

“Take her to the prison tent until we get to the bottom of the matter. If she is innocent, as she claims, she is free to go and do as she pleases, but if she is guilty, she has to answer for her crime.”

Turning to Brienne he added, “My apologies, but we have to detain you until we know what the truth of the matter is. I promise that every attempt is made to make your stay as comfortable as circumstances allow – but as you can see, we are an army on the march and some comforts are limited.”

He gestured for the guards to take her away but as they grabbed Brienne’s arms, her weapons having been confiscated already earlier, Lady Stark raised her voice.

“Make sure you treat her well. She is still a lady, of noble House Tarth.”

“At least two Kingslayers deserve each other’s company,” King Renly’s man snorted, clearly unhappy about the situation, but powerless to do anything about it.

“Somebody, please take care of my horse!” Brienne shouted as the guards dragged her away.

And so ended her first meeting with House Stark.

Chapter End Notes

Do let me know your thoughts regarding characters and plots, should you feel so inclined! Also, for those interested, the next chapter will be all Sansa’s POV...
The Plan

Chapter Notes

Thank you, everyone, who is following this story, and especially those who leave encouraging and wonderful comments – that means a lot! (Almost) all players have now entered the field, so for the next little while, things that have been started will follow their course for each of them...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

The first thing Sansa did when she got up the next morning was to send Jessa to find Lady Brax. She needed someone to arrange an audience with the queen.

While she waited for the word, she moved about her rooms fiddling with her things; lifting one thing, then dropping it, then picking up another. Time and time again, she rehearssed in her head the words she was going to say, pondering whether it would work better if she acted as a worried daughter of an heinous traitor or an eager-to-please future good-daughter; a naïve young girl or one who saw the political situation unfolding in what was happening. How to attract the least suspicion?

In the end, getting to see the queen was surprisingly easy, and by mid-morning she found herself in a comfortable chamber in the private quarters of the royal family. The room was luxuriously appointed with dark wooden furniture, heavy brocade covers and pillows scattered here and there, and vases of fresh flowers filling the room with their heavy scent. And lions, golden lions everywhere; embroidered, painted, carved into statues. The overall effect was somewhat outlandish, but she supposed the queen didn’t worry about such matters when it came to the pride of her house.

By then Sansa knew exactly what she was going to say; plead Cersei to influence her son to allow her to visit her father. Purportedly it was to convince him to freely confess his treason and plead mercy from the one and only true king of the Seven Kingdoms – a reason that sounded perfectly valid even to her own ears.

Queen Cersei seemed to agree, after some pointed questions and probing, which Sansa had anticipated and responded to with an act she had finally chosen: that of worried eagerness of a distraught bride who sought only harmony between her future husband and her own family.

After having assured Cersei that she was sure of her father’s contrition, and that his public confession and pardoning would also guarantee there to be no reason for his heir to rise against the crown - thus erasing the threat of the Northern forces advancing on the capital - Sansa was rewarded by the queen’s promise to do her best to make the visit happen.

After a thousand exclamations of gratitude Sansa left, escorted by one of the gold cloaks. On their way through the meandering corridors they saw a lone figure approaching; a plump man clad in blue and lilac silks, hands tucked deep into his sleeves. Sansa didn’t need for him to come closer to know who he was; Lord Varys.
“Lady Sansa.” A small bow of his bald head.

“Lord Varys.” Another of those damned curtseys. Sansa was getting better at them, but boy did they tax her knees!

“Visiting your future good-mother, so kind of you. How is Her Grace this morning?”

How that man knew everything that was going on was beyond Sansa, but she assumed he must have employed a good number of spies in is service. That was really the only explanation, not that she minded. Her meetings with the man the Hound had disparagingly called the Spider had been pleasant enough. Although Sansa didn’t remember reading about him in the history books, it was clear that he was a man of significant influence and cunning. Even the Hound had admitted that much, reluctantly.

“Her Grace is faring well, we had the most enjoyable conversation.”

“Something pertaining to the good news King Joffrey shared with us recently, perhaps?” Varys smiled and cocked his head.

Sansa studied him while trying to decide how she should respond. His interest appeared real, his words genuine and perfectly appropriate all things considered. She wondered how much the eunuch knew about the plans for her father’s demise. The impression she had gotten from Cersei was that despite her haughtiness and suspicions about anything that could threaten her position or her precious children, she genuinely wanted to thwart the threat from the North. If it meant pardoning Ned Stark and sending him to the Wall, she was going to do it. She had practically jumped at the opportunity to get Sansa to help that to happen, no matter how much she had pretended to be cajoled into it.

But Varys… What Sansa did know was that Lord Stark had not left the capital alive, but who had made sure of that, she couldn’t guess. Not Cersei, she surmised, as she had nothing to gain from that as far as she knew. The same extended to King Joffrey – but then again, he was known for his unpredictable and vindictive nature. Could it be Lord Varys? Or somebody else altogether?

“As a dutiful daughter I am naturally happy to hear that my father will receive mercy from the king. He is a traitor, of course, and I am sad beyond belief that he chose such a dishonourable way.” She pursed her mouth and stared distraughtly on the floor, an image of unhappiness and disappointment at the actions of her foolhardy father.

“Mercy? Yes, King Joffrey is a benevolent ruler indeed.”

He might as well have smacked Sansa in the head with the heavy irony dripping from his words, but she pretended not to recognise it. Judging that taking a chance might be worth it, Sansa glanced at him under her brow.

“Besides a daughter’s natural affection towards her father, it would be horrible indeed if he should be executed. The last time something like that happened, there was a terrible turmoil and unrest in the realm, and much destruction.”

Varys nodded, also an expression of suitable severity on his face. “Yes, there is nothing as devastating as a crippling civil war. The Seven Kingdoms would suffer greatly from such calamity.”

“Nonetheless, I can’t see what else my poorly misguided brother could do but to declare a war, should something like that happen,” Sansa continued. Would Varys flinch even a bit? Or would he smile knowingly, the option already known to him – maybe even planned by him?

Yet she couldn’t detect any change in the man’s features, only solemnity. Maybe he really didn’t
know anything – or was a very good actor indeed.

After a few more exchanged platitudes they departed and Sansa continued on her way.

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While waiting for Queen Cersei to fulfil her promise, Sansa worked tirelessly to find out more about where her father – Lord Stark – was being kept and under what kind of conditions. She talked to everyone she thought might have any helpful information, but as before, she knew that if she wanted direct answers her best chance would be to turn to the Hound. Yet she couldn’t help wondering how readily the man might be willing to divulge such knowledge. Why would he? What possible advantage there would be - there had been – for him to share any of the information he had?

Ever since Sansa had made the possible connection between him and the Elder Brother’s poem, she hadn’t been able to shake it out of her mind. She found it both very hard and yet imaginable to believe that the man might truly have been him, Sandor Clegane. The timing was roughly right, the Elder Brother being active during this very period – the thought which by itself was quite startling for her. A chance to possibly see with her own eyes the man who had done so much good for mankind, and whose legacy had been kept alive better than that of any of the rulers or warlords… It was tempting, but Sansa shook her head, resignedly. The Quiet Isle was far away and she had more pressing things to do.

The Hound certainly filled the part about mocking and bitterness. And his hate for his brother, apparently his only family, was quite evident. His nickname and the three dogs of his sigil were almost certain giveaways, but how would a man like him ever even come to be under the care of the brother of the Seven?

And what was it with the little bird? Blue eyes and red hair.

Sansa tried not to flatter herself by thinking that he might have feelings for her; that the love that was true could have been about her own person. In any case, it would have been the real Sansa Stark – and even then she could hardly believe it. The Hound was crude and violent – she had heard stories of him that made her hair curl – disdainful, uncouth… He certainly didn’t appear the sort of man who harboured tender feelings about anyone.

Sansa attempted to catch him sometimes, turning abruptly to see if he was looking at her in any way that could be interpreted as longing or as any kind of feeling. On occasion, she had met his eyes trained on her with an odd intensity, but whenever it happened, he averted his gaze quickly and his expression immediately transformed into the same impassiveness he seemed to view everything around him. Indifference, suspicion, well-guarded ire beneath his mask of coolness; he was like a deep pond harbouring fierce undercurrents in its depths, but on the surface appearing smooth and unperturbed.

And yet… some things he had said made Sansa think that there just might be more between him and Lady Sansa than what was outwardly obvious. That he called her ‘little bird’ was by itself highly irregular, and that one time he had said something about her not remembering how he had gotten his scars…It implied that she had actually heard about it once, maybe even from himself? If so, why would that be? He seemed to be an intensely private person by all accounts – why would he spill his story to a young girl even if she had been foolish enough to ask out of curiosity?

Even more disturbingly, Sansa couldn’t help observing him more than she probably should have – curiously trying to decipher the man behind the mask. He was ugly, he was rude, and yet, he was also tall and strong and refreshingly direct – and he had tried to help her.
Sansa had had her share of fumbling encounters with boys of her age. Some of them might even be called boyfriends, none however being serious enough to lead to a longer term attachment. She was no virgin, but neither was she after one night stands or brief encounters. She knew it to be maybe naïve at that time and age, but what she really wanted was someone with whom she could share all of herself; her hopes and dreams, her laughter and tears; someone she could respect and who would respect her, and who would want to share all of himself with her.

And yes, sometimes she just wanted to have fun, and if that was with a friend who on occasion could be something a bit more, what of it? She was still young, she had time.

Or so she had thought.

**But the Hound…?**

Sansa brushed such thoughts away as soon as they emerged; when she noticed herself paying much too close attention to the way muscles in his forearms flexed when he pulled open a heavy door, or to the broadness of his shoulders and how small he made her feel standing next to him.

That’s the last thing you have to worry about now, you stupid girl, she chastised herself instead.

Nonetheless, she decided that whatever it was between Sandor Clegane and Lady Sansa, it would be useful for her to know it. And knowing there was only one way to find out – asking him - she decided to tackle it sooner rather than later. What was the worst he could do? Mock her, growl at her? She could take that.

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So it was that one evening, as she was returning from the dinner at the king’s table with yet another member of the Kingsguard, the comely and courteous Arys Oakheart, and saw the Hound coming towards them in his off-duty garb, she took her chance.

“Pardon me, Ser Arys, but I need to confer with… Clegane, about certain arrangements I have discussed with Queen Cersei,” she said with the courtesy and deference she had noticed people expecting of her.

Oakheart frowned, but probably as it was a fellow member of that distinguished fraternity rather than some random person, he seemed to accept Sansa’s words without protest. Bowing at her, throwing a glance at the Hound, who had stopped when Sansa had halted their progression, he muttered his farewells and strolled back towards the king’s court without a backward look.

The Hound was staring at her with poorly-disguised curiosity. It was usually the other way around, him telling Sansa when to come and when to go – at the king’s behest, naturally. As Sansa looked at him more closely, she noticed that he had indeed been immersed in activities not suitable for duty; a reek of strongwine greeted her as he breathed out.

“What arrangements are those? The queen hasn’t told me about any,” he growled. Only now Sansa noticed the wineskin he was holding in his hand, its cords twined around his wrist. From the shape of sagging leather it seemed to be at least half-empty, the sounds of sloshing liquid penetrating the silence after she found no words to continue.

“I have asked her to speak on my behalf to the king to allow me to visit my father. I hope that will come to fruition sooner rather than later.” She eyed around them, not thinking the public corridor to be the best place for the kind of discussion she had in mind. Behind him she saw a small door she knew to be leading outside, into one of the enclosed gardens dotted here and there in the jumble of
Sansa brushed past him to the door, pushed it hard and to her relief felt it giving in. A cool night air brushed her cheeks carrying with it a whiff of earth, vegetation and blooms she couldn’t specify. Glancing behind her she saw the Hound still standing on his spot staring at her, swaying slightly. By her beckoning he seemed to make up his mind, sighed heavily and followed her outside.

“I take my orders from the king, girl. When he tells me to take you to the dungeons, I will do it, and that is all there is to that.”

Sansa pressed the door softly closed behind them and then they were alone. It was dark, only a distant torch on the other side of the square shedding faint orange glow, and that of the moon, half full and silvery on the dark night sky. In other circumstances the setting might have been quite romantic – but here, with this man, in this world, Sansa found herself shivering slightly. Maybe this was a bad idea, after all. She took a deep breath.

“That was only an excuse. Although that is true, I do wish to see my father soon.” They hadn’t spoken since her outburst and she was not particularly wont of reminding him about it, but it had been her own idea to lead the discussion there. She hoped he didn’t bear a grudge.

The Hound had stopped and now raised the skin on his lips and took a gulp. Lowering it he swiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Although Sansa couldn’t see his features clearly, she thought she saw him wincing.

“So then. Not often young maidens entice me to follow them to a secluded place. Are you sure you know what you are doing?”

It was Sansa’s turn to groan internally. She didn’t want to follow his trail of thought but unfortunately that was exactly where she had to go. Gathering her dignity she replied, somewhat coolly.

“I only wanted to talk with you without interruptions. An empty kitchen or a stable would have done equally well.”

“Well then. What do you want to talk about? Spit it out, I don’t have the whole evening.”

“I…I just wanted to ask how well do we – did we – know each other. Were we friends?” When she let it out like that, it sounded pretty stupid even to her own ears. “Friends” – the king’s dog and the noble maiden?

A long silence ensued, the Hound probably thinking the same.

*What a fool I am.*

Sansa wondered if she could just leave, forget she ever asked and hope he would do the same. Her eyes had started to adjust to darkness but still she could feel more than see the tension building inside the huge man next to her. His face was frozen, then a deep scowl spread on it and he stared at her, taking a step closer so that his chin almost met Sansa’s forehead, his head bent down.

*Oh dear god, what have I done?*
As always, all kinds of comments and views are encouraged, including concrit, should you feel so.
For the Bull

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the wonderful Hardlyfatal for betaing this chapter! It is always an interesting journey to find out more about the intricacies of English language and especially British vs. American English…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya

There were days when Arya slept in her new lodgings until late in the morning, instead of getting up at dawn to eke out her living in the unforgiving alleys of Flea Bottom. It happened especially when there had been a feast of some kind in the city; one where people celebrated until late, got drunk and became more generous with their coin. And there were such feasts often; all Seven deities had their own feast days, and there were others for different trades; the bakers held their own, and so did the woodcarvers and beer brewers and many, many others. Arya had never known smallfolk had such thirst for festivities. Not that they were grand or ostentatious by any stretch of the imagination, usually consisting of a few stalls forking out drinks and food, a troupe of musicians playing jolly tunes, dances and speeches.

Yet they were good opportunities for a poor beggar girl to sit patiently in the fringes of the crowd, face lifted in a silent plea to merry makers. Often - maybe because of a brush of conscience, their drunken state, or the combination of both - some of the revellers dropped a copper or two into her hands. It was weary work and meant a late night, and hence the following day she usually reserved for rest.

The day the visitors came was one such day; Araya had slept well past sunrise and was just starting to stir when she heard a familiar voice from the smithy.

On those days she had to be extra quiet and careful. Although the smithy was noisy enough during the day with a clank of metal, hiss of fire and din of many voices of apprentices, master smiths and customers, the attic where she slept was right above all that. A careless creak of timber or inexplicable thump from above could have raised uncomfortable questions about their source.

It wasn’t really a problem for Arya, though. She could be quiet as a mouse when needed, mostly resting until it was time to leave again, and then treading softly to the entrance to the roof she had made by removing two planks from the wall and covering the hole they made with a sack cloth.

Quiet as a shadow. Calm as still water.

The voice she would not have expected to hear in this place, however, raised her curiosity, and she crawled carefully to a spot near the chimney from where she could peek to the goings-on underneath.

At first, she saw only the usual buzz of the place; apprentices carrying coals and master smiths beating hot iron against the anvil. Then she saw Tobho Mott himself talking to someone whose back was turned towards her. A big man, round shoulders, bald head, nondescriptive clothes – not the
usual silks and satins he wore in the Red Keep. Yet when the man momentary turned his head so she got a glimpse of his profile, she identified him just the same.

**Varys.**

Arya had seen him at court and had heard him talking with her father, and hence had recognised his voice and accent that still carried traces of his years across the Narrow Sea.

Why would the Master of Whisperers visit the Street of Steel, why Tobho Mott’s smithy of all places? It was not as if he was likely to acquire himself an armour or sword or anything else Mott could offer.

Arya cursed the noises that threatened to obscure the discussion of the two, but luckily the men seemed to think the same and moved further away from the clank – right under where Arya was lying flat, her ear against the wooden floor.

“…should be back here in a few hours. The ironmonger is only at the other side of the city and my apprentices don’t dilly-dally when sent on an errand. Would you care to wait? I have more comfortable rooms at the back, and I could call for some wine, perhaps?”

“As much as I appreciate your kind offer, I have to decline – urgent matters call me elsewhere. Yet it is a shame that young Gendry is not here.”

“It may not be my place to ask – but is he in some kind of trouble? Has he done a poor job or offended someone he shouldn’t have?” Tobho Mott wringed his hands, clearly nervous about the prospect of losing the favour of a powerful figure in the royal court, even that of one who didn’t need his services directly.

“You are quite right; it is not your place to ask. I have paid you handsomely enough for the boy for you not to worry about the details when it comes to him. I thought we had an understanding.” Varys’s tone sharpened but then he seemed to relent. “But if you really want to know, the boy has done no harm. I only would like to exchange a few words with him, nothing more.” Varys bowed his head slightly to convey his harmless intentions – but Arya was not fooled. If Lord Varys himself had come to talk to Gendry, something was not right.

Immediately her thoughts flew to what she was pretty sure she knew about Gendry’s origins. Could that be why?

“Shall I send him to Red Keep to see you when he returns? I can also send someone to fetch him right now – one of my younger apprentices could run there in no time.”

“No, no need, although I appreciate the offer. I will come again tomorrow, just tell him to be here. Tell him also that he has absolutely nothing to worry about, in case he wonders. And don’t mention my name, only say that his benefactor wants to talk with him.” Varys turned to go, not waiting for an answer, and faster than Arya would have believed possible for such a fat man, disappeared.

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Arya couldn’t get the overheard discussion out of her head, and instead of leaving for her usual rounds, she stayed in the loft. Besides, she had done well the night before, her purse of coin under a loose brick of the chimney fatter than it had been previous morning. Her bed of hay was soft, her belly was still full of the evening’s haul, and so she had the luxury of just lying there and thinking of what all of it could mean.

Why would Varys have paid money to Mott on Gendry’s behalf? Gendry had mentioned that
somebody had provided him with an apprenticeship. He didn’t know who, but had assumed it might have been his well-to-do father who nonetheless otherwise wanted nothing to do with him.

Could it be true, could Varys have been doing it for King Robert himself? Arya worried her lip; what little she knew about the man, he didn’t seem one to be sent on a minor errant like that, even by the king. No, it had to be one of his own schemes. Besides, he had not come to the smithy as himself – his disguise had not been foolproof, but enough to prevent a casual passer-by realising who he truly was.

If Gendry would see him the next day, what could it mean to him – good or bad? Arya knew her father had not fully trusted Varys, but had accepted that he had had to work with him nonetheless. Yet Varys was up to something, that much was clear, and whatever it was, Arya was not sure if she wanted her only friend to get involved with it.

But if she warned Gendry about him, she would have to tell him about her reasons, and who she really was. How would he take that? He had no love for hightborns, that was abundantly clear, and should he find Arya was one…

Arya shuddered. What would she do if Gendry drove her away – where would she go? She was not so much worried about her livelihood or where to stay, but what stung the most was the thought of losing his friendship.

Yes, Gendry could be stubborn and infuriating, but he was also funny and loyal and he had a way to explain her things so that they made sense. He was patient with her and… Arya buried her face in her hands and squirmed when her thoughts took a new route - but she couldn’t deny it; Gendry was also the most handsome boy she had ever seen. Sometimes when he was still finishing a job when Arya came down to cook over the coals, she stole glances in his direction and observed his strong arms, broad shoulders and thick neck, with a funny feeling growing inside her. She had never noticed such things before and wasn’t sure why she did it now, but she liked what she saw.

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Arya was so submerged in those thoughts that she noticed the arrival of soldiers only when they had already entered, their marching steps halted and deadly silence fallen on the smithy. Quickly, she jumped up, her stomach rolling. Were the soldiers after her, had she been discovered?

Risking a peek from her vantage point, she saw a group of gold cloaks, their leader talking to Tobho Mott. They were too far away for her to hear them clearly, but he did hear Gendry’s name and saw Tobho pointing towards the direction of the ironmonger, undoubtedly explaining again where his apprentice had gone.

These men were not satisfied to leave the matter until the next day; soon enough the leader barked orders to his men, sending some to take positions at the back and front of the smithy, some to reside inside it, standing by the benches where customers usually waited for their orders to arrive.

Tobho Mott didn’t like it, Arya could see it from his stiff posture and pursed lips, but if Varys had been someone he was not in a position to confront, gold cloaks of the City Watch were even more so.

Arya’s mind raced. Why were these men after Gendry too? She knew them to be at the king’s command – or had Varys changed his mind and somehow commanded soldiers to do what he hadn’t been able to? What was the urgency? And if it was not Varys, who was behind this? Why Gendry?

The relief she felt after realising they were not after her soon changed into a gnawing worry.
Whatever it was, someone or many someones were after Gendry – and it could not be good.

She counted hours quickly in her head. She knew where Gendry had gone and what he was supposed to do there; they had discussed it just before she had left for her prowling the night before. It should be no more than… one or two hours at most before he was back. If soldiers were under orders to apprehend him as he arrived, waiting for his return would not be enough. She had to find him and warn him, whatever it took.

Arya shook her head. No, she had to do better.

They had to leave.

Disappear.

Now.

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Arya acted quickly; what little belongings she had, including the purse of coin, she packed into an old canvas bag, then she sneaked into Gendry’s little alcove at the back of the smithy. It was separated from the rest of the building only by a heavy curtain, and she tiptoed around it her heart in her throat, afraid that she would be caught. Flustered, she looked around; what should she pack for Gendry? He had little possessions as well, but she picked his leather bag, some clothes, a notebook and pen Gendry used when he made designs of various armours and things he wanted to make someday, his good boots, comb and shaving knife – although both had had little use as far as she knew.

She stopped in front of Gendry’s most prized possession; the helm in the shape of a bull. She had spent many evenings watching him polish it to a finer and finer sheen, removing invisible impurities from its surface, smoothing it in his hands…He loved that thing more than anything else, not the least because it was the result of his own hard work, made after the end of his working days over many long months.

But it was so BIG. Arya glanced at her bag; it would hardly fit in it, and then she would need another bag for everything else. And yet…how could she leave it behind when it meant so much for Gendry?

Making her mind up she pulled a thin blanket from Gendry’s bed, tied its corners together, threw the helm into it and sneaked out, balancing her loads on her shoulders as she ran.

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“Gendry! Gendry!”

Arya caught him only two blocks away from the smithy. Had she delayed any longer with her packing, he would have walked right into the waiting soldier’s arms.

“Arya? What are you doing here?” His eyes narrowed and he looked behind her. “Is someone chasing you?”

“No, not me, you have to stop, don’t go there!” Arya panted, having sprinted after that familiar mop of black hair she had spotted in the crowd.

“Don’t go where?”
“Gods, sometimes he can be so slow!”

“To Tobho Motts. There are gold cloaks waiting for you, and if they get you, they will take you to the Red Keep. You can’t go back!”

“What would they want from me?”

“I don’t know! But whatever it is, it is no good. Besides, they are not the only ones – Lord Varys, the Master of Whisperers, came by earlier and he was after you as well.”

Gendry had stopped fully, staring at her incredulously.

“What do those people have to do with me? And… wait, what, how would you know anything about this Lord… Varus? Varys?”

“I tell you all about it later, but first we have to leave.” Arya’s patience was already worn thin and all she wanted was to run far away from danger.

She had figured their first stop already; a warehouse in the harbour that was used by a spice merchant, but only three days a week, the rest of the week standing empty, only a heavy whiff of exotic spices occupying it. They could sleep there one, even two nights while figuring out their next move.

“But I can’t just leave! Master Mott would take my hide if I did.”

“What he would or not do is no consequence now. Don’t you see it, there are bigger things in motion. I promise, it will make more sense after I tell you what I know – and I don’t know all, but some. But for now, you simply can’t go back. Tobho Mott will understand.” The last bit was a little white lie – Arya didn’t know what kind of trouble Mott would get from either Varys or from the king if he lost the boy who seemed to attract so much interest – but neither did she care.

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It took more cajoling and coercion than Arya would have liked, but eventually, Gendry followed her reluctantly to the harbour. He muttered to himself the whole time though, and Arya knew that there was no way she could avoid coming clean to him now, after this.

“You could have taken my hammer as well, you know. It belonged to me, not to the house - Master Mott gave it to me as a reward for a good job I did with the city guard lances,” he mumbled while going through the contents of his bag.

“You can get more hammers later, but you can’t get another head,” Arya snapped. She was cutting remains of the pie she had stolen from the feat the previous evening, and its filling of meat and beans threatened to spill on her lap rather than on the bowl she had found in the warehouse.

“What is this talk about losing heads anyway? Why do you think anyone looking for me had bad intentions? And how do you know about this Lord Varys? Come now, time to spill it up!”

Gendry had that jut in his jaw that told Arya that he was not going to budge. He could be as stubborn as she when he got that way – luckily it was not often, though.

Gendry received the piece of pie from Arya and scooted to sit right in front of her on the floor, never letting his gaze waver.

“Out with it now.”
Arya sighed.

“What I told you when we first met is very close to the truth, but not exactly the whole truth. You know, my father was not the retainer to the Hand of the King.” She sucked her cheeks in. “He was the Hand of the King.”

“What?!” Gendry’s mouth fell open. Any other time the expression of total incredulity on his face would have made Arya laugh, but now laughing was the furthest thing in her mind.

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Much later, after Arya had told Gendry everything, he stayed silent for a long time. All his focus seemed to be on the small knife he had started sharpening at some point – probably to give his hands something to do while his head was trying to process all the things he was hearing.

scrape - scrape - scrape

“Don’t you have anything to say?” Arya finally asked.

Gendry ran his thumb along the blade’s edge, his lips drawn into a tight line.

“So King Robert was my father, you say? And you are a noble lady, a highborn?”

“Yes, that is the essence of it. And now Lord Varys and somebody else high in court are after you, and we have to…”

“And when were you thinking of telling me all this, without being prompted by Varys and the gold cloaks?” His tone was unnaturally calm and low. He refused to look at Arya, and that alone gave her the chills. Gendry had never before been like this, so cold. Even in the beginning, when he had still been suspicious of her, never had Arya felt such frostiness in the room.

“Well, I would have, only…”

“When?”

Arya shrank. “I swear I would have, it was just not a right time…”

“When would have been a right time?”

“I don’t know…” Arya was running out of excuses, and as much as it galled her to admit it, Gendry was within his rights to be angry at her. To conceal something of that magnitude, especially about his own birth… She had just sat there and listened to his disparaging comments about his father being some highborn loser who had tumbled with his mother and left. And she had said nothing.

“I was wrong, I know it now. I am sorry, I truly am. I didn’t know what was right or wrong, and I was afraid for myself and for you, what would you do if you knew…” She was prattling now, with no rhyme or reason, but she was ready to say anything, promise anything, just to make that cold expression on Gendry’s face to go away.

“Did you think – did you truly think - that I would have given you away if I knew who you were? Or did you think I would be angry at you for telling me about King Robert? Is that what you thought?”

Gendry stood up and for a moment Arya thought he was going to leave then and there – but he only moved to the other side of the warehouse and sat on a pile of empty sacks, as far away from Arya as
Arya bit her lip.

“What now?” she asked. She had slid lower and lower on the bench she was sitting, shoulders slumped. Realising that, she straightened herself. She had done it alone once before, she could do it again if needed!

Nonetheless, despite her momentary defiance, she had to face the fact that if Gendry left her, it would be a devastating blow. She was not used to be alone, she was not built to be alone. And Gendry was… different. Different to any other person she had ever met. Different to any other boy.

Arya shook her head. She needed trustworthy company if she wanted to travel towards the North. That was all.

Or that was what she told herself.

Gendry stretched himself on the ground and pulled one of the sacks on top of him.

“That was the last thing he said that whole evening, and after a few entreaties to make him talk, Arya eventually gave up and settled on her spot. It was fully dark by then, the noises of the busy harbour abated, and there was nothing else to do but rest and gather strength. To think what next. And to wait.

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The next morning Gendry was still moping, but when Arya offered him the leftovers of the pie, he accepted her offering and lowered himself next to her on the floor.

“What now?” she repeated her question from the previous night. Wary, should Gendry baulk at her.

“I guess now we have to leave the city and find our way to that Northern place of yours to freeze our asses off,” game the grumpy reply, which nonetheless made Arya’s face to split in a grin.

“I swear, you’ll not regret it! My father will give you a place among his men, and Mikken will welcome you with open arms. He is always complaining about not having anyone to take up his craft when he is gone - he’ll take you in for sure!”

Gendry only glanced at her, unfathomable expression hiding what he thought.

“I guess one master is not that different to another. I could forge arms for all the lords and their bannermen, your father, your brothers – and eventually, your lord husband. “ He took a bite of the heel of the bread. “Not bad for a lad from Flea Bottom.”

*It is not going to be like that*, Arya almost said – but then her words withered and died before leaving her mouth. That was *exactly* how it would be.

Suddenly even the thought of leaving that godsforsaken city did not cheer her quite as much as she had thought. She went back to her bread and cheese and said nothing.
Just a heads up: The next chapter will pick up with Sansa again - and overall the pace is going to alternate between different story arcs more and more going forward...
Scars

Chapter Notes

Thank you Hardlyfatal for betaing and inspiring me to look into grammar and writing in more detail again… Not sure if it shows in my writing though – but heck, it is fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

“Friends.” A flat statement, the word drawn out as if it was particularly hard and difficult to pronounce. Then the Hound laughed, a low snarl reverberating through the air. “What the fuck is a ‘friend’?!?”

Sansa withdrew a little, startled by his crudeness. He noticed, and reached out to take both of her arms in his grip. His hands were huge and Sansa braced herself for pain, but despite his agitated state, his touch was oddly gentle.

Not so his words.

“What the hells are you thinking?! You think you can bat your eyelids at me and toy with me, like a spoiled princess who is used to get what she wants? Pretend we are friends, even?”

He let his eyes wander over Sansa’s form, and judging by how much better she saw him by then, her eyes having adjusted to the dim light, he doubtless saw her as well. He stopped to stare at her chest, then lowered his gaze slowly down to her feet and then back up again.

Then he smiled, his teeth flashing white in the darkness.

“You have grown. You were just a girl back in Winterfell and look at you now. Teats, hips – you're almost a woman. Do you bleed yet? If you do, Joffrey will wed you and take you to his bed soon.”

Strangely, Sansa wasn’t afraid. She knew all about schoolyard bullies, and that’s what he seemed to her at that moment. Tormenting someone weaker than him just because he could. Besides, the contradiction between his touch and his words told her something else, and she decided to believe his non-existent bite more than his bark. So she squared herself and stared boldly back at him.

“A friend is someone who tells you the truth and tries to help you if you are doing something wrong. You did that to me and so I couldn’t help wondering.”

He was focused on her face now and despite his continuing grin she could see that he had grown solemn, his drunkenness brushed aside for the moment. He didn’t release her and Sansa felt his closeness acutely, the strength and tension of his body radiating through his touch and into her.

He blinked, opened his mouth as if to say something, then snapped it close again. At last he let go of her, sliding his hands down her arm. They were warm, their callouses catching at the silk of her sleeves, and briefly met her bare skin before letting go altogether. Sansa shivered again, but for a different reason.
“We are not friends, girl. I have no friends, and neither do you, in this court. You’d better learn it now or suffer from it.” His tone was remarkably subdued and Sansa didn’t miss the change in his tone.

“I may not be able to force my friendship onto anyone who wishes not to receive it, but it is freely given to you, in any case.” Saying those words Sansa realised that as strange as it was, she wanted to be friends with this man. What little she knew of him was enough to suggest that he was not evil in the same sense of the word as Joffrey was. Thinking of how little she was ready to settle for – to be friends with one of her jailors - made her want to laugh, nervously, but she controlled herself.

“We may not be friends, but you have told me the story of your scars, at least I think so. Why did you? Not that I remember any of it, though,” Sansa said quietly, not really expecting him to respond. The Hound was looking away, towards the garden growing wild and neglected all around them. He took another swig of his skin but seemed not to be in a hurry to leave.

“It was my brother. He was a squire already by then and had no time for children’s play, but a woodcarver in my father’s debt sent us gifts anyway. A wooden knight for him, and I don’t even remember what for me.” He didn’t look at Sansa but played with the cords of the wine skin.

“Gregor’s toy was magnificent, all painted up, its joints separated and fixed with strings, so you could move him. I was but a brat, six or seven, and I wanted nothing more than to play with it.” His voice was strangled and oddly monotonous, almost as if he was reciting somebody else’s story.

Sansa was at loss. What had some wooden toys to do with how he had gotten his scars?

“I hid in a room to play with it, but he found me, don’t know how, but he did. There was a brazier in it and when he saw me he didn’t say anything – he didn’t even look angry. All he did was to pick me up under his arm and shove my face down in the burning coals, holding me there while I screamed and screamed. I still remember the smell of burning flesh. You know it too, girl, like a roast prepared in a pit. It may smell good when your stomach is grumbling - but let me tell you, when it is your own flesh burning and you feel every fucking coal and pebble eating though your skin…”

Sansa’s eyes widened and for a moment she thought she was going to be ill. His silhouette showed against the distant glow, hooked nose and heavy brows, perfectly still, only his mouth moving as he continued his story.

“Eventually my father’s men got him off me – three of them it took. My father told everyone my bedding had caught fire, and nobody questioned him. I got what treatment I could from our cowardly maester, and Gregor had what was coming to him a few years later when Rhaegar Targaryen knighted him.”

Sansa wanted to cry. A boy so cruelly treated, then shunned by society because of his looks – no wonder he had grown to be ruthless. A classical response mechanism for someone so abused at an early age.

She reached towards him and clumsily touched his elbow. The Hound stilled but didn’t move away when she did it. She was not sure how to convey her sympathy to him. What could she do? What could she say? She was years too late, the damage had already been done both for his body and his mind.

And yet she had to try.

“I…I am so sorry. You didn’t deserve it, or what came after. He is a monster.”
Standing totally still, he didn’t say anything more. Sansa could feel his arm tensing under her hand and without thinking she squeezed it — and held her breath. She didn’t really know how to best comfort someone reliving a past trauma, but she had read that often it was not the words, but simply the other person’s presence and physical touch that was most helpful. So she held back her words and squeezed his arm again, now with more force behind it.

A long, shuddering breath, and he shook himself like a noble beast waking from its slumber, carefully, not dislodging her hand.

Sansa had to know.

“Is this what you told me before?”

“Aye. And I told you not say a word to anyone or I will kill you.” The threat lost some of its potency from the way he said it, almost inaudibly.

“I will not tell a soul.”

The slug of wine again, then a nervous chuckle and a muffled curse.

“Is that all, girl, or do you want me to spill my innards on your feet while we’re at it? Don’t get any fancy ideas in that head of yours, though. This does not mean that we are ‘friends’. I only told you so you would understand some things about this world and the monsters in it.” Like Joffrey simmered unsaid between them.

“I thank you. I think I understand now better...about monsters. And I know you are not one of them.”

“Fuck that. I am the Hound, I kill for joy. Don’t ever be fooled to think otherwise.”

They gathered themselves in near darkness, the torch having died down and the moonlight not being enough, and returned to the corridor. The Hound saw Sansa to her rooms, brooding and dipping into his fast-emptying wine skin with increasing frequency. He seemed angrier now than before and Sansa judged it wise to let him be. He had revealed enough of himself that night already — more than she would have ever imagined.

A hasty nod at the door, his eyes not reaching hers, and he was gone.

That night Sansa had nightmares of dark cells, rotting straw and a man hunched on the stone floor. Somehow she was in that cell too and when she approached the man, he turned to look at her and it was the face of her real father, his auburn hair and soft blue eyes looking at her with love — and then his features changed in front of her eyes into a man with long face, grey eyes and dark hair. Sansa drew back, but even though the man was a stranger she felt sympathy and the same sense of love she had felt with her own father, and she leaned forward to embrace him.

And then she heard a scream and saw the man’s face melt away in a glow of fire and embers and her heart hammered and her breath caught in her throat and she woke up sweating and shaking, the last thing she remembered from her nightmare being the horribly burned face of the Hound.

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Eventually, Queen Cersei delivered, bless her lioness’ soul. A missive from the king himself, doubtless written by some scribe judged by its flourishing lettering, advised Lady Sansa that she would be escorted to see her lord father the very next day. The stated explicit aim of the visit was to make him recant his treacherous claims and to ease the process of pardon for everyone involved.
Excitement, but also nervousness, washed over Sansa, and she squeezed the parchment in her hand so tightly that it crumpled into a ball. Her discreet enquiries under the guise of a worried daughter about how her father was being treated had provided her with some knowledge about the black cells and how they were situated down on the third level of the Red Keep dungeons. It seemed that it was easy to extract information from a great many people while pretending to be just an empty-headed girl, she had found out to her relief – but also to her frustration. Pretending to be more stupid than she was didn’t sit well with her - she had not been brought up that way.

There was really just one right thing to do, she had concluded during that night of frantic thinking and analysing of her options; she had to help Lord Eddard to escape. That was crucial – but how?

Deep deliberation, assisted by endless pacing in her room rubbing her forehead and rummaging through the very limited assortment of tools at her disposal, helped Sansa finally to come up with an idea.

And at the heart of it was her visit to the Red Keep on that fateful day when her misadventure has started.

Her strategy might not have been a brilliant one, but it was the best she could do at such a short notice, and contained the element of surprise because of the knowledge she had of the keep – knowledge she suspected not many others had.

First, she needed some yarn – quite a bit of it. She pulled apart her sewing basket and patiently unwound the few skeins she found, then tied the ends of threads together with a tight knot and wound the resulting long thread back into a ball again. In the evening, she asked her maid to bring some more with an excuse that she wanted to start a new tapestry as a gift for her betrothed and wanted to plan its colour scheme. Jessa did as she was bid, returning with a full basket of threads of different colours; dark blues, muted greens, vibrant reds and of course an array of golds, yellows and oranges.

Sansa worked until late at night, ignoring her heavy eyelids and weary arms. She couldn’t be sure how much she would need, and so thought better to prepare rather too much than too little, unwinding skein after skein, pulling, tying, rolling, unwinding, pulling, tying, rolling…

In the morning Sansa found herself slumped over a pile of yarn, drool having glued her chin to a piece of cloth that had covered the basket. Just in time, she heard the approach of Jessa’s soft steps and swiftly hid the incriminating evidence before slipping under her covers.

Pretending to feel poorly, she stole a few precious hours of sleep before she had to get up for the second act of her plan.

Having refused breakfast earlier but now claiming to feel much better, Sansa ignored her maid’s protestations and made her way to the vast kitchens in the ground level of the keep. In this, she was guided by Jessa, who although mortified by the prospect of the future queen visiting such an undignified place, was even more afraid of not doing as she was told.

The kitchen was a buzzing hive of activity, preparations for the evening meal already well under way although it was hardly past noon. Kitchen maids were running back and forth, manservants carrying in whole carcasses, sacks of flour and vats of greens, fires burning in huge fireplaces, a cacophony of noises a pulsating hum above all this.

While Jessa bartered a meal from whatever was available from one of the cooks, every now and then querying Sansa if she preferred cold boiled potatoes or turnips, pork or beef, bread or pudding, Sansa studied the benches and shelves around her. On one of them, she spotted what she was after: a knife.
It lay flat next to an assortment of bowls and plates and was about the length of her handspan and sharp-edged, just what she needed.

Pretending to be interested in the crockery Sansa made her way towards it, lifting first one item into her hand, studying it, putting it down and then moving to another. Near her target she lifted one of the bowls with one hand while swiping the knife with the other, pressing it against her thigh. A few more steps, a casual word with Jessa and the cook, and she had secured her prize into her sleeve, holding it in its place by clasping her fingers across her wrist in a demure gesture.

Later in her room, after a well-earned midday meal, she examined the knife. A broad blade, sturdy handle, razor sharp edge – it would have to do. She didn’t want to think about what exactly it was going to be used for, as that was unavoidable. Besides, maybe it would serve well only as a threat.

The last thing for her was to hide the results of her endeavours – luckily the wide skirts were perfect for the purpose. Somehow she didn’t think she would be frisked in the dungeons; the sweet and docile Lady Sansa, too well-bred and innocent about the ways of the world, how could anyone even doubt that she had something sinister in her mind?

And so Sansa sat down on her bed, smoothed her skirts over the hardly-visible bumps of the ball of thread and the knife wrapped in a handkerchief and secured in a loose-hanging pocket under her skirts, and attempted to force her frayed nerves to settle down.

She was ready.

Chapter End Notes

Any comments or questions you might have about this tale are warmly welcomed! I don’t mind constructive criticism either, should you have something constructively critical to say…
Chapter Notes

What will Ned think about his sweet, innocent daughter? How will Sansa react to a stranger, who is supposedly her own father? Is it dark in black cells? Will Sansa be frisked? For answers to all of these questions, read on…

Big thank you for Hardlyfatal for challenging my writing habits in her betaing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ned

The darkness inside the black cells was deeper than Ned had ever experienced, deeper even than in the crypts of Winterfell. When he had been just a small boy he had hidden there – like generations of young boys of House Stark had done before and hopefully were going to do after him – and after the initial anxiety and nervousness, had felt an unexpected sense of peace and comfort. A sensation of being surrounded by his kin, the ancient kings of the North looking over him with benevolent air.

Not so in the black cells of the Red Keep. His leg hurt. A dull ache which, if he moved too suddenly, burst into hot flames of agony. Ned wondered how bad it was – the wound had started to heal clean, but then he had been thrown into this stinking pit and it had festered again.

He had had no visitors save the gaoler’s assistant who came in once a day with water, a slab of stale bread and some tasteless gruel. The man refused to talk to him or answer any of his questions, and so days went by without Ned knowing what was going on - and it was driving him crazy. He wondered what had happened to his daughters, to his feisty Arya and gentle Sansa. Surely Cersei would not go as far as to punish them for his mistakes?

He slept a lot, feverish disturbed dreams of beds of blood and promises made. Whether it was night or day made no difference to him, and sometimes he thought that maybe it had come to this: for him to spend the rest of his days in this abyss.

Oh Cat, what have I done?

Then one day something unexpected happened: he received a visitor. The sounds of loud footsteps and clang of heavy keys approached from the corridor, stopping in front of his door. The gaoler put up a big show about opening it, turning the large key three times to release the giant latch, then entered the cell. The light from the single torch was dim, but it made Ned squint his eyes as it had been a shine of thousand suns.

The gaoler himself led the procession. He was a grubby man, as wide as he was tall, dangling the symbols of his esteemed position, the keys to the dungeons, prominently in his belt. He was followed by two persons; the first lean and tall, the second heavyset and even taller. At first, Ned couldn’t identify them, but when he saw the first figure hurrying towards her with an exclamation, he recognised her.
“Sansa!”

Then she was in his arms, Ned holding her tight.

“Father!”

“You have a moment. The prisoner stays where he is.” The gaoler put down a little stool he had been carrying and after disentangling herself from the embrace, Sansa sat on it. She didn’t seem to care that the hem of her skirt brushed against the dirty floor.

“I thank you kindly, and you, Ser Arys. I will talk with my lord father now, as was the king’s wish.” His daughter’s tone was polite but unusually confident, dismissing the two men from the cell. They obeyed but didn’t go far, muttering to each other at the corridor.

“Sansa, my sweet child, how are you here? What is happening, did Joffrey truly send you here?” Despite everything, Ned couldn’t make himself to call that unpleasant boy a king. He felt for Sansa’s hand and she took hold of his. He hoped he didn’t stink quite as much as he was afraid of he did, but resigned to the fact that there was nothing he could do about it. And Sansa was always such a lady, she wouldn’t like the dungeon at all.

“Father, we don’t have much time, so I will be quick. You know you are being accused of treason, and you are going to be executed for it.”

Ned was taken aback. Not only by the content of the statement but also the way it had been delivered, with such brusque words.

“What are you saying, child?”

“I am sorry, I didn’t mean to be so harsh. I just want you to realise the full gravity of the situation.” She was looking at him, eyebrows drawn together, but not with repulsion, and then squeezed his hand and Ned squeezed it back.

“I am sure Joffrey knows better than to risk the wrath of the Northmen. He can’t execute me.” Ned’s words were more confident than his actual beliefs, but he didn’t want to distress his precious Sansa. He had been allowed to see her, for which he was thankful, and there was no point in causing her anguish by speculating about things that might or might not happen.

“I am sorry, father, but he is. Or somebody is; I am not quite sure who is behind it, but I know that the plan is for you not to leave the capital alive. I apologise for being the bearer of bad news, but that is why I am here. We have to do something about it.” Sansa spoke in low tones, glancing behind her to make sure her companions had stayed in the corridor.

Ned was thoroughly confused. It was not like his daughter to think of stately matters – nor was it her habit to speak with so much confidence, so matter-of-factly. No, his Sansa was respectful and polite, deferring to her elders and being shy to express her opinions. She was smart, Ned knew; all his children were clever and well-educated. Thanks to Cat, he thought, the pain of thinking of his beloved wife piercing him.

“We have to escape. You first, and I will follow. Look, I brought you a knife.” Indeed, she slid a heavy knife wrapped in a piece of cloth from under her skirts to rest against Ned’s leg – the good leg.

“A also made sure that from now on it is the head-gaoler who brings you your food. He has the keys to the main door of the dungeon, unlike the under-gaolers.”

A shuddered breath and her tone changed. “The knife is for… you know what to do with it. The main thing is that you get the keys from him and make your way to the first level of these vaults.
There, not far outside the guards’ room, you will see a carving of a dragon on the wall. It is small and barely noticeable, and hence I have devised means to make sure you find it.”

“Sansa, what has happened? You say the strangest things – what have they done to you?” Ned’s heart constricted. Had Cersei tricked Sansa to do something foolish, using her love for him as a bait? Could that woman be so cruel?

Without answering him, Sansa shifted and pulled something from a mysterious pocket of her skirts.

“I will bind the end of this thread onto the pole, here, and let it run as I walk away.” Her fingers made a quick work of it, and the pole into which Ned was shackled soon had a new addition; a blue thread running from it and disappearing under Sansa’s skirt.

“Just follow the thread to the dragon, and when you get there, press it down from its head, at the same time pushing it hard against the wall. It will release a mechanism that opens the door to a tunnel. Then just follow the passageway and it leads you to the stables. Just remember to close the door behind you.”

For a moment Ned thought he was hallucinating. He stared at her daughter, his eyes having adapted to light. It was her, no doubt about it; her mother’s eyes, fair skin and hair, tendrils of auburn gleaming around her face. And yet…she could not be his sweet Sansa. Not like this.

Sansa seemed to finally notice his astonishment as she stopped, an unsure smile lighting her face.

“I apologise, father. I may seem somewhat changed, I realise that. The thing is, I had an accident.” Seeing his expression of alarm, she hastened to continue.

"Nothing serious, I assure you. Or maybe a little. I fell and hit my head and I lost my memory.”

“Your memory?”

“Yes, I don’t remember much of the times before the accident, now almost three weeks ago. Nevertheless, things are coming back to me, one by one. And Father…” Sansa looked down, taking a deep breath. At that moment she was Ned’s little princess once again, shy and demure. Then she looked up and her eyes were those of a woman grown, not of a girl.

“I know I may not seem the same as before. I can’t tell why it is, but there are things I may be doing differently. Yet it is still me, and I will do all I can do to help you and our family. Will you trust me in this?” Her eyes bored onto his with intensity – gods, they were like Catelyn’s the day he had faced her after bringing Jon as a babe with him to Winterfell.

“I believe you, my child, but I still find it difficult to believe that Joffrey or Cersei could be so foolish. I know my position is precarious, but…”

“Please! I do know this – it is going to happen unless we do something! I can’t tell how or why but it is the truth!”

Ned was touched. He wanted to hear more about the accident – how was it possible that she had lost her memory? If it was the case, should she not have also forgotten him? He had so many questions, but there was no time.

Having come to the same conclusion, Sansa tugged his hand hard. “You have to believe me! I know… things.” She stopped, as if to gather her thoughts. Then she pursed her lips and set her jaw, full of determination. She leaned even closer – Ned could smell the flowery essence of her hair.
“I know about Jon. Don’t ask me how, but I do.”

Ned drew back. “What do you mean? What about Jon?”

“I know that he is not who he is claimed to be. He is not all wolf… there is some dragon in him as well. I know about Lyanna and Rhaegar.”

_Gods!_ Ned stared at her, stunned. There was no way she could know. Only two people alive had knowledge of his sister and Rhaegar... and Howland Reed was far away in Greywater Watch.

Sansa looked at him, almost pitying. As Ned started to shake his head in a muted denial, she stopped him.

“Do you believe me now?” Without waiting for an answer she squeezed his arm. “Once you have dealt with the head gaoler, take his clothes. Camouflaged that way you should be able to slink out of the keep without anyone paying too much attention. Besides, the reputation of the black cells as being inescapable should be enough to prevent anyone even imagining that you could escape, not so easily. If nothing else, at least it would confuse them for a while and buy us some time. We have to use that.”

Ned was still watching her, mouth agape.

“Then what?” He couldn’t believe he was asking his innocent little daughter for directives. Life had truly turned upside down.

“Is there a place we could meet, after? No doubt I will hear about your escape, and then I will make my own way from the keep. But I need to know where I can find you.”

Ned blinked. Things were happening too quickly, he needed to know more about them – but even as he thought of that, he knew it had to wait. Even if Sansa was wrong about his fate, the notion of leaving that dreadful place was too tempting. He could start for home, back to Winterfell. Only…

“Arya? What about Arya? Is she with you?”

Sansa froze, then pulled back slightly. That gesture alone gave Ned chills.

“She is not. She hasn’t been seen since the day you were arrested.”

“Since the day… it was weeks ago! Where could she be?!?” Ned couldn’t breathe. His little girl, gone?

“Nobody knows. It may not be a bad thing, she might have escaped!” Sansa squeezed his hand again, speaking fast. “She was not caught when the soldiers were sent to get her. They got her dancing master though; the poor man was killed. You see, it may mean that she had a chance to escape!”

“Escape where? She doesn’t know anyone in the city, and she is just a little girl, how could she…”

“Shush, Father, don’t think about it. There is nothing you or I can do about it now, not while we are kept here as prisoners.”

Reluctantly, Ned had to agree. One thing at the time. If he just could get out of here… maybe he could find Arya then. Maybe she had found one of his household guards. Ned knew some of his men had escaped, maybe they had kept an eye on the Red Keep. Maybe she had already left the city. Maybe…
“Father, I don’t mean to rush, but we don’t have much time.” Sansa nudged him, gently.

“Yes, of course… but how do you plan to get away? Don’t they keep you too a prisoner?”

“They do – but they don’t guard me quite as tightly. I think they can’t imagine me running away, a mere girl. I think my chances are good. So, where do I find you?”

A knock on the open door alerted them. The gaoler stuck his head in and grumbled something about it being time to leave.

“I will be with you in a moment. I still have to make sure that my lord father knows exactly what the king expects of him,” Sansa shouted back. Then she turned to Ned again and hissed, “Where?”

Ned’s mind worked in high speed for a while, then he remembered.

“There is an inn called The Golden Stag at the far end of the Street of Steel, near Visenya’s Hill. I know of the place but I haven’t been there myself, so I think I could go there without being recognised.”

Sansa seemed to think about it for a moment and Ned felt horrible – how on earth was his sweet daughter going to find a place like that? She, who had not often stepped outside the Red Keep, and most certainly not without the protection of guards? To his amazement, Sansa soon nodded.

“I don’t know the place, but if it is near Visenya’s Hill close to the end of Street of Steel, I think I should be able to find there. How do I find you in it?”

“I am not sure you should try to escape. You alone in a big city, with no-one to look after you… we could try to get you back with diplomatic means.”

“The time for diplomacy is over, I’m afraid. Don’t worry about me, I am sure I will survive. So much has happened since we last saw each other and I am a quick study. If any place can prepare me for the hardships ahead, this court can. Please know, Father, that I will leave, whether you accept it or not. It just would be better if we travelled together, that’s all.”

A dry smile graced the corner of Sansa’s mouth but she looked determined. Almost like Arya sometimes – or Cat. Has my baby daughter grown up while I was not there to see it? Ned wondered and felt bitterness for the need for her to do so. Yet, being an experienced battle commander he knew when he had lost a battle, and so he yielded.

“I will book a room under the name Underhill, ask for me there.”

“Time to go, my lady,” the knight who had escorted Sansa – Ser Arys – murmured from the door.

“Very well. Dear father, have you heard me? Do I have your word that you will behave as agreed, and admit the error of your ways to the king when he asks you so?” Sansa asserted louder, looking back at him while getting up from her crouched position. Ned wasn’t sure what his lines in this farce were supposed to be, and hence settled to saying his goodbyes.

“Take heart, my child, and know that my thoughts are with you. I shall do as you bid.” At least what he said was true.

One last press of her slender fingers, and Sansa stood up. “I will see you soon, my Lord Father.”

Then she was gone and the door slammed shut behind the party.
Ned sat in the darkness for a long, long time, trying to digest what had just taken place. He still couldn’t quite believe that Joffrey or Cersei could be so foolish as to execute him – another Lord Stark killed in King’s Landing? Then again… what he knew about the two did not suggest sense and reason were their main motivators. And Sansa had been so adamant, almost as if she had received confirmation from somewhere. Yet how could she? And then there was the thing she had said about Jon and the dragon…

Ned felt the knife against his thigh and without seeing, opened the bundle to feel the bite of sharp steel against his thumb. It was hard and solid and something concrete he could set his mind to.

Yes, he knew what he had to do.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be told from Sansa’s POV again, and some things mentioned here will be elaborated more in it.
This chapter was a beast to write – hence the slight delay… Now it is done and dusted and it is time to move on! Thank you kindly for Hardlyfatal for helping me to tame the beast!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

Sansa looked at her image in the tarnished mirror she had in her room. It was slightly cracked at the edges and not as polished as the mirrors she was used to, but the reflection in it was clear enough.

The face revealed in it looked unchanged from before; the nose, the eyes – even the slightly protruding ears that had driven her crazy in her early teenage years.

And yet it was not truly her – at least not only her.

Somehow it had been easier to pretend to be a different person in the presence of strangers. Like that one summer holiday in a coastal holiday town years ago, when the kindly woman in the corner shop had somehow mistaken Sansa for her friend Eowe and had kept on calling her by that name the whole summer. First, she had not paid much attention to it, and after a while, she had been too embarrassed to correct her mistake – and so she had been Eowe to that woman all those weeks. She and Eowe had giggled about it and thought it hilarious, and she had been sure to address her friend as ‘Sansa’ whenever they visited the store.

But that had been nothing like this.

Here, in this world, Sansa had polished and perfected her role playing a girl named Sansa Stark, presenting as her to all around her, but all the while doing it, she had accepted it had been just a role, only pretend. She knew that deep inside her she was still Sansa Tully, born and bred in White Harbour, a thoroughly modern young woman who by some freak accident had ended up somewhere where she didn’t belong.

Yet that day, after coming face to face with someone who had looked her deep in the eye and truly recognised her, embraced her and loved her – that had been different.

The most disconcerting in it had been how she, too, had reached for him and held him close, and it had not felt like acting at all. Finally seeing Lord Eddard, he had been the man she had seen once in her dreams; the very same face, the very same sad, grey eyes. ‘Father’, a distant voice had whispered in her head and Sansa had felt no hesitation in embracing him in earnest.

Sansa sighed and put the mirror down.

She hadn’t missed the confusion on the man’s face when they had talked, and she had felt sorry for him. It was obvious that Lord Eddard – Ned, as his family apparently called him – had not expected
his daughter to be so bold and had been quite taken aback by her speech and behaviour. Yet there had been no time or chance to introduce the escape plan to him gently. She would make it up to him once they were out of danger, Sansa decided. There would be time later to patch any misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

Tapping the mirror distractedly, she soon lifted it up again. Solemn blue eyes stared back at her, and she found herself wanting to ask questions from the girl she was facing. **Who are you? What do you want?**

Sansa had wondered many times about the *real* Sansa; was she really as clueless and goody-two-shoes as others seemed to think? If so, had it been because of her restricted upbringing and the expectations of the society they lived in? What kind of a girl would she be, if she lived in modern Westeros?

She felt a great closeness to this girl from the past. There had to be a reason why she had fallen into her so easily, and why the things *Sansa* was good at were so easy for her to learn. The needlework, for example. Sansa didn’t entertain any foolish notions of it being her own doing that she had picked up such complicated and delicate skill so fast - she, who had struggled with darning her own socks in her own time. No, it was her doing…

Then there were the memories. They didn’t come to her in the same way as recollections of her own past – but every now and then Sansa caught herself deliberating over someone or someplace, and with a jolt realising them to be people or places she had never encountered. A recollection of a pretty girl with brown eyes and dark hair came to her often. *Jeyne*, she might have been called. Who was she? A friend, for sure, from the warm glow suffusing her when she thought of her.

A handsome young man with wavy auburn hair appeared frequently as well. *Robb*. Had he been Robb her brother, or perhaps a friend, or even a sweetheart? If noble ladies of the time even had sweethearts, Sansa thought gloomily. A long-faced young girl, a baby with a downy reddish hair, a young boy with knowing eyes, a woman with a sunset hair and warm smile – who were they and where did they come from?

There were days when the line between her and *Sansa* blurred and sometimes she was afraid of it, sometimes she embraced it. Yet there didn’t seem to be anything she could do about it, so in the end, Sansa accepted it as best as she could, as she had tried to accept the whole crazy rabbit hole she had fallen into.

She got up and paced around her room, feeling like a caged animal. Traces of adrenalin from earlier were still coursing through her veins. Looking back, she felt giddy and yet deeply satisfied with the nerve she had shown throughout the ordeal. So much was pending on the success of her mission, but what she had done so far had been just laying foundations to the audacious scheme that had taken up her every waking moment recently.

She went through her actions once more in her mind, trying to think if she had missed something, anything - or if she had made any mistakes somewhere along the way.

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The first part of her plan had played as she had planned in her head – almost.

When they had approached the entrance to the dungeons, Ser Arys had explained that only the chief gaoler held the keys to the many doors leading to the lower levels of the dungeons, one door after another until reaching the smaller guard room that served as an entrance to the black cells. The man had been alerted to their arrival and was waiting in the guard room near the main entrance, an
impressive looking iron-enforced wooden gate. He - his name being stated as Gulbrant - turned out to be old, fat and wrinkled, with a wispy beard and white hair. Not exactly what Sansa had expected from the chief gaoler of the royal dungeons, but she had nodded at him politely nonetheless.

Wasting no time, they had gotten on their way, meandering through many corridors and stairs, deeper and deeper into the rancid belly of the keep. Sansa had tried to endure the foul smells and dank air as best as she could, but the thought of anyone spending time in such conditions had made her sick in the stomach.

After leaving the guard room, Sansa had examined the walls of the corridor with keen eyes, searching for the dragon’s head serving as a sign for the tunnel she had gone through in her guided tour earlier - which seemed like a lifetime ago. She had worried it would not be there, or that it would be covered with something, or that she would simply miss seeing it in the dim light of the torches. She hadn’t been even sure if she remembered exactly where it was, the surroundings appearing so different in their present form, when compared to the well-lit corridors with clear signs, electric lights and Perspex cases containing information about all there was to know about that part of the castle.

Eventually, they had passed the last guard room and the last door the chief gaoler had to open with his impressive set of keys. The entrance of the tunnel should have been soon after – and Sansa had sharpened her eyes and slowed her pace. Yet all she had seen were smooth walls of dark stone, stretch after stretch, turn after turn, and after a while, her heart sank. Maybe she had remembered it all wrong – maybe it had been some other corridor she had travelled that day. Sansa had felt numb and her earlier high spirits had started to ebb.

Just as she had been ready to give up all hope, they had passed one more widening of the corridor, its size large enough to be called a room – and she had realised that the last guard room they had gone through had been from an earlier era than the one on the guided tour. She had been fooled by the different layout and the renovations that had been undertaken since then – and her spirits had lifted.

For a good reason, because soon enough she had spotted a worn head of a dragon with its jaws wide open almost at the floor level. In itself it was not unusual – the whole keep was dotted with dragon imagery in various forms; statues, wall carvings, paintings, columns… Some of them King Robert had ordered to be destroyed, but his attention span had not been long enough to ensure that the task had been completed. Besides, not many people cared about what resided in the dungeons.

Revitalised, she had executed the rest of her mission as she had planned. When they had walked, Sansa alongside with the chief gaoler and Ser Arys a few steps behind them, she had asked the man questions. The more information she had, the better. First, she had enquired who took care of the needs of her lord father and how often. Hearing that it was a duty of an undergaoler to visit him daily, after being escorted to the last guard room by the chief gaoler to take care of this task, had made her stomach clench. If the undergaoler had no keys to the upper parts of the corridor, Lord Eddard might not be able to escape after all.

What could she do to fix it?

Then the answer had come to her, an image of the Queen's golden arrogance flashing through her mind. If Cersei could do it, bloody hells, so could she!

“You know who I am, don’t you?” she had asked the man. Without waiting for an answer, she had pulled herself up to her full height, raised her head and using her most commanding and arrogant tone, continued. “I am your future queen, the queen of the Seven Kingdoms. In a matter of weeks, I will be Queen Sansa, sitting next to the Iron Throne, side by side with my lord husband King Joffrey.” From the corner of her eye, she had noticed the man bowing his head in deference to her words. Good.
She had then turned towards the man and fixed her gaze on the man’s rheumy eyes. “Chief gaoler Gulbran, when I am the queen, I will remember those who have done me favours. And even though my father is a traitor and deserves his just punishment, he is still my lord father. It would shame me, your queen, to see him appearing disheveled and in poor condition to answer the charges laid against him. I can’t have that. Hence I command you to attend to him daily yourself, not send your underlings. Give him all the food and care he needs, and provide him with a means to wash.”

Sansa couldn’t be sure if all her orders would be fulfilled, but she had figured that it would do no harm to try. If they were to escape, it was better for Lord Eddard to be in a good shape. If what she had seen of the dungeons so far were any indication of the general conditions, he might be filthy, even more so than the general population of King’s Landing. That could be disastrous - he shouldn’t stand out in any way from the common population.

Chief gaoler Gulbran had stared at her blankly, and so for the good measure, Sansa had upped the ante, narrowing her eyes and taking an expression she hoped to convey threat and intimidation.

“I will also remember those who refused my reasonable requests. It is not much I am asking, and I am sure my wishes are in perfect harmony with the instructions given to you by the king and the queen, my future lord husband and good-mother. But if you have any doubts about it, you are of course welcome to raise the matter with them.” She had thrown around all the references she could think of showing her affiliation with the rulers of the realm, and despite the slight risk of the chief gaoler actually going to Joffrey or Cersei, she had rather doubted that he would.

She had gambled – and her gamble had seemed to pay off when the man had bowed to her and muttered that of course her wishes would be adhered to, and from now on he would take personal charge of the prisoner and attend to his every need.

Sansa had felt a twinge of remorse remembering the dagger she was carrying, as she might have just condemned the man to his death - but she had shaken it away. *It is either he or my father,* she had told herself. It had felt odd to think of Lord Eddard as her father, but after the dream she had had the other night, part of her had felt as if she already knew him – notwithstanding that she had never even laid her eyes on him.

 Sansa had completed her mission on their return via the same route, despite her heart seemingly having moved to a permanent new location in her throat as she had walked out of the black cells, trailed by her two companions. She had walked deliberately slow and close to the wall to allow the thread to run from the ball under her skirts. To her relief, neither of his escorts had complained or tried to hurry her - apparently her assertive behaviour had had its desired effect.

She had been glad that it had been Oakheart assigned to escort her. Had it been the Hound, she might not have been able to pull it off – he was always much too perceptive and might have suspected something. As it had turned out, Ser Arys had been courteous enough, as always, but also oblivious to anything but to his stated tasks - and that had suited Sansa just fine.

At the site of the dragon’s head, she had pretended to drop the dainty purse she was carrying, knelt down, scooped it up, dropped her carefully coiled loop of thread around the jaws of the dragon and sprung up before her attendants had had time to react. A pretty swift movement, even if she said so herself, she had mused later with satisfaction. The likelihood of the thread being noticed was small, it being placed so close to the floor and the wall, where torch light did not reach. Only the one to whom it was intended would be able to trace it.

At least she hoped so.
The next few days after Sansa’s visit to the dungeons – of which she had given a full, although perhaps somewhat embellished report to both Queen Cersei and King Joffrey – Sansa focussed on the preparations of her own escape.

She took one of her simplest dresses from the coffin and cut away all decorations from the sleeves and hem: velvet roses, colourful beads and fine embroidery were all ruthlessly excised from the garment. She removed everything denoting it as a dress for a noble, leaving only a simple cut and a humble colouring of dark muted green. If one didn’t know much about fabrics, even the good quality of the cloth could be missed, making it look just like any other simple dress a maid or a city dweller could wear.

She took stock of her belongings, stuffing all valuable-looking jewels inside a secret hanging pocket of her newly-plain dress. Sansa would have preferred money, but where was she going to get any? Who had money at their disposal, and who might be willing to give any of it to her?

Only one man.

“To what do I owe this pleasure, Lady Sansa?” Quizzical raise of eyebrows, perfectly groomed over a pair of grey-green eyes. “As this is a pleasure indeed, let me assure you.”

Petyr Baelish rose from behind a big desk and pulled a chair to Sansa, gesturing for her to sit down. The room was big and sumptuous, the walls covered with shelves groaning under the weight of many books and scrolls.

“I hope I am not intruding. I am sure the Master of Coin has many pressing matters taking up his time without interferences from ladies of the court,” Sansa said, settling down on the proffered seat. She had figured that he had some sort of soft spot for her, possibly because of her mother, of whom he had spoken often. How much she could play him was another matter, as clearly he was not stupid.

The Hound had told her that Lord Baelish had risen from humble beginnings to become one of the powerful players in the realm. Anyone who could do that in times, when upward mobility between classes was rare, had to have good brains and shrewd intelligence. ‘Littlefinger’, the Hound had called him, unavoidably making Sansa giggle at the connotation. He had glanced at her hard and she had tried to suppress her glee, but he had only harrumped and luckily not commented further. That the Hound didn’t like the man was clear – but then, he didn’t like anyone.

Pushing the Hound out of her mind, Sansa studied the man across the desk. He was smiling but it didn’t quite reach his eyes, which were regarding her intently. No, any notion of playing a hare-brained girl would not work with this man – he would see right through it.

“My time is fully at your disposal. Just let me know what I can do for you, my lady.” His smile deepened and Sansa wondered if that was what a fish saw when lured with a colourful bait – just before the line was pulled out of the water.

“There actually is something you could do, if I may be so bold,” she started. “As you know, my mind is still quite blank about many matters, and some of the areas where my intellect is still woefully inadequate are heraldry, houses and currencies. I am ably assisted in womanly matters by Queen Cersei and her ladies, but as this area is a more manly pursuit, I don’t know who else to turn to but you.” She smiled. Not too seductively, she hoped, but with warmth nonetheless.
Lord Baelish pressed his fingers together to form an arch, his elbows resting against the desk. “I see - but why do you bother yourself with such things right now? Useful, undoubtedly, but not urgent. You can pick up those things over time, I am sure.”

Sansa was prepared for this argument. “You are right, of course. However, as my future role is to be the second lady of the realm – after Dowager Queen Cersei, of course – I feel it is my duty to be well-versed in all matters of the state. It would reflect poorly on my position and on my lord husband, the King, if I were caught unawares in these things.” She looked straight at him. “I want to be the kind of queen the realm deserves.”

‘The kind of queen who is not afraid to play the game of thrones’ was left unsaid but conveyed effectively enough.

“How could I help you in that, if I may ask?” Lord Baelish was intrigued, Sansa could see.

“If you have a book with sigils of all noble houses of Westeros to borrow, it would be of great help. I could study it on my own in my room, in the evenings.”

Baelish nodded slowly, glancing at the bookshelf to his left.

“I may be able to assist you with it. I will make sure a suitable book will be sent to your room no later than tonight.”

Sansa smiled again. She didn’t really care about the heraldry, but it might have seemed odd to get straight to the matter of money. Besides, it might not hurt her to learn some of the sigils. Friends from foes, that sort of things.

“There is also the topic of currency. I am quite curious to see some coins, just so I would know how they look.”

“I assure you that you don’t have to handle any coins with your own hands, Lady Sansa. Queens are above those things. Nonetheless, I like the way you think – so much like Catelyn used to view the world. She, too, is a very practical lady.” Baelish leaned down and reached for a box on one of the lower shelves. He lifted it on the desk and proceeded to pick up individual coins from it, haphazardly strewn across the bottom of the box.

“These here are a penny and a halfpenny, then we have a groat and a halfgroat, and finally a star – all copper coins.” He placed the well-worn objects in order at the desk. “Here are our silver coins; a stag and a moon, and this is the highest nomination; a gold dragon.” He fingered the coins as if enjoying the feel of them, rubbing his thumb and forefinger against the images adorning them; a stag, a star, a profile of a man, a dragon.

Sansa let out the appropriate exclamations of how beautiful they were and how interesting. She asked about their value; how much one could buy with one of these or these coins, how many groats in a stag, and so on. She admired them for their looks too, marveling the shine of silver stags and fierceness of the dragons in their namesake coins – how beautiful ornaments they were on their own right! She fiddled with them, hoping that the damned man would take a hint.

He did.

“Please do accept these as a gift, Lady Sansa. They are rather beautiful, as you rightly say, and a beautiful lady should have beautiful things.”

Got you! After the minimum amount of modesty and maximum show of gratitude Sansa accepted what was offered, and after some further exchanges concerning her wellbeing and the anticipation of
the approaching pardon for Lord Eddard she finally extracted herself from the offices of the Master of Coin. Exhausted from the subterfuge she had been forced to play, Sansa yearned to return to her chambers – but when she walked there, trailed by a guard, the jangle of the coins in her pouch assured her that it had been all worth it.

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A day went by, then another. Still no sign or word about Lord Eddard having escaped. Sansa’s nervousness increased – what if something had gone wrong?

On the morning of the fourth day, she was enjoying her breakfast in the big hall where various members of the royal household popped in and out, each according to their schedule. Breakfast was the least official meal of the day and she enjoyed having it in the company of the ladies of the court.

On that particular day, only one of the youngest girls was still sitting with her when a familiar form approached.

“Lord Varys.” Sansa bowed her head, quickly swallowing the piece of bread she had been chewing.

“Lady Sansa.” A bow and a meaningful look towards her companion, who suddenly seemed it fit to finish, get up and after a curtsey and cordial farewells to both of them, make her hasty exit.

“How has your morning been so far, Lord Varys?” Sansa enquired politely. She hadn’t seen him for many days and had not particularly cared to do so. She had nothing against the man as such, but she didn’t want to be under his scrutiny. She had taken great care in covering her activities, hiding her dress preparations and her new fortune in coins under a lock and key in her coffer. The last thing she needed was a sharp-eyed Master of Whisperers on her trail.

“Oh, it has been most interesting. It seems that our black cells have more surprises than one would expect from such established and secure place.” A generous smile graced his round face, but for Sansa, he looked a harbinger of destruction. The beat of her heart thumped loudly in her ears.

“Why did he come? What does he know? Luckily she didn’t need to ask him – not that she would have trusted her voice to be steady enough for speaking anyway.

“I have never understood the need for such a large number of cells in the king’s dungeons. Most of them are empty anyway, and the host of chief gaolers, chief undergaolers and plain undergaolers is only a strain to the king’s purse.”

Sansa had gained control of her faculties and nodded politely, showing what she thought to be an appropriate level of interest. Varys watched her intensely, but after receiving no response from her continued.

“I understand you visited your lord father in the cells some days ago, Lady Sansa. I trust you found him well?”

“King Joffrey was kind enough to grant me a permission to visit him to ensure his compliance with the terms of his pardon. He was as well as can be expected in that horrid place – which unfortunately is not much, I was distraught to see him there – but luckily it all will soon be over, once he has been released and sent to the Wall.” Sansa schooled her expression carefully, knowing that she was dealing with possibly the most observant person in the court.

Again Varys trained his gaze on her, eyes narrowed. Sansa raised her goblet and sipped some watered ale from it – the man had interrupted her breakfast, after all.

“Indeed. I am delighted you had a chance to meet him. It is a long way from King’s Landing to the
Wall, and a daughter should be allowed to say goodbyes to her father.” Varys took something from the folds of his sleeves.

“I found an interesting piece of yarn from the floor. By any chance, would this happen to belong to you, my lady? I hear you are accomplished in needlecraft.”

Sansa looked at the thing he was holding, and spotting two pieces of thread knotted together in a familiar way, she resorted to every trick she had ever learned in her amateur acting career not to show any signs of recognition.

The best way to fool anyone was not to try to fool at all, but truly believe in what she was doing was the truth. *I have never seen these things in my life*, she told herself. Outwardly, she raised her eyebrow and cocked her head, then looked at Varys. *Why are you showing these things to me?*

“My lord, I don’t think so – I keep my needlework in my rooms or my maid carries them in a basket when I join the queen in her solar for such work. Besides, I am afraid I wouldn’t recognise any single piece of thread anyway, as I have so many.”

Taking another look she furrowed her brow. “Moreover, I have enough yarn for all my needs. I don’t need to extend them with this kind of clumsy knots.”

Focussing her attention back to her meal she maintained the somewhat surprised look of someone who was baffled why anyone would even ask her about such a trifle matter. Varys put the thread away to its hiding place and bowed.

“Of course, my lady. I don’t know what I was thinking. These matters are not so familiar to me, I am afraid.” Varys gathered his robes and turned to go. “I wish you a good day, Lady Sansa.”

After he left, flutters in her belly distracted Sansa too much for her to be able to eat anything. Had Lord Eddard escaped? Or had they found him, and the condemning thread, linking it to her? It must have been the reason why Varys had come to her – to test her out, to gauge if she had anything to do with it. Yet, had he had any proof, surely she would have been arrested already for questioning?

She pushed her plate away.

*I have to find out - one way or another.*

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Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be from Brienne’s POV. How is our warrior maiden faring? Soon we’ll see…
Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay with this chapter – the reason being the usual, real-life issues… Thank you for your patience and all the lovely comments for this fic – they really do make my day!

Brienne’s dreams about finding a place for herself seem to have been shattered, and on top of that, she has to endure a constant presence of one of the most obnoxious men she has ever met. How is our girl going to maintain her sanity in such circumstances??

Thank you again, Hardlyfatal, for betaing this chapter!

Brienne

Brienne was led through the Stark camp once more, but unlike earlier, the signs of hum and bustle didn’t cheer her. Rather, her gloomy fate to be imprisoned seemed a cruel opposite to what she had hoped for; activity, purpose, a chance to redeem herself if not in the others’, but in her own eyes.

The tent where the guards took her stood in the middle of the camp, surrounded on all sides by smaller tents housing soldiers. Without ceremony, she was pushed in and her wrists were shackled to a pair of loose irons. The man who did that was fast and efficient, but not harsh, mumbling apologies under his breath while doing his task.

While Brienne was gingerly testing her bindings, his other escort attached a set of iron chains to a corner bar of a large steel cage standing at one end of the tent, then drew the chains to Brienne and fastened them to the cuffs in her wrists. Yanking them hard once, and apparently being satisfied that they were secure, he nodded curtly at her and left without another word. His companion looked at Brienne and hovered on his spot for a moment before following suit.

Brienne was alone.

She was so crestfallen by the turn of events that she didn’t even look around at her new lodgings, and hence she was startled by the disembodied voice from the shadows.

“Dear Gods, what do we have here?! Is that a woman or a beast?”

She was not alone, after all, it seemed. And whoever her companion was, he was clearly not as accepting of her appearance as the others had been. Brienne sighed.

Then she frowned. What had Renly’s man said, when she had been taken away? Something about two Kingslayers keeping each other company?

“Are you brought here for my entertainment? I would thank the Young Wolf kindly for such a gesture, but you are not exactly what I am looking for.” The speaker’s tone was confident, arrogant, his speech suggesting noble birth.
Brienne closed her eyes momentarily. Of course – there was only one Kingslayer known throughout the Seven Kingdoms. Only one man so heinous that he didn’t need any further introduction. Oh, she had heard the stories, had been told how a sworn brother of the Kingsguard had turned his sword against his king. How he had risen high in the service of the new king, never repenting his crimes. There were also other rumours, so sinister that Brienne could scarcely believe them, even about a man so monstrous. Vile rumours about him and his sister…

_Jaime Lannister._

“Shut up, Kingslayer,” she muttered, uncomfortable about using such language, but if anyone, this man deserved no courtesies.

“Disdain from the beast! But why? Here I was just thinking to myself that at least now I shall have some company to talk to. Amicable discussion to while the time away. Or are you not up for a conversation, only good for insults?”

By then Brienne’s eyes had trained to the dim light inside the tent and she could see the man in the cage. He had been sitting on its floor, but now stood up slowly. He was tall and sinewy and graceful in motion. His hair was golden, although in its current state, matted and messy, and his jaw and cheeks were covered with beginnings of a straw coloured beard.

He was an embodiment of knightly good looks and he knew it. Smirking he came as close as he could to Brienne, his hands curling around the bars of the cage.

“Since it looks like there will be no chance for any other forms of entertainment…” his gaze measured Brienne up and down, slowly, in a way that made her blush, as ridiculous as the notion was, “…nor am I inclined to such proclivities with such a hideous creature as you, surely we can at least converse as civilised people?”

“I know who you are, and there is not a civilised bone in your body,” Brienne said, refusing to look at him. She should have been used to insults by now, but his words still stung. It was one thing to have people whisper behind her back, another thing to hear someone saying such cruel things right to her face.

Instead, she surveyed her small domain; a simple camp bed, a rickety chair, a low table, a bucket in the corner. She glanced inside the cage and saw it adorned in a similar manner. She blushed. Surely they did not expect her to take care of her needs while that man was looking?? Or expect him to be free with his functions while she shared the same space?

“There you are wrong, wench. Shall I call you wench, since you still haven’t seen fit to tell me your real name? I would introduce myself, but it appears that you know my name already.” That smirk again. “I happen to be a very civilised person and a good conversationalist. We could ponder about goings on in the world, swap our stories about how we ended up in this unfortunate situation, musings like that.”

His tone was light, teasing. “I could teach you better insults than a mere ‘shut up’. We could have a nice time, wench.”

Brienne sank down on the bed, her head in her hands.

And so started the longest weeks of Brienne of Tarth’s entire life.

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To Brienne’s relief, the guards came again that same day and installed wall hangings to partition the
tent into two parts. They didn’t close off space completely, being too narrow, but at least her bed and the bucket were behind it, providing her with a modicum of privacy.

That night she slept poorly, tossing and turning, assailed by concerns for both her long-term and short-term future. What would be the judgment of the Starks for her alleged crimes? How could she defend herself against the indefensible without witnesses? How could she survive that arrogant man on the other side of the partition?

The next day the guard who had attended to her before delivered her leather wrist cuffs, “courtesy of Lady Stark”. Brienne took them, thanked him politely and slid them under her shackles, immediately relieving the chafing that had already rubbed her skin red.

It appeared that at least she was not going to be mistreated in her captivity. A small respite, but a respite just the same.

The Kingslayer attempted to start a discussion with her a few times, but Brienne rebuffed him, hiding behind the curtains. She was in no mood to suffer arrogant murderers.

One more day went by, slowly. She was fed well, from the looks of it the same rations as the troops, her bucket was emptied regularly and she was accorded quiet courtesy by the guards. She heard the Kingslayer trying to antagonise the men with mocking words, but for him the men had little patience, mostly telling him to shut up. Of course, he didn’t.

That a man could be so arrogant and so conceited that even in defeat he couldn’t keep his mocking in check... Brienne couldn’t understand it. His situation was dire; Robb Stark was not going to let him go easily. Maybe he planned an exchange: Kingslayer for Lord Eddard – was that what made him so sure of himself, and so rude? Still, that was not a behaviour of a true knight.

Brienne even told him so in one moment of weakness when his crude japes about a wolf pup hiding behind his mother’s skirts shattered her patience. The brazen man only laughed at that and asked if she had ever seen true knights, and did she know they were all a bunch of whoring, drinking, killing monsters anyway.

Brienne regretted ever opening her mouth.

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The next day, the same two guards who had been looking after her the most, Walton and Gerrick, came to her.

“Robb Stark would like to see you now,” Walton, the younger one, told her. “Lady Brienne”, he added, as an afterthought.

“Why, what now?” Brienne wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad – had they already measured and weighed her case without her contribution? Was this going to be sentencing? Or a hearing?

“He will let you know - but they will be asking questions,” Gerrick added. He was a middle-aged man with a paunch, a good-natured fellow, Brienne had concluded, hearing the two men converse with each other.

“How come I have not been invited to the inner sanctum?” Jaime Lannister exclaimed, hearing their exchange. “I can answer questions. I have some of my own, too.”

“Shut up, Kingslayer,” all three said at the same time, and Brienne felt a tug at the corner of her
mouth. At least she had something common with the Starks.

She was taken to the same tent as before, and although the attendants were fewer this time, she recognised some faces from her first visit. The two women dressed in the mail were still there, as was Lady Catelyn. Renly’s man was nowhere to be seen and for that she was thankful.

“You have been accused of a heinous crime, of killing your king, whom you swore by oath to protect. What do you say to these accusations?” Robb Stark started, solemnly. He was sitting behind a trestle table laden with maps and books and ravens’ scrolls, and Brienne had been offered a stool opposite him. Lady Catelyn sat next to her son, back straight and looking at her with an unfathomable expression. All the other people present were standing.

*Thank the gods – they are going to hear my side.* Brienne sighed in relief.

“I did not kill him. I swear it by the Father, the Mother, the Maiden, the Crone, the Warrior, the Smith, and the Stranger. It was a shadow that did it, a terrible and dark shadow.”

Robb Stark leaned closer, his elbows on the table.

“A shadow? How could a shadow kill a human?”

“I confess I have no explanation for that. It was a shadow in a shape of a human, appearing out of nowhere as I was dressing King Renly for the battle. I was just fastening his gorget when it was suddenly standing right behind him. And then I saw… I saw a sword, dark and shimmering in the air, protruding from his chest. He fell down, not letting out a sound…”

Brienne felt like crying but she clenched her fists and jaw to keep her emotions in check. She had to make them understand, she *had to*, and being level-headed about it was surely better than any emotional outburst.

“What did you do then?” Lady Catelyn’s voice was steady. If her son minded her asking questions, he didn’t show it but moved aside a bit to give his mother more room.

Brienne described her actions, only slightly discomfited by the admission of having cried over her king’s dead body like some weakling. Robb asked some more questions, as did Lady Catelyn, and an older man with broad shoulders and long, white whiskers: Ser Rodrik they called him.

She was asked to explain in detail all about the shadow; how had it looked and moved, and where had it disappeared? Had there been a visible wound in Renly’s chest afterwards? Had there been blood?

Then they questioned her about how long she had been with Renly, and how she had gained such a prestigious position in his Rainbow Guard. She answered all of them truthfully – if she kept her maidenly crush at Renly her own little secret, it didn’t change the matters, she told herself. Yet the way Lady Catelyn watched her when she described her first meeting with Renly in her lord father’s house – sympathetic and sad at the same time – gave Brienne an impression that she might have seen though her.

She also told them about the meeting between Renly and Stannis, and about the terrifying Red Woman who was seemingly a close advisor to Lord Stannis. Robb frowned at that, and a short discussion with the others confirmed that they, too, had heard of her and of the sinister reputation of her dark powers.

It took a long time, but at the end of it, Robb Stark raised his hand and the murmur in the tent stopped immediately.
“I have heard you, as has my council. The tale you tell is intriguing and if you don’t mind me saying so, quite incredible. However, because there are no witnesses, but only your own words, the truth of the matter is not easily deciphered.”

Brienne’s heart sank.

“I wish I could deliver a verdict here, but I’m afraid I can’t do it just now. Hence I have to ask for your patience and forbearance for detaining you for a while longer.”

“Have you been treated well?” Lady Catelyn asked. “Is there anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable?”

Brienne raised her head and looked at her. She looked kind, motherly. She didn’t really remember her own mother, but she hoped she had been someone like her. Then she swallowed, trying to dislodge a lump in her throat.

“I would like to know what happened to my horse. Blaze is her name.”

The men looked at each other, then the young woman dressed in mail stepped forward.

“She is well looked after. She is used to harness, we found out, so she is pulling supply carts when needed.”

“Thank you…?”

“Dacey Mormont – my lady.”

“Thank you kindly, Lady Mormont,” Brienne breathed. Then another thought occurred to her.

“My lord, my lady, if it would be possible, if you could be so kind…”

“Yes?” Robb Stark raised his eyebrows.

“…if I could be moved away from the presence of Jaime Lannister, I would be most grateful.”

Robb and his mother exchanged a look. Then he cleared his throat.

“I wish I could grant you that wish, but we simply can’t spare the men needed to guard you two separately. I am afraid this is the best I can do for now.”

“I am sorry, my lady, but you just have to try to ignore him,” Lady Catelyn added in a soothing tone.

Brienne’s shoulders sagged. She saw the sense in it – there was nothing that could be done. She just had to endure that vile man.

She was escorted back to the tent soon after, her heart lighter now that she knew that at least they were not going to sentence her right away, and that her defence had been fairly heard. Maybe she would survive this ordeal yet.

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Over the next few days, Brienne tried - she tried so hard - to ignore the Kingslayer. Yet it was difficult, if not impossible.

The worst part was that every now and then when he let his mocking tone to drop, he actually was almost like … a normal person. And not so bad conversationalist, either.
“I wouldn’t do it that way,” he had said one day, out of the blue, when Brienne had struggled with her irons while washing her face. As loose as they were, they were also big and bulky and prevented her getting her hands fully inside the narrow wash basin, yielding only small dribs of water for the actual washing.

Although Brienne had initially ignored him, he had followed his comment by showing her how she could tip the basin in an angle against the tent pole, making water more accessible. Brienne had muttered her thanks, and possibly encouraged by that small sign of thawing on her part, he had proceeded to tell her a long story about the time he had been held in chains before. By whom and why, he didn’t tell, and Brienne didn’t want to know – but the story had been funny in a disarmingly self-deprecating way, and Brienne hadn’t been able to prevent a tug of a smile in the corner of her mouth. She had hidden it from the Kingslayer, though.

Anyway, it was not as if she had much else to occupy her time. So more often than she felt comfortable, Brienne found herself talking with him, asking him questions about his battles, his time in the Kingsguard, and about the famous warriors he had met. Many of the names she mentioned were legendary and Brienne had heard of their exploits in songs and tales; men like Ser Barristan Selmy, Ser Gerold Hightower, and most of all, Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning.

The way Ser Jaime – gradually Brienne started to call him that in her mind rather than the Kingslayer, it not being in her nature to use such a negative sobriquet – talked about those renowned knights brought them alive, changed them from mythical figures to men of flesh and bone. Brienne breathed in every word, every description, and wished she could one day be even a little like those shining examples of knightly values.

She could see that Ser Jaime was amused by her eagerness, but for once he held his tongue and didn’t tease her any more than he deemed absolutely necessary. In turn, Brienne let his taunts slid past her without taking too much umbrage.

Brienne reciprocated, after his endless queries, by sharing with him stories of her past; initially reluctantly and warily, prepared for merciless mocking about her lessons with her father’s master-at-arms, Ser Goodwin. Yet Ser Jaime surprised her by not laughing at her even once. Of course, he too wanted to know how she had been appointed to Renly’s Rainbow Guard, and she told him. She downplayed her first meeting with Renly, and felt slightly uncomfortable telling him about the melee in Bitterbridge, where she had bested Renly’s best knights.

When she told how Ser Loras had been the last to go down, Ser Jaime laughed... but not at her. He even congratulated her for a worthy win, and as ridiculous as it was – what was the worth of a praise of a worthless man? - it made her feel good.

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Then one day he asked her about the accusations against her, and if there was any truth in them. They had avoided the matter ever since Brienne had lost her temper with him about that very same topic and refused to talk to him for a day and a half. But that had been over a week earlier, and both her temper and Ser Jaime’s manners had improved since then, so she decided to tell him the truth, not caring if he believed her or not.

He listened to her, interrupting only a few times to ask for a clarification. When she finished, Brienne braced herself for a laugh, for a disparaging comment, for a cruel jest – but none came.

When she turned to look at him, Ser Jaime stared back at her with a thoughtful expression. He leaned against the bars of his cage, his hands folded on his lap. Slowly, he opened his mouth.
"If anyone else told me this story, I would tell them what a pitiful excuse for a defence it is, and that I could think of a half a dozen better tales than that, even in my sleep. Yet since it is you… I don’t believe you could make up such a fanciful lie, and even less, keep a straight face telling it. So as unlikely as it may seem, the only conclusion I can make is that it must be the truth."

Brienne’s mouth fell open. *He actually believed her?*

Ser Jaime appeared as surprised about it as she did, as he soon changed the subject and resorted to taunting her on another topic – but he had said what he had, and he didn’t take it back.

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The days were monotonous and their routine unchanged from one to another. Morning meal, emptying of the buckets, water brought in for washing their hands and face, midday meal and ale for drinking, evening meal, always the same.

Sometimes Brienne engaged in small talk with Walton or Gerrick, and they told her little snippets of the events in the realm. She knew they had to be careful not to reveal too much, especially in Ser Jaime’s hearing, but it was no secret that they were still camped in the woods, Robb Stark amassing more troops from his allies and planning his next move.

She learned that most of Renly’s troops had joined forces with Lord Stannis; that Lord Eddard was still held captive in the capital with no word about what was going to be done with him; and that Tyrell forces led by Ser Loras had left Renly’s camp and nobody was quite sure what was going to be their next move. Hearing of all those events made Brienne fume at her own circumstances. She should have been out there; doing something, helping someone, being a knight, instead of just sitting idle and useless!

Ser Jaime seemed to share her frustration, even though he didn’t talk about it – many nights Brienne heard him tossing on his bed, followed by heavy sighs in the quiet of the night. The hangings didn’t prevent sounds traveling through them, and hearing him so close evoked an odd sort of intimacy, something Brienne was not used to.

Then one day the monotony was broken by the arrival of no lesser person than Lady Catelyn. She asked if Brienne would like to join her for a walk, and after requesting and receiving Brienne’s word of honour that she was not going to try to escape, they stepped out. Her guards walked a few steps behind them, but it was the first time for almost two weeks she was able to properly stretch her legs and she was grateful.

“I believe you,” Lady Catelyn said without preamble. “I believe that you didn’t kill Renly Baratheon.”

“I…I am grateful, my lady,” Brienne stammered.

“Unfortunately what I believe does not matter,” her companion sighed. “I think my son believes you too, but his hands are tied. There are men in our alliance who demand a proper trial, for you to be judged by the king or by a council of lords. As you can imagine, we are not in a position to involve the current ‘king’ into the matter, and the lords are scattered and busy.”

Brienne nodded, focusing on keeping her strides short and steady to allow Lady Catelyn to match her pace.

“So what we are going to do is to send you to Lord Stannis. He is a just man, and true heir of King Robert – he is the best person to weigh your case.”
“But – but Lord Stannis was the one who did it, of that I am sure!” Brienne thoughts raced through her head. She could not face Stannis, not accused of killing his brother!

“I know it sounds strange – but believe me; especially if he killed Renly, he could not condemn you for that. He may be many things - stern and strict - but he is fair. You have nothing to fear from him in that case.”

“What if it was not him? What if the Red Woman acted without his knowledge?” Brienne was nervous about the direction the discussion was taking.

“Then he would examine the case for her guilt or innocence, just as yours,” Lady Catelyn said with a tone of finality in her voice. Something in her confidence rubbed on Brienne, and she started to feel slightly better. In any case, there was nothing much she could do about it anyway.

They walked a while in silence, before Lady Catelyn spoke again.

“You loved him.”

That was not a question, not an accusation, just a simple statement. It was clear whom Lady Catelyn meant: Renly. However, it didn’t seem to require an answer, so Brienne said nothing.

“You will get over it, I know you will. He was a knight of summer; pretty and green and soon gone. You will meet a man who matches you, who admires your strength and gives you the respect you deserve. I know this shall be true.” Lady Catelyn gave her a knowing look and Brienne returned it, bewildered.

She didn’t really believe in what she said - who would ever love her? Most men she knew were either afraid of her or personally insulted that she had dared to take up the arms – especially if she was more skilled than them. Besides, there were not many who bested her - and those men didn’t like her any better. No, she knew her fate: to live and die alone, never having experienced love or how it was to be loved for her own sake. Nonetheless, Lady Catelyn meant well and Brienne was not going to argue over it.

They walked a bit further, around the whole camp. Brienne asked her about the two ladies in the mail, and Lady Catelyn told her about the Bear Island and its strong women. It, too, made Brienne feel somewhat better.

Eventually, they approached the prison tent again, but just before they reached it, Lady Catelyn stopped and touched Brienne’s arm.

“Just one thing. We are sending Jaime Lannister, too, to Stannis, as a token of our good intentions. So I am afraid that you have to suffer his company for a little while longer. I will lead the procession and will abide no subordination from him, you have my word.”

“Yes, my lady. I understand,” Brienne mumbled. She was not exactly happy about it – but she had learned to tolerate the man; she could endure him a bit longer.

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When the guards told them both the same news that evening, with an addition that they were to leave in two days’ time, Ser Jaime went quiet, than quipped something about at least having lovely company on his journey.

Later that evening at a meal time, both sitting in their respective chairs at their respective tables, facing each other almost as if sharing a meal together despite the iron bars separating them, Ser Jaime
returned to Renly.

“You know what Renly was, do you?”

“I have no notion of what you are talking about,” Brienne answered stiffly. She still never knew if Ser Jaime was going to be serious or in one of his sarcastic moods.

“He loved cock. He loved his lithe companion Ser Loras, and no matter how comely or beautiful a lady, he wouldn't have paid any interest to her.”

Brienne felt her face heating. Why did he have to be so crude?!

“You shall speak no ill of the dead, or I swear I will shut your mouth,” she replied, pretending that the words had not shaken her up. Could it have been true? Renly and Loras had been the closest of companions, that much was true, but...

“So do not waste your time pining after him. He wasn't worth it.”

Brienne squinted her eyes and eyed him sceptically. If she didn’t know better, it sounded almost as if Ser Jaime was suggesting that she deserved better – better than Renly. But no, he couldn’t mean that.

“What do you know about worthiness, I wonder?” she questioned testily. The gall of the man!

“Maybe I don’t know much about it – but I do know that you can’t always choose who you love.” His tone was surprisingly subdued. “Even if it would be better. Even if you were given well-meaning advice to do just that.”

When Brienne watched him, she thought she saw a shadow of sadness clouding his features. It soon passed, and he sighed and adopted a brighter tone.

“Still, you are right; what do I know about worthiness, indeed? The worthiness of your kind, at least.”

The rest of the meal he was boisterous, scathing, almost too much to bear – but as Brienne observed him, she thought the shadow she had seen earlier still lingered with him.

Kingslayer, Jaime Lannister, Ser Jaime – Brienne simply didn’t know what to make of him.

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, we will see Sansa trying to work out what the heck has just happened – or has it…?
Chapter Notes

Once again, many thanks to Hardlyfatal for betaing this! Some of you may think this turned out way too easy – but then again, it is amazing how much strong determination on one side and false assumptions on the other may achieve…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

What had happened? What had made Varys come prying around her? Sansa was sure the man didn’t do anything by chance; no spontaneous encounters on his way to have breakfast, no innocent queries about casual discoveries on the floor – especially not about something as trifling as a piece of yarn.

Sansa got up, unsure what to do next. She needed information – but from where she was going to get it? She couldn’t ask her most reliable source of information, the Hound, as that could have alerted him that something was amiss. Instead, she strolled casually around the big hall trying desperately to eavesdrop on conversations around her. There were still many people milling around, sitting or standing in small groups, before dispersing to many parts of the keep to their duties.

She walked at a slow pace, up one side of the hall, weaving between tall columns, chairs and tables, finally reaching the last table and stopping to exchange a few words with Lady Brax. She then proceeded down the other side, stopping to admire a wall hanging there, picking an apple from a bowl here, her ears pricked up all that time.

No joy in the fragments of gossip she caught from the ladies of the court, or from the few lords still digesting their meals, but then she observed King Joffrey and Ser Boros in an apparently intense discussion near the entrance. With renewed purpose she made it her mission to go right past them, keeping Joffrey’s back towards her in the hopes that he wouldn’t notice. It seemed unnecessary, though, so engrossed he was in his tirade.

“…that he still has not been found?! Somebody’s head is going to roll for this; I was told nobody has ever escaped the Black Cells! And now you are expecting me to believe that Stark somehow just brazenly strolled out of them without anyone knowing how he did it?”

Joffrey’s face was flushed and Ser Boros was stooping under the onslaught. If he ever responded to the king’s tirade, Sansa never knew, as she had to move on in order not to raise attention.

But her heart sang.

She almost ran to her rooms, knowing there to be no time to waste. Whether Varys suspected something or not, if Lord Eddard had escaped, the sooner she joined him and they got out of the city, the better.

The notion of traveling alone with someone she hardly knew – did not really know at all – stopped Sansa for a moment. Would it be awkward? Then she remembered the warmth of the man and how kindly he had spoken to her and felt ashamed. She felt as if she was stealing something that didn’t
belong to her; his love and his affection, which was meant for his real daughter, not for her.

Yet she had no choice. The man – ‘Father’, I must remember always address him as ‘Father’ –
didn’t deserve the fate reserved to him. Everything Sansa knew or had heard about him suggested
that Lord Eddard was a decent and a good man – and honourable to a fault.

Lord Stark. Eddard Stark. Father. Petyr Baelish had let it slip that he was called ‘Ned’ by his friends
and family, and immediately Sansa had felt more comfortable with that than any of the others she had
heard him being addressed. There was something familiar and normal in such a name. It could be
the name of a man who ran a hardware store in a little suburban shopping centre back in White
Harbour, or a name of a father of a school friend, or a teacher in her old high school, or a host of one
of those silly TV quiz shows.

Ned.

Sansa had given the matter a lot of thought and concluded that the best time for her to escape would
be in the middle of the day, rather than during the night. Yes, there would be more people around,
but she would not stand out so much as in the quiet of the night when only the guards patrolled the
empty keep.

Bold and brazen, doing something that nobody expected from a meek and obedient young maiden -
that was the way to do it.

The next day Sansa got up as usual, but instead of dressing normally, she put on her modest dress
under her courtly attire, and hid her small bag of belongings between the layers. As much as the
heavy and impractical costumes galled her, in this they were perfect; hiding a multitude of items in
their folds.

The day dragged on slowly, her nervousness making every minute feel an hour. She tried to
embroider to kill the time, but her hands shook so much that she soon abandoned her task with a
sigh. She harboured no illusions about what would happen to her should her escape attempt be
discovered. She might not lose her head, but the relative freedom of the castle she enjoyed now
would certainly be rescinded. Her marriage might be moved ahead, and she could forget her attempts
to return to her own time through Winterfell.

Although Sansa refused to think of a failure, she devised a backup plan for such eventuality anyway.
She practiced fainting and tried on different befuddled expression in front of the mirror. ‘Oh, where
am I? What happened??”. “Where are my mother and my father? Take me to them immediately!”
If she were lucky – unlucky and then lucky? –being caught might lead to people believing poor
Sansa had just suffered another bout of her mysterious illness. Some would get frustrated at her – but
she might not be punished. Watched over more, her movements limited – but not punished.

This has to work, she told herself and gritted her teeth during the longest midday meal she had ever
endured. After the meal there would be a period of buzzing activity in the kitchens – that was going
to be her chance.

Sansa tried to swallow the lamb stew on offer, one forkful at the time, while paying keen attention to
her surroundings. King Joffrey was sitting only four seats away, next to Queen Cersei, surrounded
by his Kingsguard. Sandor Clegane stood behind him as tall and imposing as ever, and she eyed him
with mixed feelings. She hadn’t exchanged more than a few words with him since that night in the
garden, but she had seen him often and had felt his gaze on her at times.
She felt a tinge of remorse for leaving the matters between them like that, tentative friendship cut short. If it even was friendship – or whatever it could be called. If the Hound harboured any tender feelings towards Sansa Stark, he surely had an odd way showing it. Anger, indifference, barely concealed impatience – *way to get a girl, man.* She shook her head. No wonder that the only remains of it were a few faded lines in an old manuscript written by an amateur poet with an overactive imagination.

Well, that couldn’t be helped. In another time, in another life… He was not that much older than her; Sansa knew many girls of her own age who dated men in their thirties. If they were in the modern world and he sulked less and did something to his burns… Ashamed, she stopped in the middle of such superficial thoughts. She was better than that; looks were not that important to her, truly.

Besides, he was quite impressive even with them, strong and manly, and much better looking than artificially bulked-up guys in magazines showing off their muscles from the gym. And he was candid and honest, and - when he wanted - even kind, in his own, gruff way. He was not stupid either; Sansa had often been surprised at his astute comments and observations. In other circumstances and in another society he could have gone far in life. He could have been a man she could imagine herself with.

And yet… in this world, they could never – not that she wanted to… Oh, it didn’t matter anyway, as she was leaving and he would stay behind and they would never meet again!

Drawing a deep breath and releasing it gradually she picked up the fork and forced another few mouthfuls down. *Soon.*

In the end, it was so easy Sansa could hardly believe it. She left the hall, slipped into a quiet corridor and stepped out of her courtly dress, stuffed it into a recess in the wall, wrapped a scarf on her head to cover her hair, sneaked into the kitchens, picked up an empty basket from one of the shelves – and walked out of the keep. Nobody asked here where she was going, nobody stopped her, not even the guards at the servants’ gate she had chosen for her departure. They just looked right past her, not paying attention to yet another kitchen maid on her errands.

And then she was on the streets of Kings Landing, her head spinning from side to side to take in all the strange sights - and unfortunately also the smells. She kept close to the walls near the River Row, not wanting to risk losing her way in a city that was a sprawling maze of streets and alleys and laneways leading this direction and that, ending abruptly or merging with bigger streets or alleys or other laneways. She had to backtrack her steps twice after losing her way, but directed by the aroma wafting from the Fishmongers Square, she eventually found her bearings again.

Feeling more confident about her ability to find the Street of Steel, then the inn, Sansa walked fast, enjoying the unfamiliar buzz of the city. There were crowds of people going to and fro: women and boys pushing carts, men walking purposefully, youths loitering, children weaving between the foot traffic running and squealing, dogs lurking by the sides of buildings, even an odd pig snoring in front of a shack. Wider streets had wooden buildings, some of them with trestle tables in front of them laden with trinkets and all kinds of goods for people to buy. Better houses had windows with shutters that could be lowered down to serve as a counter; these were shops for leather workers, metal workers and carvers. She walked past one market offering vegetables and fruit for sale, merchants shouting praises of the quality of their wares.

It was busy, it was noisy, it was intoxicating. Sansa had never seen *this* side of history in her books; real people, real lives, everything so authentic and true! She loved it– notwithstanding the vulnerability of her situation. However, nobody paid attention to her, bar one or two young men who
shouted good-naturedly after her asking where she was going and if they could show her a good time. Some things never change, Sansa thought with a sigh, but didn’t stop to respond.

Once she reached the beginning of the Street of Steel she knew where to go. As it happened, her route took her past the hotel she had stayed in, back in the modern days. The building was the same, but new, almost sparkling, the wood and stonework unblemished, the patina and the wear of olden times that had fascinated her during her brief stay yet to emerge. After eying it longingly, she turned away, her grief of what she had lost too raw to acknowledge.

She had to stop once to ask for directions to the Golden Stag, but it seemed to be a well-known place and she was soon pointed to it. A large wooden building, two storeys high, with stables and an inner courtyard, a plaque depicting a stag on its hindquarters against a faded yellow background proudly reclaiming its name. Everything in its appearance suggested a place frequented by travellers coming and going through the nearby King’s Gate, a perfect place for someone who didn’t want to be noticed and preferred to be thought just one of many drifters in and out of the city.

For the first time Sansa wondered how Lord Eddard – Father- might have managed to get there, and even more importantly, stay there to wait for her. He had been filthy and dressed in grimy clothes when she had seen him last – and where would he have gotten any money to pay for things? This society was not trusting of credit, she hazarded to guess, and she felt a pang that she had not been able to smuggle some coin for him.

Well, there was only one way to find out. She pushed the heavy front door open and stepped in.

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Sansa had to blink a few times to adjust her sight to the dim light inside the big room. The inn was quiet at this time of the day, only a few men sitting huddled together at the far side of the big room, a maid sweeping the floor at the other – and a man lifting a barrel into place behind the counter. An innkeeper, perhaps.

She took a few hesitant steps, then stopped until the man had finished his task. Having heard the door open he knew she was there, but took his time to turn to her.

“What do you want, girl?”

Sansa had figured she should try to forget all her new learnings about a refined pronunciation, especially after hearing snippets of talk in the streets and how far removed it was from the courtly speech. Resorting to a coarser speech, still with deference towards someone who was supposed to be her superior socially, she closed the distance to the counter and spoke.

“Good day, master. I’m to find someone here - Master Underhill, that is. He should have arrived here one or two days ago. Has he?”

The man looked at her up and down – not crudely, just seemingly trying to assess if it was worth his while to be of assistance for a mere maid. He had the biggest moustache and sideburns Sansa had ever seen.

“Mayhap he is, mayhap he isn’t. What is in it for me?”

“If he’s here, we would like to have a meal. We would also want to buy some…” her gaze swept the offerings at the counter, settling on the barrel and a half-cut loaf of bread.”…beer and bread.”

Instead of an annoyance, she had now changed to a putative customer, and the innkeeper’s demeanour changed. He leaned closer over the counter.
“Aye, he arrived yesterday. Stank like a pig, but his coin was as good as any, so I took him in.” The man gestured towards the back of the big room, to a small door in the corner. “Missus didn’t want his stench to spoil the appetite of other customers so we gave him a room next to the stables. Through that door, across the yard, left of the main stable doors.”

Muttering her thanks Sansa hastened to the door.

“If you plan to come eat here, he better have had that bath he was talking about!” the innkeeper shouted after her, but Sansa hardly heard him. She was soon again to be face to face with the man who was a stranger to her, and yet crucial to everything that was going to take place next. What would he say when he saw her? How would he find her, now that they were going to have more time to spend in each company? Would he ask her difficult questions? Would he start to suspect something was not right?

Palms sweating she pushed the door open and slipped outside into a large and empty courtyard. Looking around, she saw buildings on every side of it; a barn, a pigsty, a hen house – and the stables. Large, as could be expected from a place like this, which didn’t have to house only the travellers, but also their animals.

Crossing the yard she glanced through the covered driveway leading to the street – and stopped mid-step, her hand flying to her chest.

A flash of white cloak, a ray of sunlight reflected from silver – have they found me already?!!

The sight was gone as soon as she has seen it, leaving the street full of dun colours and muted shades. Had she just dreamt it? Cautiously, Sansa took a few steps through the archway and looked in both directions, seeing nothing but retreating backs or indifferent faces of people coming and going. No white cloaks, no silver armour.

Heart pounding, she returned to the yard. If she had been followed, there would be more people after her. Gold cloaks, likely. She had seen them on her way, leaning against the wall or standing in attention in the street corners in their black armour and heavy golden cloaks. They always travelled in groups, it seemed, and she was sure she would have seen them, if any had been near the inn.

No, she must have imagined it – or gotten confused with someone else wearing white robes, maybe a member of some religious order? Shaking her head she walked to the stable door, then veered to a smaller door on its left. Nondescript, weathered wood, made grey by age. What lay behind it?

She extended her hand and knocked on the door, three knocks. After a while, getting no response, she tried the latch. It lifted, and after a momentary hesitation she opened the door and stepped in.

The room was empty.

“Father?” she whispered, her gaze sweeping across the modest room, when she was grabbed from behind into a grip tight as a vice, hands pinned down to her sides.

Panicking, she glanced down and saw scaled white leather vambraces ending in steel gauntlets wrapped around her waist. Kingsguard! She had seen it true!

“So, what do we have here?” a low growl sounded in her ear.

Sansa felt all her strength abandoning her, leaving her empty and deflated; her knees buckled and without strong arms holding her upright she would have fallen. She let out a choked sob. She had been so close!
But now not only she had been caught, she had also led the King’s men to her father.

All was lost.

Chapter End Notes

I won’t be leaving you to hang from a cliff for long, as the next chapter tells what happens then – this time from Ned’s POV… Comments are all welcome, as is constructive criticism, should you feel so! You can also find me on Tumblr as ladytp.
Not The Same

Chapter Notes

Finally we will find out who was the mysterious person who caught Sansa just as she thought she was getting away… SURPRISE! (not…) As before, many warm thanks for Hardlyfatal for betaing this chapter.

I might also mention that I am going for a month-long work-holiday trip next week, and although I try to keep up posting while away, I can’t guarantee that it will be as regular as it mostly have been up to now.

Ned

Ned brushed his new horse briskly, detangling knots and burrs from its mane. As horses went, this one was not bad; a bit knock-kneed, but in a good condition. And judging from its teeth, almost as young as the seller had declared.

One of the first things he had done – after bathing thoroughly in the inn’s bathhouse to get rid of the stench of the dungeons – had been to buy the horse and a cart. If – when – Sansa arrived, they needed to get out of the city. Didn’t even matter where, as long as they didn’t stay in King’s Landing. Whether they would go to the Riverlands or to the North, they could decide later.

The cart was a necessity, as Ned couldn’t imagine forcing his gentle daughter to endure weeks on a horseback, Sansa not caring much about riding. Besides, his leg wasn’t fully healed, so it wouldn’t be amiss for him, either.

Ned had sadly concluded that they couldn’t risk delaying their departure any longer than necessary, not even to search for Arya, as he would have wanted to. Joffrey would turn the whole city upside down – probably was doing so already – so every minute spent within the confines of the city walls meant more risk of being captured.

Ned closed his eyes and muttered a silent prayer to the old gods. Let her get away. Let her be safe.

In addition to the means for transportation, he had bought blankets and cloaks to keep them warm, as well as food supplies to last them until they were well out of the capital. Once again he blessed his foresight in securing the coins he had carried with him at the time of his arrest, before the guards inspected him. He couldn’t tell why he had done it, at the time being sure that the situation was going to be only temporary and that he would soon prove his innocence and be released. Yet he had; surreptitiously dropping them one by one from his purse into his boots. It was not a huge sum, but it would have to do. Sansa wouldn’t have any coin, naturally, so if they ran out of his, he would just have to find a way to make do.

Ned sighed. How much longer he would have to wait? The horrible feeling of helplessness, the churning at the pit of his stomach knowing that there was nothing he could do to help his little girl… he hated it. He hadn’t even asked how she was going to escape. How could she? No, he should have
told her to stay, and come back later to rescue her with his troops. He should have--

A shadow falling across the stable floor from the open door alerted him of someone’s presence in the inner yard. Could it be Sansa?

Ned put the brush down and walked to the door to have a look. And drew back just as quickly.

Kingsguard!

All the muscles in his body tensed. How had they found him so quickly? He had been so careful: he had closed the door of the secret tunnel behind him, hidden in the stables until it was dark, then made his way through the city, backtracking his steps several times and taking shortcuts through the roofs and backyards. At his arrival at the inn, he had chosen a busy period when the innkeeper had been distracted with other customers to ask for a room.

Ned was confident that nothing in his appearance had raised suspicions – sure, he had stank so much that the innkeeper’s wife had told him he couldn’t stay in any of the better rooms, but that in itself was not that unusual. He had even made a clumsy jape about spending too much time with his pigs on his way bringing them to the markets, in hopes that it would explain his condition.

And yet, there was a knight of the Kingsguard on his doorstep.

Ned assessed the situation, concentrating on essentials. The first thing he had to do was to see how many of them he was facing. Were there gold cloaks, too - soldiers? Had he been surrounded?

He sneaked to the window overlooking the yard but saw nobody else, just the lone knight. However, what he saw, darkened his mood considerably. The Hound! Of all the knights, why it had to be him – the meanest, the strongest and the most ill-tempered?

Another peek through the back door - opening to a narrow alley behind the stables - confirmed it to be empty. Ned frowned. Unless there were more men hiding inside the inn, it just could be possible that he was a loner, maybe one of many sent to inspect all inns in the city. If that was the case, he might still have a chance.

Treading lightly in order not to make noise, Ned approached the front door again. He stole another look through it - and froze. Sansa, his precious little Sansa, was just stepping inside his room – and the Hound was almost behind her.

No time to consider what next, Ned reacted by instinct. He grabbed the first hard object he saw, a piece of firewood from the pile against the wall, and rushed out.

His heart thrummed loudly in his ears, but years of experience had taught him to ignore such things in the heat of the battle and focus only on the man in front of him. The ground was hard and smooth, worn by many boots and hooves, making his steps silent. They were alone – Ned could only hope it would stay that way for a bit longer.

One step, two steps. He saw the Hound taking one long stride to reach out and grab Sansa by her waist.

Ned vaulted.

One hard blow to the head, and the man fell down. Inexorably, silently, keeling sideways and almost dragging Sansa down with him, finally collapsing on the floor.

Sansa twisted around – and across the sprawling body of the Hound, Ned met her widened eyes.
“Father!”

“Sansa!”

Yet there was no time for heartfelt reunions. Instead, he rushed in and closed the door behind him. They had conversed in muted tones, both realizing that their situation was perilous. Ned knew what had to be done, but he didn’t want her to witness it.

“Sansa, go outside, please.” The Hound might be down for now, but it wouldn’t last long. Ned knelt on the floor and pulled his dagger from its sheath. It was going to be ugly... but there was nothing else he could do.

“No!” Sansa cried, rushing to his side.

“He will come to his senses any moment now; I have to silence him before he does,” Ned murmured. “Do as I said, go out.”

“No, I won’t let you do it!” Sansa exclaimed, and grasped his wrist. It was not her strength that stopped Ned, however, but his own astonishment.

“He is not going to stay unconscious for long, and we can’t let him wake up and raise the alarm. Surely you can see that?” he said in a hushed tone. Ned understood her distress, he really did. Women were not meant for blood and gore, especially young women of high birth.

“I know! But we can’t kill him!” Sansa hissed back in a strained tone. “If we do, what do you think happens when the innkeeper comes to check the room? A knight of the Kingsguard dead at his inn – and we both gone. He saw me, and I know he saw you, too. Whatever advantage we have now would be gone, and everybody would know that we travel together, where we have been and exactly when we left.”

“What else can we do?” Ned protested. “This is the Hound we are talking about. Have you forgotten what he did to that butcher’s boy on the way to King’s Landing? You may not have heard what else he has done - nor should you - but believe me, he is a brutal man. If he were here instead of me, he would have already cut my throat.”

Sansa didn’t let go of his wrist, but held on, and lifted her chin. “I won’t let you.”

What?

Ned almost dropped his dagger, so shocked he was by her open defiance.

“I know we have to silence him and make sure he can’t raise an alarm, so I suggest that instead of us arguing here, you find something to bind him with. I’ll gag him in the meantime,” Sansa continued, then removed her hand and in one motion pulled the scarf from her head. While Ned stared at her, still stunned, she tore two strips of fabric from it, crunched one into a ball and leaned over the Hound’s supine form. For a moment she looked uncertain, but soon Ned woke from his astonishment and understood what she meant to do.

Sighing heavily, he helped open the Hound’s mouth and Sansa pushed the cloth into it. Glancing at him briefly with a tiny smile, she continued by binding the other strip around the man’s head and tying it into a tight knot.

“What do you think he can still breathe?” she asked, knitting her brow as she studied her work.

“What? Yes, I would say so.” Ned glanced at the still-unconscious man. He had to admit that
Sansa’s words made sense. To leave a body here for anyone to find might not be the wisest thing. Warily, he got up to his feet.

In a few short moments, he had retrieved several coils of rope from the stables and used them to bind their captive. He worked fast, but stopped every now and then to make sure the bindings would hold. He was still taken aback by Sansa’s strange behaviour, but now was not the time to dwell on it.

“Right, he is secured now – and about time, too.” Ned pulled the last knot taut and appraised his captive apprehensively, as the Hound’s eyes fluttered and he groaned faintly, the sound nonetheless being muffled by the makeshift muzzle. “He is coming to.”

Sansa leaned down and stared at the man, then straightened. “We need to leave as soon as we can. What do you suggest?”

“I have a horse and a cart,” Ned replied. “I can bring them to the back alley and we can use the back door of this room to get him and our things in it.”

Sansa nodded. “Sounds good. What can I take? What do you have here?” She looked around the room and Ned pointed her to the supplies he had collected.

In no time, Ned harnessed the horse and brought the cart about, anxious about the chance of being interrupted by servants or other guests. As luck would have it, it was a quiet time of the day at the stables, and he finished his task without disruptions.

The next part of the undertaking was somewhat more problematic: how to get the Hound into the cart? His weight alone was a challenge, and his distinctive armour and cloak would stand out like a sore thumb for anyone even glancing in their direction.

“We have to remove his armour. Sansa, can you take his cloak?”

Their captive had opened his eyes and was groaning faintly. It would not be an easy task to handle a man of that size, especially one who didn’t want to be handled. Ned trusted that his binds would hold, but if the Hound truly decided to get difficult, it would make things harder.

“Did you come alone?” Sansa asked the Hound as she knelt down next to him. He only glared at her, nostrils flaring. With deft fingers, she opened the fastening of the cloak and let it fall on the floor.

“I don’t think he would tell us anything even if he could,” Ned replied dryly, his hands at work in unclasping the pauldrons and the gorget. He struggled with one of the clasps and Sansa brushed him aside.

“Let me. You can remove the parts as they fall,” she said softly.

Ned didn’t like the idea of his daughter undressing a grown man, but time was of essence and they had to move as fast as they could. Gritting his teeth, he increased his pace and together they removed the pieces of armour one by one and put them aside. By the time they were done, the Hound was fully awake and straining in his ties, twisting his body this way and that, hampering their progress.

“Stay still, please!” Sansa snapped. “You know as well as I that if you don’t, my father has no other option but to silence you forever. I am sure you don’t want that, and I… I don’t want that, either.” She almost swallowed the end of her sentence, but Ned heard it – and wondered.

He was about to tell her to save her breath, as her words were unlikely to have impact to that crude man, when to his surprise the Hound stilled, exhaled audibly through his nose and stopped struggling. He kept on making noises through the cloth, though, jerking his head, widening his eyes
and glaring at Sansa.

“It looks like he wants to say something,” Sansa said, leaning over.

“I am sure he does – but we don’t need to hear it,” Ned grumbled. He had no time for this; they should be on their way, already.

“No, I think it really is important. We should hear him out.” Sansa stared at the Hound but despite glancing at the man, Ned wasn’t sure what she saw to make her so convinced. Yet, if it truly was as urgent as she seemed to believe, maybe it was worthwhile to let him speak.

He reached out and steadied his dagger on the Hound’s throat while placing his knee on his chest, then nodded at Sansa to release the ties of the makeshift muzzle.

“Say what you have to say, but be sure that if you try to shout I will cut it short with this,” Ned said, and tickled the man’s throat with the tip of his weapon.

As soon as Sansa had loosened the cloth enough for the Hound to speak, he croaked. “My horse.”

Ned frowned. He hadn’t noticed a horse on the yard.

“At the back.”

A man of few words, as always, Ned thought. At least he didn’t try to call attention nor try to talk his way out of the situation - not that there would have been chances for that, anyway. Ned instructed Sansa to reinstate the muzzle, then stood up and peeked into the back alley through the door.

Indeed, at the end of the alley stood a magnificent courser, black and heavy-set, its reins tied to a pole. Ned cursed silently. They couldn’t leave it behind; a masterless horse would raise too many questions. They would have to take the horse, too.

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Ned’s back felt as if it was broken to pieces, grinding against each other relentlessly when he moved. Hauling such a massive man to the bier of the cart, even though he had stopped actively resisting, was not an easy feat.

Sansa had helped where she could, swiftly and capably bundling the armour into the white cloak and shoving it under coarse blankets, shoving the baskets and bags behind the high seat of the cart and finally, arranging a few empty grain sacks on top of their finally-loaded and prostrate prisoner. His weapons - an impressive two-handed greatsword, a smaller longsword and two daggers - she wrapped into another sack and pushed under the driver’s seat.

The last thing to do was to tie the horse’s reins to the back of the cart. It was not easy, the beast snorting and baring its teeth to Ned as he approached, but it was not the first bad-tempered horse he had dealt with in his life, and after some coaxing and determined action on his part the job was done.

“Ready?” Ned asked, heaving from exertion and wiping his sweat-streaked brow with the back of his hand.

“Yes,” Sansa replied promptly, then hesitated. “Maybe you should go inside and tell the innkeeper that we are leaving? Also, buy some bread and ale for the road. I hinted that we would do it, to make him tell me your whereabouts. It might look odd if we just disappeared.”

“What about him?” Ned nodded towards the pile of sacks.
“I’ll stay here. You won’t be long, will you?”

Ned didn’t like the notion, but once again, saw that it made sense. When had his little girl become so rational and wise?

He finished the task as instructed and on his return found that Sansa had turned the cart around and was now sitting in it, holding the reins in her hands. Sansa, who didn’t voluntarily go near a horse if she just could avoid it. His daughter Sansa?

Ned swallowed his questions and climbed to the seat and took the reins. Later.

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It took them several hours to jostle through the streets, queue through the congested King’s Gate, then follow the ring road past the tourney grounds and three other gates leading out of the city all the way to the Dragon Gate until they finally reached the Kingsroad and joined the trickle of traffic moving forward.

The ride had been silent, both too tense and constantly scanning their surroundings for any signs of trouble. They saw a few gold cloaks standing in formation, several guards at the gates, a few soldiers bearing Baratheon and Lannister colours returning to the city - but no Kingsguard. Nobody seemed to pay attention to a simply clothed older man and a young woman, who by all appearances could be local farmers on their way back home, or dwellers of the capital on their way to visit relatives in the country, or even a craftsman and his assistant returning from selling their wares in the market.

The Hound started to writhe again at some point, but Sansa jumped down from the front seat and seated herself at the back of the cart, and soon he settled down again. She spoke to him, but Ned couldn’t hear what she said, despite straining his ears to catch something, anything.

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Ned had time to think on the slow journey, and his thoughts returned more often than once to his daughter’s strange behaviour. It was not like Sansa to be so… bold. Smart, yes. She was the sensible daughter, Arya being more prone to rash actions, but this…

Her behaviour regarding the Hound was another mystery. To Ned’s recollection she had not spent any time with him except in Joffrey’s company, and in those occasions the man had always blended into the background as if he didn’t exist. Sansa’s point about not killing him at the inn had made sense, but what about what had happened after? The Hound had almost appeared to listen to her, and had seemingly stopped struggling at her behest. To Ned’s knowledge he took orders from nobody but Joffrey – and before that, from Cersei and Lord Tywin. He was an uncouth and cold individual who didn’t mix well with others – and yet he seemed to have adhered to the wishes of a mere girl?

Even more, when Sansa had sat with him at the back, she had spoken to him for a long time in a low voice. What had she said? What on earth could she have to say to such a man?

And her strong reaction when Ned had unsheathed his dagger – no, Ned didn’t understand that at all.

He glanced at his daughter behind his shoulder. She was silent, looking at the side of the road, studying the sights with keen eyes. Every hovel, every passer-by, even the fields and forests they rode by seemed to fascinate her. Ned couldn’t help remembering how on their way to the capital she had preferred to stay in the wheelhouse with the queen, chatting, embroidering and reading poetry. None of that attitude was visible now, as she strained her neck to observe a party of hedge knights on palfreys as they overtook the Starks in their cart.
Ned concentrated on the road again. The horse pulled the cart steadily, patiently, having clearly been used as a cart horse before. The road was emptier now that the throng and buzzle near the gate had subsided, but there were still enough people traveling to and fro for them not to lose focus or stop being vigilant.

Ned sighed. Yes, Sansa had told him about the accident. Maybe that had changed her? He had seen his share of unfortunate souls who had suffered from such a mishap, losing their faculties as a result. Yet Sansa had been anything but irrational or dim-witted. On the contrary; she had been quick in thought and acted sensibly at all times.

He frowned. Maybe he just didn’t know her daughters as well as he thought he did? Both Sansa and Arya had grown up mostly in the company of their mother and septa, whereas he had seen more of his sons. The thought twisted deep in his belly. He had neglected them, in truth – and to know that it was often the way with father and daughters, especially nobles, didn’t assuage the ache.

Who are you, Sansa?

Ned’s thoughts also drifted back to the man tied up at the back of his cart, and his horse. The situation was untenable; sooner or later something had to be done. Gods, he couldn’t drag him all the way to the North trussed up like a chicken! But if he was let free, he would either kill Ned and take Sansa back, or capture them both. The Hound was strong, and although in a fair swordfight Ned didn’t discount his chances completely, his wounded leg would be his undoing. Also, why would the Hound fight fair when he had a task to do? He was the king’s dog, after all, following orders.

True, he couldn’t have been killed in the city, where his body would have remained as a clue to their whereabouts – but here, especially once they reached the less trafficked parts of the road, Ned would have to do it. He would bury the body in the woods where nobody would ever find it. Ned didn’t like it - it was not honourable and it was not fair. Nonetheless, if the events since Robert’s death had taught him anything, it was that he couldn’t afford honour when the safety of his family was at stake.

Ned urged the horse on. He felt better after making his decision - until the image of Sansa’s flushed face and set jaw came to his mind. That, and her unwavering stare and firm touch when she had pushed his hand away from the Hound’s throat. Grimacing, Ned realised that she might not like his plan. He didn’t understand why, but there was no doubt that she hadn’t wanted the Hound dead. Not then, when there was a good reason for it – but what about later? He needed to reason with her and make her see the sense of it.

Clutching the reins tighter, Lord Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell, the Warden of the North, the Hand of the King, shrank in his seat trying to figure out how to face his daughter with his proposal.

Chapter End Notes

This time it was the husband, the next time it is the wife – because the next chapter will be all about Catelyn and what she and her prisoners are up to!
**Unexpected Events**

**Chapter Notes**

This is all about Catelyn - but of course our favourite blondes also make an appearance – and even more so, get heavily impacted by the events of this chapter...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Catelyn

Catelyn surveyed the troops lined up at the edge of the camp. Ser Rodrik led them, and she knew that each and every one of the men had been hand-picked by Robb himself. Only the most loyal and the most capable had been chosen to the task of escorting Lady Catelyn and two valuable prisoners to Storm’s End.

Well, one valuable prisoner at least, the exact status of Brienne of Tarth being still somewhat unclear.

Catelyn pressed her lips together and tightened her hold of the reins. She was convinced the maid was innocent, and had said as much to Robb and the lords of the North. Nobody had exactly disagreed, but most of them either didn’t care or simply wanted to pass the burden of judgment to Lord Stannis in order to get rid of her. Roose Bolton had suggested that she should be tried and judged then and there, based on the testimony of Renly Baratheon’s man who had first accused her, but that proposal had soon been defeated.

Their journey was to be undertaken in stealth; the soldiers wore no outward signs of either Stark or Tully sigils in their attire, and they carried no banners. By necessity their number was small, as they had a better chance of slipping through the countryside unnoticed if they didn’t proclaim their presence or affiliations too loudly.

The last orders were given and the convoy started to file out towards the west. The wagon carrying the prisoners was strategically placed in the middle, as was Lady Catelyn riding right in front of the wagon with Walton from Widow’s Watch and Gerrick from Pinkmaiden as the prison guards. Ser Rodrik rode at the head of the procession, the end of it being reserved for the provisions cart.

Catelyn nudged her horse forward and soon settled to the rhythm of the road.

She had said her goodbyes to her son in private, afraid that she might lose her composure in front of everyone, if leaving that to the last. Robb had been so brave, so determined, and full of plans to proceed to the capital and force his father’s release from the king. Once more Catelyn had warned him against doing anything hasty, had advised him to keep Theon Greyjoy close, and had beseeched him to stay strong for the sake of them all.

Neither had forgotten about Sansa and Arya, and Robb had sworn to free them alongside their father. Catelyn wasn’t as convinced as Robb about the success of a military operation, seeing diplomacy as better means for it, but she didn’t rule it out, either. If Lord Stannis agreed to an alliance and took affirmative action to oust the false king… they still had a chance to end all this peacefully.
Yet no point in worrying about all of that for now. Catelyn glanced back towards the procession advancing in good order and felt a swell of pride in her chest. Pride, and worry.

I can’t fail Ned and Robb now. I simply can’t.

Their plan was to ride to Saltpans and from there to take a ship to Storm’s End. It meant less likelihood of meeting hostile forces on the road, although it necessitated facing the high seas that could prove equally if not more dangerous. Nonetheless, it would be faster, and time was of essence.

Their prisoners had been confined to a covered wagon pulled by Brienne’s horse. It was a small gesture, but Catelyn hoped that once she would be freed by Stannis, the horse would be returned to her, together with her arms and armour. Jaime Lannister had irons in his hands and feet, but Brienne of Tarth carried only light shackles on her wrists. If it was up to Catelyn, she would have been completely free, but Ser Rodrik had insisted that at least some sort of decorum had to be adhered to. She was still under the suspicion of kingslaying, and she was still in their custody. Brienne didn’t seem to grudge them, though. She appeared to have settled into her situation remarkably well, confident in her trust that truth was going to set her free.

Catelyn had had a few meetings with her in the camp, and during the travel they often sat together at meals, being the only women in the company of men. She liked the young woman’s bravery and innocence – some would call it naivety, but Catelyn knew better. It took a special kind of strength to believe that life could be fair, and that sometimes bad people got punished for their deeds and good people persevered. That the reality often turned out differently could not be avoided, but the secret was not to let that destroy one’s core values. Catelyn felt it strongly and so did the Maid of Tarth.

Besides short breaks for their meals, and camps for the nights, their journey proceeded steadily and unremarkably. The familiar scenery from her youth in Riverrun, when Catelyn had sometimes accompanied her father on his visits to his bannermen, both revitalised Catelyn and made her nostalgic. The green forests, the undulating hills and the many streams they crossed were so different to the snow-capped mountains and endless wilderness of the North. She had learned to love her new home, she really had – but part of her heart would always remain in those green plains.

Knowing the route and recognising them to be only a few days’ ride from the inn at the crossroads, Catelyn started looking forward to a night’s sleep in a proper bed. Maybe also a bath, perhaps a roaring fire and some mulled wine in front of it? Small comforts before an uncomfortable sea journey would certainly be welcomed. Perhaps they could increase their pace a bit, to get there sooner? She decided to suggest that to Ser Rodrik – surely he too, longed for some comforts? Catelyn urged her horse forward to reach one of the soldiers ahead of her.

It was then, just as she was about to call for a rider to be sent to Ser Rodrik, when events took a different turn.

It all happened so quickly.

One moment Catelyn was riding, focussing on reaching the man riding in front of her – and the next, a band of attackers poured out from the woods. Their blood-curdling screams alarmed the horses and riders alike, and the procession broke into chaos.

The stretch of the road was surrounded by a deep forest on one side and an open, abandoned field on the other. The men emerging from the foliage wore no sigils nor banners, but from what little Catelyn
had time to register, did not appear to be random robbers preying on innocent travellers. No, the attack was too well coordinated, one group placing themselves between Catelyn and the front of the convoy, the other between the prisoner wagon and the back of the procession.

The horses reared, men shouted, soldiers drew their swords and soon metal clashed against metal when the two groups clashed. Catelyn drew her reins in and turned her head to see what was happening, when a horse with two riders appeared by her side in full gallop. Fast, and with an elegance and balance that belied belief, the man at the back raised up in the saddle and jumped, landing on Catelyn’s horse, behind her.

Catelyn almost fell from the impact, but the man circled his arms around her waist, locking her hands against her sides, and pulled the reins from her grip. Using a language she didn’t understand, he shouted something – and on her left, Catelyn saw that the prisoners’ wagon was under a similar attack. Another man riding double jumped into the driver’s seat, elbowed the driver out of the way and pulled the reins sharply, causing the horse to turn towards the field.

Catelyn’s assailant followed in the same direction, as did the two horses with now single riders, staying a few strides behind them. A well-planned attack executed with men each playing a specific part in it? No, this was not just another highway robbery.

Catelyn had been too shocked by the fast pace of the events to react, but once they were in the open field, she started to squirm and pull her weight, hoping to… she wasn’t sure what she hoped. She glanced at the fast-moving ground under the horse’s feet. They were riding at high speed, but if she could just make her body slack and slip from the hold and throw herself on the ground… As if sensing her intentions, the man tightened his grip, almost crushing her, and for a moment Catelyn struggled to breathe.

*That won’t do.*

She twisted her neck to look back and saw the convoy having broken into several small skirmishes, men fighting sword to sword, even hand to hand. A few riders broke out and started the chase across the field, but the attackers stopped them – Catelyn saw one horse going down with a lance on its side. She closed her eyes and recited a mute prayer to the Warrior to give strength to the soldiers fighting for their lives.

Who were these attackers and where were they taking her? Were they after her, or Jaime – or both? How had they known about their journey? Those, and a multitude of other questions flashed through her mind as she was trying to make sense of the attack. Catelyn’s stomach churned and a cold sweat trickled down her brow, mixing with hot sweat from exertion as she tried to hold on during that wild ride, tried to detangle herself from that iron grip, tried to turn to see what was happening to her troops and if anyone was following them.

The prisoner wagon jostled and bumped on the uneven surface, its wheels creaking threateningly, its back curtain flapping in the breeze. The man who drove it could handle it well, even Catelyn could see that, deftly guiding the horse to avoid the biggest bumps on their way.

Soon they reached another road; just a narrow laneway for the local traffic. The progress became easier, but their pace stayed the same. Catelyn though she heard faint shouts and curses from the wagon – likely the Kingslayer releasing his frustration of not knowing what was happening.

After what seemed like an eternity, her captor slowed the horse down. Apparently judging it safe, the whole procession reduced its speed to a walking pace, the wagons staying between the riders in front and back. The effort required for simply holding on thus subsiding, the tension that had sustained her left Catelyn and she started to shake like a leaf.
“What do you want? Who are you?” she rasped, addressing her words to anyone who might hear them. The driver of the wagon on her right glanced at her and didn’t bother to answer. He was a big man, dark and lean and battle-hardened, and judged by his looks not from Westeros. Instead, he said something in that foreign language to the man behind her, and they both laughed. Catelyn’s hopes of finding someone with answers thus dashed, she struggled to prevent tears of frustration escaping her eyes.

She tried to understand what was said, hoping the lessons from her youth would come to her help, but couldn’t make sense of the words. She wasn’t sure, but it sounded like something from across the Narrow Sea. From Pentos, perhaps? Or from Bravos?

The Kingslayer’s curses and shouts had subsided; maybe he, too, had found them to be futile.

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They rode for a long time, and the sun was almost down by the time they reached what appeared to be their destination. An abandoned mill next to a flowing stream – Catelyn realised with a jolt that she recognised that place. She had been through that part of the countryside many times and knew it to be an old mill that had been abandoned for as long as she could remember. Which meant no hope for anyone seeing them by chance. Her spirits sank.

They stopped right outside the building, and the riders and the wagon driver leaped to the ground. The man still holding Catelyn didn’t move, his grip remaining as tight as ever. Catelyn wished he would have dismounted and allowed her the same, as by then she was shaking badly from exhaustion and the aftermath of the shock, and she would have preferred firm ground under her feet.

The driver went to the back of the wagon and pulled the curtains open – and took a step back.

“What the hells is this? Two, not one?”

They do speak the Common Tongue of Westeros.

So they do speak the Common Tongue of Westeros.

The others congregated closer as the driver pulled first the Kingslayer and then Brienne out to the open. Both looked dishevelled, the ride having bounced them heavily around in their confined space.

“I thank you kindly for relieving me of my previous company – oh, Lady Catelyn,” Jaime Lannister drawled, noticing Catelyn. “I see we can keep each other’s company for a while longer. What a pleasure.” He made a mock bow, then turned to the driver.

“So they do speak the Common Tongue of Westeros.

“I thank you kindly for relieving me of my previous company – oh, Lady Catelyn,” Jaime Lannister drawled, noticing Catelyn. “I see we can keep each other’s company for a while longer. What a pleasure.” He made a mock bow, then turned to the driver.

“Who are you and what is your affiliation? I trust it was not a coincidence that you secured just this very wagon and this very lady – and I don’t think I am flattering myself too much if I assume that you intended to get me specifically. Did my father, Lord Tywin, send you?” He looked around, from one man to another, but for a while nobody spoke.

Then the driver – apparently their leader – spoke.

“Nevermind who we are. We had our orders and we followed them, and now we wait for our commander to arrive. It is up to him what he tells you - or not.”

Focussing his attention to Brienne, who loomed next to the wagon, eyeing her surroundings suspiciously, the man raised his eyebrows.

“This one is a surprise – what, is it a woman?’’

The others jostled closer. The man behind Catelyn leaned forward to see better, and apparently
concluding that it was still not enough, dismounted and hit the ground with a thud. He left the reins on the horse’s neck but took hold of the bridle, leading the mount closer to the group.

Brienne turned towards them and her gaze flitted from the man to Catelyn, then back to the man. Ignoring the chuckles of their captors, her blue eyes drilled into Catelyn and she threw her head back, as if trying to grab her attention. Then she set her jaw – and charged.

She ran head-first towards Catelyn’s abductor who was still holding the horse, a resounding thump indicating contact between her head and his midsection. The man fell down, and before anyone had time to react, Brienne pulled his sword from his scabbard. She had to use two hands, her wrists still being shackled together, but that didn’t slow her down. Without stopping she whirled around and in one continuous motion slashed the belly of the second man, closest to her.

“Ride, Lady Catelyn!” she yelled. “And don’t stop, not for anything!”

As shocked as Catelyn was, she reacted. Pull of the reins, sharp kick to the flanks, and the horse reared its head and shot forward.

Catelyn crouched low, gripping the horse’s mane for her dear life, spurring it on and on. Back towards where they had come from, yet knowing that she had to think of something else, and quickly. Their captors were bound to follow her as soon as they had subdued Brienne… a haze of tears blurred her vision. She knew that the warrior maiden had no chances against so many, and even if the Kingslayer was inclined to help her – which was unlikely, against his own liberators – he, too, was shackled and bound.

No, Catelyn knew that by helping her escape, Brienne had signed her own death sentence. A great sob escaped her throat and she squeezed her eyes shut, just for a second - but there was no time for grief.

In desperation, she guided the horse into the woods, away from the road. The trees were sparse and she could ride between them without slowing speed, all the while frantically trying to figure out her next move. It was getting darker by the moment and Catelyn knew she couldn’t run much further without risking the horse taking a wrong step.

Where should I go?

She tried to remember the area around the old mill, recognising that she had to go somewhere not obvious to those who followed. That meant not trying to reach her troops, or riding towards the inn at the crossroads, as both were directions where they would expect her to go. She strained her ears for any sounds of chase, but heard nothing but the wind whistling through the branches. Brienne must have made quite a scene to delay her pursuers that long - but at what cost?

Chewing her lip Catelyn slowed the horse down to give herself some time to think. If she remembered correctly, there was a small settlement not far in the opposite direction. Nothing big; just a few homes surrounded by farmland, but unlikely to be known by anyone outside that area. If she could find it, maybe she could hide there for a while? There was a good chance that the attackers had been first and foremost after the Kingslayer, and if she would be able to cover her tracks well enough, they might judge it not worth their while to track her further.

She turned the horse in the new direction and rode deeper into the night.

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Catelyn found the small settlement – but it had been abandoned. Lannister troops must have
ransacked it already some time ago, judging from the cold ashes and the rubble strewn about the yard. Only one of the buildings was still standing, the others reduced to skeletons of scorched timber and crumbling stone.

She dismounted slowly, the eerie sense of past violence making hairs stand at the back of her neck. The light of a half-moon cast the place in a silvery glow. Yet the place offered some form of safety, where she and the horse could hide away from the open. If she was lucky, she had not been followed, and even if someone would ride past, they might judge the place abandoned and ride on. It all depended on how long Brienne had been able to detain the abductors.

_Brienne._

The thought of that brave soul tightened her chest, but Catelyn could not give in to it. Not yet.

She found a well, which luckily had been left untouched, and pulled some water for her horse to drink its fill. While it drank, she looked around of what was left, and found some hay in one of the barns, which she brought into the still-standing shack. Then she led the horse inside and unsaddled it, before sitting down on the ground, resting her back against the wall.

She had drunk her fill as well, so she was not thirsty, and the rumblings of her stomach couldn’t be helped. Now all she could do was to wait. Maybe a day, allowing for the sellswords to leave the area, and then towards the evening of the next day she could start towards the inn. She would have to give a wide berth to the old mill, maybe even go all the way to the Kingsroad and approach the inn from the north – which probably nobody would expect of her? But she _had_ to reach the inn. Any survivors of the ambush would surely gather there, and from there she could send a raven to the Riverrun to tell Robb…

Tears she had been holding back ever since the attack started to flow freely now. _To tell Robb that I failed; that I allowed our hostage to be taken from me. And our men – Robb and Ned’s men – to be killed. And an innocent maiden to be cut down, defending me._

Catelyn cried, gut-wrenching sobs that tore through her whole body. She cried, she cried, and she cried some more. There was nobody else in that room, for whose sake she would need to keep up appearances - only the horse who came closer and blew softly into her hair, nibbling it with its velvety lip. Catelyn cried for Ned, for Robb, for Sansa, for Arya, for Brienne, and for all the men who had died in vain that day.

Once her tears had dried out so there were none left, she rolled over to her side and curled into a fetal position, wrapped her cloak around her, and fell into a distraught sleep.

Chapter End Notes

_I have started my big trip now (first part work, the rest of it a holiday), so we’ll see how I keep up with the postings… The next chapter is in any case from Sansa’s POV again. Road trip of doom or fun?_  

_Any comments are happily received and appreciated!_
Finally these three uneasy companions are on the road together! Just as I am, with my own companion – but it is much more relaxed travel, I have to say, than with these three… Million thanks for Hardlyfatal for patiently continuing to beta this work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

Sansa simply couldn’t stop staring: at women wearing pointed little caps and chattering to each other on the streets, at children with concentrated looks on their small faces carrying baskets bigger than themselves, at horses dressed in coloured caparisons throwing their heads nervously among the crowds thronging near the gates they passed… Her fascination with history come-alive was unabated; the colours alone took her breath away. The deep greens, earthy browns and rich blues were nothing like the dull tones she was used to seeing in museums behind protective glass. No amount of reading about it in the books could have prepared her for the lively scenes she was witnessing on their journey out of the capital.

Living, breathing history – and she was right in the middle of it.

Sansa took everything in with wide eyes, becoming more and more aware that despite the time she had already spent in the past, her experiences had been rather limited. She had stayed only in the Red Keep, in the company of courtiers and their servants. Sure, the dresses were magnificent and the hairpieces and jewellery fascinating, but after a while she had grown used to them and had started to take them for granted.

This – this was different.

She glanced at the silent man beside her, steering the horse with a slight touch of reins, eyes fixed on the road ahead. Sansa had sensed his surprise at her behaviour earlier, but it was not as if she could have helped it – at the time. He had been disappointed at her, Sansa just knew it. And she didn’t like the feeling.

They had a long journey ahead together, and for the first time Sansa wondered how she was going to manage it. So far she had been so focussed on finding a way for both of them to escape that she hadn’t thought much of what came after. She had trusted Eddard Stark – Ned – to have all the answers.

“How are you, really, sweetling?” A gentle voice interrupted Sansa’s musings and she looked up. Ned’s brow was furrowed as he watched her, concerned.

“I’m fine, Father,” Sansa replied, too quickly.

Ned didn’t seem convinced, judging from his expression, but he didn’t press the matter.

“You haven’t yet told me how you managed to escape. I was so worried you wouldn’t,” he said
instead, shifting his focus on the road again.

“Oh, that. I simply walked out. I modified this,” Sansa motioned at her dress, “and changed into it right after the midday meal and covered my hair with a scarf. Then I went to the kitchens - the big ones at the back of the Red Keep - took one of the baskets that were lying around, and walked out of the servants’ gate near the beer cellars.”


“Nobody. There were guards at that gate, but they seemed to be more interested in flirting with the maids than paying attention to any comings and goings there.” Sansa couldn’t help smiling at the memory of the few giddy dancing steps she had taken out of relief after going through that gate and walking down the road leading away from her prison.

Suddenly Ned started to laugh – not a boisterous belly laugh, but a low chuckle, making his whole body shake. Sansa joined him and for a brief moment she felt the happiest that she had been ever since being thrown into this nightmare. It felt so good to laugh with someone who had no agenda, who loved her, and who was on her side.

After their laughs subsided, Ned glanced at her again, his eyes crinkled at the corners and his mouth still spread in a wide smile. It transformed him; where Sansa had seen him so far mostly as a stern and serious man, she now saw him as he showed himself to his family and loved ones: warm and caring, with an actual sense of humour.

Sansa thought she could like this man – very much so.

“So the Lannisters let their most valuable hostage leave, just like that! Then again, I can believe that from Cersei and Joffrey, too preoccupied with their posturing to pay attention to details. That boy never had makings of a good king. Not that I complain, as it means you are here and now.” He smiled again, then got serious. “So they really didn’t have guards on you?”

“No, not really. I was escorted to all the court gatherings in the Great Hall and back, but I think it was more for decorum’s sake than because they thought I actually needed guarding.”

“Him?” Ned tilted his head towards the back of the cart and Sandor’s unmoving bulk.

“Him too – but also the others. Kingsguard members.”

For a while they drove in silence. The road had narrowed down after it passed the outskirts of King’s Landing, but was still wide enough for riders and carts to pass each other. Ned had to concentrate on navigating past a file of knights riding in single file, returning from gods-knew-where. Sansa observed the Lannister colours in their shields and banners and wondered how it was that the king’s true colours – Baratheon black and gold - had become so conspicuously absent.

“About him. Sansa, you know we have to…”

“Please, Father, can we talk about it later? He is behaving now, isn’t he?” Sansa pleaded. She didn’t feel ready to tackle the thorny subject of what to do with the Hound – not yet, at least. She needed time to think it over.

To her relief, Ned nodded. “As you wish. Although we’ve passed the most dangerous part, we’re not in the clear yet. Anything can happen, so maybe better for both us to keep our guard up and concentrate on the journey for now.”

“Yes, I’ll look out for soldiers, Kingsguard, gold cloaks, anything out of the usual,” Sansa assured
him. She left out that she might not be best placed to recognise if something was out of usual – but at least she could spot any of the group she had just listed. Surely that was better than nothing.

“Thank you, sweetling. But sooner or later – preferably sooner – we have to decide what to do with him”

“I know, Father. And we will.”

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Sansa had tried to figure it out ever since she had recognised Sandor, crumpled on the floor at her feet. If he had seen her leave, why had he waited so long before trying to apprehend her? The only conclusion she had been able to draw had been that he had wanted to catch both of them, having figured out that Sansa’s escape was tied to that of Ned’s.

But why not call enforcements? If he had indeed followed her through the city, they had passed several gold cloaks he could have beckoned to follow him. His Kingsguard attire alone would have given him the authority. Maybe he had wanted to do it all on his own, to get the greater glory? He might not have expected to be overpowered by a crippled man and a young woman.

Yet it didn’t sound like the Hound she had come to know to be so careless.

Even so, when Ned had drawn his dagger, Sansa’s first instinct had been to protect Sandor. Yes, for perfectly logical reasons – but there had been something else, too. If he were the Hound in the poem, it proved that he was redeemable. That he was not all he appeared to be.

Sansa’s impression of his potential in that regard had only grown as she had observed the man during their encounters and whenever she saw him in the court. Many subtle things in his behaviour and words had indicated to her that he was not happy, and not truly enjoying even his rather privileged position in the king’s service. Sansa had read enough psychology to know something about PTSD and the impact of physical and mental abuse on a growing child. She knew how it could colour the victim’s experiences later in life and influence their behaviour, and often lead to a vicious cycle where the abused became abusers themselves. However, most importantly, she had also read about how that cycle was not inevitable and could be broken, if the victim received appropriate care and support.

She was realistic enough to know that her knowledge of the matter was at best scanty, including an uncertainty of what such appropriate care could mean – but she wanted to give him a chance. She was sure there was an opportunity for him to still turn his life around, making the Hound perhaps yet to be a force for good, not for evil.

If he were given that chance.

At the inn, Sansa had been probably as surprised as Ned when Sandor had heeded her words and stopped struggling. Later, when he had started to throw his weight around in the cart, she had jumped down to plead him to stay still.

“Sandor, please, please, do stay still!” she had murmured in low voice, pressing her hands against the thrashing pile of grain sacks. They had stilled, and she had taken the opportunity to say more.

“I know this is not the way you planned it; you probably thought you could catch us both and take us back to the Red Keep. Joffrey would have rewarded you well, I have no doubt – but it was not to be. Luck was not on your side but ours, and here we are now. And there is nothing you can do about it.”

The pile still did not move, which Sansa took as a sign that he was listening.
“You know my father; he is Lord Eddard Stark, the Warden of the North and the Hand of the King – well, he used to be – and he will do whatever he has to do keep his family safe. If that includes killing you, he will not hesitate for a second. I was able to convince him not to do it earlier, as it made sense and he is a sensible man. But once we reach quieter roads, it would be nothing for him to slit your throat and hide your body in the woods.”

Sansa kept on pressing her hands down on the Hound. She thought she might be leaning on the midsection of his body, against the sharp edges of his pelvic bone. It felt disturbingly intimate, so she shifted her hands up a bit, to his stomach. His muscles were tense and hard – but he didn’t move.

“He would hate doing it, as it would be a dishonourable thing to kill an unarmed prisoner - but he would do it just the same,” she said, staring at the motionless form. All the talk about killing made bile rise in her throat, but she knew that in that time and age, she probably couldn’t avoid its touch.

“And if he decides to do it, there is nothing I could do to prevent it.” Sansa leaned closer to where she estimated his ear to be and lowered her voice to make her point across. “I am only his daughter, and I’m afraid he wouldn’t change his mind just because I asked him to. So the only chance you have is not to force that decision on him. To behave. To stop struggling or trying to attract unwanted attention on us.”

She closed her eyes, despaired by the difficult situation they found themselves in. It had been so good in the Red Keep – that strange bond of understanding she had started to feel forming between them, no matter how delicate and tentative. Should she be forced to witness her own father – even if not her real father – kill him, how could she reconcile that in her mind? How could she accept that, knowing what she knew about the Hound?

“She knows what happened to me,” she said, not knowing what else to say. It being impossible for the Hound – Sandor, his name is Sandor - to reply, she had no way of assessing if her words had reached him or what he thought of them. All she could do was to hope that they had made an impact.

“Please,” she said one last time before Ned beckoned her back to her seat.

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They drove on through the rest of the day, until the sky took on the orange hue of approaching dusk and trees started to cast long shadows. Ned seemed to be searching for something, continuously scanning both sides of the road, and eventually he seemed to find it: an unremarkable barn some distance away near the edge of the forest, its greying timbers suggesting a great old age. He steered the horse towards it and when there, he jumped down.

“We might stay here for the night. This is used for hay in harvest time, but should be out of use now.”

“Is it safe?” Sansa asked, eyeing towards the road that was still visible from across the field.

“It should be. It is still the King’s Peace in these lands, and lonely travellers not flaunting their riches should be safe enough. I will stay guard through the night in any case.”

They started to set up their ‘camp’, if that could be called so; Sansa pulling the blankets out of the cart, and selected baskets of food and skins of water. They had stopped to fill them on the road whenever the chance presented itself, so they were fine in that regard. Ned took care of the horses, even the black one, who tried to snap at him at every turn but eventually settled down.
Seeing Sandor still lying at the bottom of the cart, motionless, Sansa felt bad for him. It must have been hard to travel like that the whole afternoon. She climbed on the cart and started to untie the binds that were gagging him.

“Sansa, what are you doing?!” Ned stopped what he was doing, alarmed.

“I am removing his gag. He needs to drink, surely. Besides, it is not like there are people here he could shout at.” Sansa didn’t interrupt her task but finished it, pulling the cloth away.

“Seven bloody buggering hells!” Sandor spat the remaining threads of the rag away, cursing loudly.

“I told you so. That is not a language you should you hear,” Ned admonished Sansa.

“I don’t mind. I am sure any of us would feel the same in his situation. Water?”

At Sandor’s nod, Sansa lifted the water skin on his lips and he took in several large gulps, greedily, rivulets of water trickling from the corner of his mouth down to his chin. Sansa kept lifting the skin until he pulled away, coughing.

“Better?”

He didn’t acknowledge her question but looked around, taking in the empty meadow, the barn, the horse, the cart, Sansa and Ned. His hair was plastered on his forehead and he looked dishevelled – yet his scorn had not abated from its usual state.

“Where in the bloody hells are we?”

“Not your concern, Hound. And I would advise you to take care of your language in front of my daughter. She doesn’t need to hear the foul language of the taverns and camps.”

If Sandor was offended, he didn’t show it.

“I need to take a piss, Stark.”

Ned frowned. “If you think I will release you from your binds, you have another thing coming. I can help you down and then you can do whatever you need to do.”

Sansa winced.

“Father, surely you don’t mean to let him foul himself! Can you, I don’t know, maybe just tie his hands in his front instead of his back so he can…use them?” Sansa hated the hot flush on her cheeks telling her that she was blushing.

“Or maybe you’d like to hold it?” Sandor smirked.

_He is certainly not doing any favours for himself._ Sansa sighed.

“Father, please,” she said out loud. Ned looked dubious but finally climbed into the cart.

“If you make any fast moves, know that I have your own dagger with me and I shall not hesitate to stick it between your ribs,” he threatened as he started to unpick the knots.

Sansa left the men to it and meandered behind the barn. She found an even spot on the ground that had been used before for cooking fires, as indicated by a pile of blackened stones. She thought she might as well make herself useful and set off to find firewood and kindling among the small group of trees hugging the barn.
By the time Ned and Sandor returned, she had set the wood into a pile on the stones, kindling at the bottom and in between the thin dry branches. Her father had taught her and her brother that when they spent summer holidays camping along the White Knife and the many national parks of the North. She would have loved to surprise her traveling companions by starting the fire, but she had nothing to start it with. No matchsticks, of course, and definitely no lighters – she wondered what they were going to use.

At Ned’s dropped jaw, Sansa realised she might have made a mistake. Would the real Sansa have known how to set a fire? It was one thing to claim head injury for forgetting things – but quite another to blame it for mysteriously acquiring completely new skills.

“Sansa! How did you know to do that?”

Well, no point trying to deny it. Sansa forced a smile to her face.

“I made it my business to learn about these things when I started to plan our escape. I… asked around.”

Ned circled around the pile studying it intently. Sandor had fallen back and was standing a bit further away. His legs were still bound, but they had been slackened enough to allow him to take short shuffling steps, the ignominy of it clearly irritating him. His arms had been bound in front, his right hand tied against his waist and to the elbow of his left hand, which however was now free to move in a limited fashion. Presumably to allow him to piss with some kind of dignity, and eat – as soon as Sansa had something to offer him.

“Asked around from whom? I doubt there are many people in the company of the king’s betrothed who knows these things. Especially this well – this is quite a neat little fire you have here.” Ned raised his head and looked at Sansa, a mixture of pride and confusion on his face.

Sansa tried to desperately think of her answer when a blunt voice interrupted her thoughts.

“I told her. Didn’t think she would have a use for it quite this soon, though.”

Ned swivelled around to stare at Sandor. “You? Why in the name of the gods?”

Sandor shrugged. “She asked.”

Sansa followed the exchange with disbelief, sucking in a quick breath. She most certainly had never asked him such a thing – but there he was, lying his socks off. Why?

He seemed to be good at it, too, as Ned accepted his explanation, only shaking his head. Sansa decided to steer the discussion away to a somewhat safer topic.

“I didn’t have anything to start the fire with.” Well, that much was certainly the truth. “Do you?”

“Indeed I do,” Ned said, went back to the cart and dug out a small bag containing flint and steel and a piece of char cloth, then proceeded to show fascinated Sansa how to use them.

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After they had eaten their fill, the unlikely trio sat around the fire, not speaking. That is, until Ned shifted on his seat and turned to Sandor.

“What do you expect to happen now, Hound?”
Sandor was chewing the last pieces of the dried sausage they had shared with him. He had been unusually subdued during the evening, not making excessive noise nor causing trouble. Sansa dared to hope that her pleading had something to do with it.

“Not much. You continue your journey, looking over our shoulder every second, fearing when they will come and catch you.” He took a swig of the water and grimaced as if still surprised it was not his usual wine. “And catch you they will. Joffrey is not likely to let his prized possessions to slip away quite this easily. And at one point or another, I suppose you’ll kill me.”

“Not necessarily,” Sansa began, but Ned hushed her with his raised hand.

“What if I do?”

“What if you don’t? You’d be a fool not to. Then again, you were a fool to go blabbing your plans to Cersei before you put them into action. A fool to challenge Joffrey and side with Stannis in the first place.”

“I understand you are loyal to the Lannisters, but…”

“Loyalty has nothing to do with it. Just saying that a smart man would have done it differently.” Sandor stretched his long legs in front of him, feigning a yawn. “Then again, you are a fool. So you might not even kill me. Who knows?”

Ned exchanged a look with Sansa, and without a need for words she guessed its meaning: ‘I told you so.’ In turn, she mouthed to him silently ‘Let’s talk later’, and at that, the discussion ended.

Ned announced that he was going to stay up and guard them, but Sansa insisted they take turns. After an argument Sansa was determined to win, he gave up and so they settled in for the night, Ned taking the first watch, Sansa wrapping a blanket around her on top of a pile of hay in the corner of the musty barn and trying to sleep.

She knew she had already overstepped so many boundaries with Ned it was not even funny, but what could she have done? Pretend to be an obedient and perfect little lady, and be thrust into that role from this time forward – or be honest about who she was and what she wanted to do? From Ned’s mild reaction to the news about his wife’s – her ‘mother’s’ – recent antics, she concluded he didn’t have an issue with strong women as such.

Sansa also wondered how much she could share with Ned when that time came. The whole truth? Would he believe her if she did so? Or think her a madwoman possessed by evil spirits and keep her under house arrest, supposedly for her own good? She would be treated well, she didn’t doubt it, but her agency would be stripped away and she would not be in a much better position than she had been as a prisoner.

Sansa knew that so far she had only succeeded in postponing the inevitable discussion; that the next day Ned was going to ask her some hard questions... about herself, about Sandor. What could she say, what should she say? She didn’t like lying to him, but if she didn’t, she risked the chance to make a difference. To change history.

Those and many other unanswered questions, including why Sandor had lied to Ned about her, assailed her and her sleep was anything but peaceful that night.
The next chapter will hopefully be posted next week, all going well. Whose POV? ----- Well, Brienne will let us know what happened to our favourite blondes after Catelyn escaped – and a bit before…

Comments are appreciated and valued, should you feel inclined to say something… Also, though my Tumblr is a bit slow at the moment due to my holiday travel and restrictions of time and access on the road, feel free to come by and say hi at ladytp!
No Chance, No Choice

Chapter Notes

Firstly, a warning about canon-typical threats of sexual violence, although nothing physical actually takes place. If you are sensitive to such things, verbal and/or implied, please proceed carefully!

Secondly, many thanks for Hardlyfatal for heroically betaing this chapter in the midst of the pressures caused by my trip!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brienne

The first sign of something being very wrong were the shouts and shrieks, then the tight turn of their vehicle, making them roll against the side of the wagon with a bang. Brienne hit her shoulder hard, but before she had a chance to sit up again, the wagon turned the other way, and once more she lost her balance and banged against the other side – this time her back.

Jaime was equally helpless to avoid being jostled from side to side – even more so than Brienne, as after the first few turns, she at least could rise into a low crouch, setting her feet wide apart against the floorboards to take the most of the impact. Jaime, being shackled by his ankles, couldn’t do the same, and was reduced to rolling around helplessly as the moves took him. Brienne saw him hitting his head once, then twice, and cursing profusely after each hit.

She had no idea what was happening, except that it couldn’t be good. Nonetheless, as the ride showed no signs of smoothing down, having gained some resemblance of control of her own body, she reached out and pulled Jaime’s head into her lap. It was an instinctive move, something she would have done to anyone being in such tough position – even to that tedious man.

It helped, both of them being finally able to settle and breathe a bit easier. The wagon was still being hurled ahead at a breakneck speed, but most of the bumps and swings were at least tolerable.

“What the hells is this?!” Jaime cursed, spitting blood from the cut in his lip where he had hit it against something – his teeth, probably.

“I don’t know any more than you. Maybe even less.” Brienne looked down hard on him. Could this be a rescue attempt to release the Kingslayer from the Starks? Had he known about it?

“I assure you I have no idea. I think it fair to assume that we were attacked and are now being taken for a ride.” As if reading her mind, a slow smile spread to his lips, bloodied and swollen. “It could be my Father, I guess. In which case a few cuts and scrapes are quite fine by me.”

“Shut up,” Brienne said almost automatically, wondering what such situation would mean to her. His head was still in her lap, and distracted, not paying conscious attention, her fingers threaded through his hair. It was silky and soft, smelling fresh and clean, and her mind drifted back towards the previous day.
The day before their departure, Lady Catelyn had asked Brienne to walk with her, as she had done a
few times before. She had shared more news about the upcoming trip and its arrangements, but even
when talking she had looked worried, and that in turn had worried Brienne. When they had
approached the tent, Brienne had mentioned passing something about feeling grimy and dirty after
her long imprisonment – and soon after Lady Catelyn’s departure, the guards had come in carrying
four buckets of water, two cakes of soap, some clean rags and two sets of clothes.

“For washing,” Gerrick had informed her. “Once you are dressed in these, we have been instructed
to take your clothes. They will be returned to you tomorrow, washed.” Walton had distributed the
wares between the two halves of the tent and then they had left. Apparently, Lady Catelyn didn’t
want to show favouritism – or simply preferred both her prisoners in a decent condition at the start of
their journey.

Whatever it was, Brienne was left with a dilemma. Their guards had sworn to stay out of the tent and
prevent others too from entering, and she had learned to trust them. It nonetheless still left Ser Jaime
– and the thought of undressing when he was just on the other side of the curtain made her waver.
Oh, she wanted to get clean – but how could she? Brienne stared longingly at the bucket and the
soap.

Such concerns didn’t deter Jaime, as Brienne soon could hear water splashing on the other side. She
wondered whether he had undressed fully – and immediately regretted it. However, she realised the
worst was yet to come when he started shouting remarks at her through the screen.

“How come so quiet, wench? Don’t you want to wipe all the grime away, now that our jailors have
so thoughtfully provided the opportunity? I don’t know about you, but I was getting rather tired of
being filthy.”

Brienne didn’t respond.

“Are you undressing? I bet you look magnificent, you and your muscles. I bet you’d leave most of
my soldiers in shame if we compared. Skinny little shits, most of them.”

Still, she didn’t respond.

“I am naked – in case you wanted to know. It sure feels good to scrub myself clean. My back is a bit
hard to reach though – would you mind scrubbing it for me? If you’d just come closer, I could do the
same for you. A Lannister always pays his debts and all that, you know.”

Brienne closed her eyes. Uninvited, images of his tall, lean body rose into her mind. Nude. He was
likely covered in soft golden hair on his arms and legs and other places…

She grimaced and rubbed her eyes, stifling a sigh.

Brienne had seen naked men before, despite not necessarily wanting to. Some men in Renly’s camp
had taken wicked delight in trying to upset her ‘maidenly sensitivities’, as they had called it. They
had done it by parading in front of her, stripped bare, whenever the opportunity had risen, ostensibly
just taking an innocent swim in the river or getting ready for a bath. She had averted her eyes and
thought nothing of it besides feeling irritated by their childish behaviour. One couldn’t expect to
survive a soldiers’ camp or a battlefield if one was too squeamish.

Yet this was different. So very different.

More splashing, then quiet.
“Wench? What’s wrong?”

“My name is Brienne. And nothing is wrong,” she croaked – hoping it sounded convincing.

“You know I can’t see anything if that’s what you are wondering.”

“It’s not that.”

“I wouldn’t mind though. I wonder how you look under those clothes. Do you even have breasts?”

Brienne sighed. “Shut up,” she muttered.

Maybe it was out of spite, or because she had an opportunity that was unlikely to present itself for some time, but eventually she carried the bucket even further away from the end of the partition and started to undress. Not fully – she was much too uncomfortable for that, but she bared her upper body and dunked her head into the water. After lathering her hair with the soap and rinsing it, she took a rag and soaped it, then proceeded to wash her arms and torso.

She wiped down her armpits and their soft hair, then past her breasts, assessing them thoughtfully. They were firm and small, nothing like well-endowed bosoms of some women she had seen. She preferred it that way: large breasts would only be in the way in arms practice and combat. Briefly, she wondered if Jaime preferred small breasts or large. Most men seemed to be taken by ample bosoms, but…

Angry at herself she hissed and scrubbed her skin harder.

“I am all done now – but I would have preferred for you to help me with my back. A favour to a fellow prisoner, you know. But it’s not too late yet. Shall I move over?”

Brienne tried her best to ignore the taunting. After having dried her torso and arms, she gingerly removed her breeches and smallclothes and proceeded in cleaning her lower body. She was crouching, back turned against the tent opening, working as fast as she could.

“You know, I would be happy to show you mine if you would show me yours. I admit I am rather curious. What say you?”

Brienne tried to shut her ears by concentrating harder on her task.

Luckily she hadn’t had her monthly flux while in custody – but that meant they were to be expected while they were on the road. She sighed again. Why was she cursed with such things when she would never even need them – would never conceive a child, a babe of her own. They meant just trouble and inconvenience for a woman in her position. Her fingers worked quickly and wiped her woman’s place clean – and of course, the Kingslayer chose that exact moment to yell out again.

“I can’t see you, but I can imagine you. You and your long legs. Gods, they’re long! Muscular as well, I bet?”

“Shut up!” Brienne shouted, then finished by drying herself thoroughly and dressing into the breeches and tunic she had been given. No smallclothes – but she would get her own back soon. The sleeves and legs of her breeches were too short, but otherwise, they fit. The main thing was, however, that she was clothed again, which made her feel much better about herself.

The guards returned after she shouted at them that they were ready, took the things and left.

Jaime emerged from his side, all clean, his skin still pink from the scrubbing. Delicate blonde hair fell
onto his sides, clean and untangled, looking much too soft against the coarseness of his beard. He looked like a god, like some kind of deviant Stranger.

If he looked this good when being a prisoner in ill-fitting borrowed clothes, how would he look in his full gear, in whites of the Kingsguard or reds and golds of House Lannister?

As they had supped later that evening, Brienne hadn’t been able to shake the weight of those green eyes when they had taken in her appearance nor the mischievous, knowing smile – as if he had seen through the screen and knew exactly how she looked in her bare skin.

Her only consolation had been that the forced company of the Kingslayer was going to end soon.

Jaime tried to shout at their captors during their long ride but got no response. He wasn’t too discouraged by it, though, having adopted the cheerful outlook of someone who expected imminent improvement in his circumstances.

“It can’t be anyone else but my lord father. Who else would have thought of it? Who else would have had the resources to get intelligence about the Starks’ plans?” His smile was almost infectious, and he didn’t seem to mind that Brienne didn’t share his enthusiasm.

“You just wait and see. Before the night is over, I shall be dining in my father’s camp on roast chicken and proper beef stew, hearty beer and the finest wines. A nice change after the weeks of gruel and that lumpy stew filled with tough meat they’ve served us.”

They were both sitting up by then, backs against the opposite sides of the wagon. The ride was slower and smoother – but every turn of the wheels took them further away from the Stark convoy. Brienne tried to think what she should do if it was indeed Tywin Lannister behind the attack. Would he, too, accuse her of kingslaying? By then, the whole realm would have heard about the events in Renly’s tent.

As if once again sensing her thoughts, Jaime nudged her with his foot.

“Not that I care what happens to you after we part our ways – but if you insisted, I might consider letting you join us, wench. Since I happen to believe that you didn’t kill that milksop Renly, I might even tell that to my father. Hells - you might even join my troops. I would have to ascertain, of course, that you would be good enough – might even spar with you myself to test you out. What would you say to that?”

“I will not fight for the Kingslayer,” Brienne muttered. She had a nagging feeling that Lord Tywin might not much care whether she was innocent or not, as long if he saw her as somehow useful.

“No for me, personally, but for the one true king. Surely you could do that, as it is not as if there are any better alternatives. Or would you prefer Stannis Baratheon? Or Balon Greyjoy, who is making a nuisance of himself in the west?” Jaime shrugged. “Your choice.”

It was almost evening when the wagon came into a halting stop, judging from the dimness of the light filtering through the canvas. Brienne tensed, pricking her ears trying to get a hint of what was happening outside. Foreign voices, a language she couldn’t place, except being from somewhere across the sea. Did it disprove Jaime’s expectations, she wondered?

The voices came closer, and then the back curtain of the wagon was pulled aside.
“What the hells is this? Two, not one?”

Jaime had moved forward when they had heard the men coming, and was helped out first. Then coarse hands reached to grab Brienne by the shoulders, and she too was pulled out.

Her legs were stiff and her body hurt from all the bumps and strains it had been subjected to, but she paid no heed to such slight discomforts. Glancing around her she spotted a building – a mill, it seemed – three horses, altogether four men, one still on horseback…

With Lady Catelyn.

Brienne startled, then gritted her teeth. If this indeed was Lord Tywin’s doing, it had not been enough for him to release his son; he had had to go one step further and obtain a hostage of his own. Lady Catelyn could be treated with respect as was her due as a noble lady, but with that one blow the Lannisters would have gained a definitive upper hand: Lord Eddard, Lady Catelyn, and their two daughters all held by them, the Starks having nothing and nobody to balance the odds.

She felt sorry for the Starks, and Lady Catelyn especially. She had always been kind to Brienne, treating her well, even promising to speak on her behalf to Lord Stannis. Watching her, Brienne saw a look of utter defeat on that proud face, the despair of not only her own position but of the realisation of what this coup had done for her family’s chances of receiving justice.

*She doesn’t deserve it.*

Brienne heard the exchange between Jaime and their captors but had no time to focus on what was being said. Jaime was not happy, that much was clear, but she didn’t much care about his happiness.

The leader, presumably having had enough of Jaime, moved closer to Brienne. He was tall and lean, his dark hair tied back in a knot and his skin the colour of burnished copper, a legacy of a land of endless plains and burning sun. Measuring her with his gaze, he had the same look on his face Brienne had seen hundreds of times before: surprise, annoyance, a hint of smugness. That a woman dared to dress as a man and stand on her own seemed to be a source of perpetual amusement to men. It was frustrating, but as often as not, it worked on her favour. As Ser Goodwin had said, men were wont to underestimate her just because of her sex.

“This one is a surprise – what, is it a woman?”

The men laughed and came closer. Even the man sitting behind Lady Catelyn dismounted and walked towards the group, holding the horse's bridle in his hand.

Brienne looked at Lady Catelyn again, the defeated slump of her shoulders. She had no time to go through all the possible options and consider all the potential consequences of her actions, beyond the calm acceptance that what she was about to do would mean a great risk for her.

*No chance, no choice.*

She charged.

The man fell backward with a surprised yelp and it was easy for Brienne to grab the pommel of his sword. Her hands were shackled, that was true, but her binds allowed her enough room to use her wrists and take a firm grip. She had held back at the last minute, preventing herself falling over, and as soon she had secured her grip, she swirled around in one smooth motion. The sword sliced through the air without hesitation – slashing through the nearest man from the lower rib all the way to his pelvis, a deep slice. The man stood motionless for just a second, staring at her incredulously, and then his knees gave up and he fell on the ground, pressing his hands against his stomach in a futile
attempt to prevent his innards falling out.

“Ride, Lady Catelyn!” Brienne yelled. “And don’t stop, not for anything!”

She whipped around, concentrating on her next foe. The two remaining men had recovered from their shock and circled her, swords drawn. From the side of her eye Brienne saw Jaime staring at the scene, his mouth slack, eyes wide.

To her immense relief Lady Catelyn had heard her and acted, and soon only the back of her horse could be seen in the dim light – and then the men attacked. Brienne fought the first man off with ease. He was not very experienced in Westerosi style sword fight, but thwarting the other man, the leader, was not quite as effortless. Brienne barred, lunged, feinted to the side. Her main aim was to keep the men occupied to prevent them going after Lady Catelyn, and she did that by engaging both of them in turn. Once the man she had knocked over got to his feet, only his pride hurt, he joined the other two and Brienne had her hands full of trying to beat off all three of them.

It was only a matter of time before they would be able to subdue her, Brienne knew and accepted it. She also knew she could not rely on Jaime’s help, these men being his rescuers. Not that he would have been able to do much anyway, hands and feet bound as he was.

“Stop this nonsense, now!”

A booming voice rose above the clang of metal and panting of the combatants. It took a moment for Brienne to register that it had been Jaime, who – for the better impact – banged his chains against the wagon, causing everyone to stop and look.

“Lady Catelyn is gone, and you’d have a better purpose to go after her than to fight with this woman. She isn’t going anywhere and is unlikely to surprise you quite as easily as she did, anymore.”

“Shut up!” the leader shouted, baring his teeth in a vicious snarl, not letting his eyes drop from Brienne. He was the most dangerous of the group, she had concluded. There was skill but also raw ferocity in his attacks, and twice he had penetrated through her defences, one cut on her shoulder and another on her flank bearing testimony to it.

Brienne didn’t relax her stance either, eyeing the three of them over her sword. She hoped she had bought enough time for Lady Catelyn and that she would be smart enough not to try to run back the same way they had arrived. If the men followed… by then, however, it would be dark, which would mean a more difficult pursuit.

Her breathing was shallow, her hands and legs trembled. She had been inactive for too long, not trained as she should have - she was not ready for a prolonged battle…

The two other men looked at each other, then stepped further away from her and lowered their swords.

“He is right, Zaggo. The bitch can’t get us and she is worn out. I’ll get the rope and finish this farce,” said the bald man with a sizable gut, then turned towards his horse and produced a coil of rope from the saddle bag.

“What about the other woman?” the other man enquired, wiping his sword against his boots. It hardly needed it, not having drawn blood, but he was very particular about it. He was lean and slightly build, with a droopy moustache and braided hair – yet another indication of the foreign origins of the group.

“Pox on the woman! We have him, which was the main thing, so we’ll get our gold in any case. The
woman was optional.” The leader snarled, still reluctant to lower his own sword.

Brienne saw what was coming and as the rope swished through the air, she didn’t resist.

In no time she was bound and trussed and thrown on the ground next to a pile of rocks, not far from where Jaime was sitting. The place looked like a small quarry with the remains of two big stone wheels lying on the ground. One had been chipped to pieces and the other was lying on the ground almost intact, moss growing on its surface. They must have been old millstones, thrown aside when the mill had been fitted with a new set.

Jaime had been released from the shackles in his legs, but his hands were still bound, the leader cursing at him just to shut up when Jaime had protested. None of their captors seemed to be impressed by Jaime’s name or his affiliation, and hadn’t even bothered to ask hers. All they did was to insist on having to wait for their commander before anything was resolved.

The men prepared their camp in sullen silence, unharnessing Blaze and their own horses, feeding and watering them, emptying their saddlebags, lighting a fire. Their movements were purposeful and efficient – they had clearly spent a long time together on campaigns like this. Maybe they were sellswords, hired by anyone with enough coin? And who’d have more coin than Tywin Lannister? They didn’t carry banners or wear sigils, which was an even clearer indication of their loose loyalties.

Their dead companion, who had lain on the ground, was collected by the leader himself. He lifted the body carefully, bound the gaping incision with a piece of cloth, and carried it aside, under the crumbling wall of the old mill. There he laid it on the ground, gently, sat next to it, and pulled the listless head in his lap.

Brienne observed him, baffled. The leader – Zaggo – talked to the body, touching the dead man’s hair and face. There was odd gentleness to it, but the others didn’t seem to find anything strange in it, focussing on their own tasks.

“It looks like you killed his lover,” Jaime whispered next to her. “No wonder he is in such a foul mood. We could have done without that, you know. Just saying.”

“What would you have me do?” Brienne hissed angrily. “At least Lady Catelyn got away.”

“For how long, I wonder? You bought her time, that is true, but tomorrow when the commander - whoever it is - arrives, he will send men after her. I doubt noble Lady Stark is as adapted to evading pursuers as you were on your way to the north.”

Brienne didn’t dignify that with an answer. After a while, Jaime continued.

“You did complicate matters somewhat, I have to say. For yourself, at least. That man,” Jaime inclined his head in the direction of the mourning man, still leaning over the lifeless body of his companion, “he will be out to get you for what you did.”

He looked at Brienne then, glancing at her still bleeding cuts, and his tone changed. “Nonetheless, for what it’s worth, you were magnificent. I would take you into my service any day.” With that surprising parting shot Jaime withdrew and leaned against the millstone.

Brienne shrugged it away, but couldn’t deny the truth of it. Killing a man in the heat of the battle was one thing and no cause for eternal animosity, and losing a comrade in arms was common enough – but when there were other emotions involved, things turned personal.
As the evening progressed, Zaggo finally let go of his lover. The three men amassed together a pile of dried wood from the mill and lifted the body on top of it. The leader lighted it and the fire started first as a wisp, gradually rising to an impressive roaring inferno, consuming the wood and the body alike. If any prayers were said over the funeral pyre, Brienne didn’t hear them, but Zaggo stayed standing next to it for a long time, staring at the flames, until the pile had reduced to embers.

When he returned to his comrades, a heated discussion ensued. They were talking about her, Brienne understood, from the sideways looks and fingers pointing in her direction. They were animated and angry, and her heart sank thinking of what it might mean for her. Even Jaime didn’t seem to have the level of influence he had thought he had. He had succeeded in ending the fight, but it had probably been common sense rather than Jaime’s words that had convinced the men.

Besides, why would he help her anyway? He had said that he didn’t care what happened to her.

“They are coming,” Jaime’s lowered voice next to Brienne alerted her. Indeed, the other two men were approaching, Zaggo still sitting by the campfire and brooding, holding a skin from which he sipped every now and then.

“Zaggo wants to kill you,” the first man said without preamble.

“Slowly,” added the other, helpfully.

Brienne stared at them, cold sweat trickling down her brow. She had never been this close to death, and it was not what she had expected. Not in the height of a battle, not while defending herself with all her might. To be killed like this… suddenly she was very scared.

“But we said we want our fun first... if you are a woman, as you seem to be. At least we want to check. And if so, Ibbe and I will have you.” The man made a lewd gesture with his hand and hips, and the other man grinned. “After that, Zaggo can do whatever he wants.”

Ibbe’s leer revealed a row of brown teeth and Brienne’s stomach turned. The threat of rape had always been present for her, but she had trusted that her sword would be enough deterrent to persuade anyone so inclined otherwise.

“You there, move away. Unless you have a problem with this?” The man’s words were addressed to Jaime, but from the way his hand rested on the hilt of his dagger and how Ibbe crouched warily while staring at Jaime, it was obvious that even if he had any problem with the notion, they were not going to be swayed.

“Me? Of course not, why would there be a problem? That woman is nothing to me.” Jaime drawled nonchalantly, getting up and stretching his legs. So, he was going to leave her to her fate. And why wouldn’t he? What was she to him? Nothing, as he had just said.

Brienne closed her eyes and an involuntary sob escaped her lips. Tears burned behind her eyelids and for the first time in a long, long time, she felt vulnerable, she felt weak - she felt afraid.

Nobody can help me now.
So, “No sapphires?!” I hear you saying. And unfortunately, no ‘sapphires’ indeed… What will happen to Brienne now??

Alas, before we find out about that, the next chapters follows again the bumbling trio of Sansa, Sandor and Ned, again from Sansa’s POV.
I am still travelling, the hard part of visiting old homeland… But here we go again with a new chapter nonetheless - this time at a bit gentler pace, with less action and more focus on personal interactions… Many thank yous to my beta, Hardlyfatal!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

The second day of their journey started uneventfully – and stayed that way, to both Sansa and Ned’s relief.

Sansa knew it was only a matter of time before Ned was going to raise the many questions he must have, and anticipation of that clouded her morning. She simply didn’t know for sure how she could reply to him, or how to best deflect his suspicions that something was not quite right. She had considered several different options, but each had their own drawbacks – mostly because pretending to be too clueless might lead her to be treated as a simpleton. And she most certainly didn’t want that.

As the morning went on, they plodded on steadily through the pastoral landscape dotted with small villages, tiny settlements and isolated farmhouses, surrounded by grassy meadows and livestock.

Ned seemed to be in a wholesome mood, the tension and anxiety of the previous day having melted away with the morning sun. He was sitting straighter, and every now and then an unexpected smile broke through his otherwise-stern demeanour in response to something Sansa said – he was like a new man. Whether it was the long-awaited freedom after the black cells, the knowledge that he was on his way home, or because he finally had something to do and something concrete to set his mind to... whatever it was, Sansa welcomed it.

As they travelled, he commented to Sansa that the region of Crownlands they were travelling through appeared still largely unaffected by political turmoils – which in turn prompted Sansa to fill him in with all the intelligence she had gathered during her time in the court.

Ned turned more serious at that, asking her many questions about what she knew of the movements of the Northern troops, of Robb’s activities, and if there had been any news of her lady mother, Lady Catelyn. When Sansa told him about Tyrion Lannister’s imprisonment, and that some said it had been the prime reason behind Lord Tywin’s campaign in the Riverlands, Ned closed his eyes and shook his head with the timeless expression of a long-suffering husband. Yet Sansa didn’t get the impression that he was truly displeased with his wife – which was another mark in his favour in her books.

Ned lamented how he wished there was a way to send a message to Riverrun or Winterfell, to let their family know about their current situation. In code, of course; words that only his wife or his son would understand. When Sansa asked why he couldn’t, Ned shrugged and said it was a matter of funds. He told Sansa about the coin in his boots, and how that would allow them to get by, but would not be enough for a message to be delivered across Westeros. Without ravens at their disposal,
the only option they had was to find a merchant or a journeyman travelling to the desired location and entrust their message to him – but such tasks were not accepted for free.

When Sansa announced that she, as a matter of fact, had such coin and probably even more than what was needed, Ned was once again equally surprised, pleased and bewildered. In response to his query about where she had gotten such a treasure, Sansa told him about her meetings with Petyr Baelish, which served to immediately darken Ned’s mood.

After some prompting, Ned told Sansa how it had been that very same man who had betrayed him, and who after first promising to help him had changed sides and held his dagger to Ned’s throat when he had been arrested. Then it was Sansa’s turn to be livid and make her displeasure known in no uncertain terms. Only after catching Ned’s aghast expression, she covered her mouth with her hand, abashed. Bastard had been one of the kindest terms she had used; bloody might have slipped out of her mouth as well.

After that outburst they fell silent, Sansa regretting her carelessness and wishing she didn’t have to be so on-guard at all times, Ned probably questioning what had happened to his well-mannered and genteel daughter.

Luckily Sandor kept quiet, having been afforded the luxury of sitting upright in the cart, his hands and arms still bound as they had been the night before. Sansa noticed many looks Ned threw in his direction, but neither of them actually saying anything, things were left as they were – brewing, waiting for a solution that had yet to show itself.

At least Ned had not raised the prospect of his imminent dispatch, and Sandor, in turn, had withheld aggravating Ned any more than necessary.

It could be worse, Sansa mused in the midst of simmering tension between the two.

They stopped for a break around midday to let the horses drink and rest and had a bite themselves. In no time, however, they were back on the road and the discussion that Sansa had dreaded began.

“Sansa.”

“Yes, Father?”

“I have noticed that you haven’t been exactly… yourself. Your behaviour is not what it used to be. You even speak differently. ” Ned spoke slowly, struggling to get the words out. Sansa felt sorry for him but didn’t rush to his help. “Is it still because of the accident you told me about?”

“I know that I may not have behaved as I did before. And yes, it must be the accident. I can’t explain it – but what else could it be? Grand Maester Pycelle thought so, too.”

Ned didn’t respond for a while, staring at the road ahead.

“How did it happen?”

Luckily Sansa had anticipated that exact question. She had already been in the middle of concocting elaborate stories about how and where and why she had hit her head when it had struck her that if she had really lost her memory, she would be unlikely to remember the accident either. Which had been a great relief, as for how on earth could one have suffered such a serious accident in such a mundane and boring place as her rooms?
“I don’t know. All I remember is coming to my senses on the floor of my room, my head pounding and my back bruised. I was lying next to the windows, so I might have tried to climb up to have a better look at something. I just don’t know…” She let her voice trail off and looked down at her lap, letting her fingers play with the edges of her scarf, hoping that Ned would take a hint and realise that it was a topic she was not comfortable talking about.

It seemed he did.

“I am so sorry it happened to you, but I’m glad it wasn’t worse. You are here, you are still whole, and that is the main thing.”

Ned reached out and touched her hand, and despite Sansa knowing he was not her real father, his touch felt familiar and consoling and real. Her heart filled with warmth and for a moment she felt as if she was home.

“Yet I can’t help wondering how it is that you appear to have gained so many new skills and strengths. In all the cases I have seen a man changing because of a blow in the head, they have become lesser versions of themselves. You have grown, instead,” Ned continued. His hand still rested on top of Sansa’s and she did nothing to move it – it felt so comforting.

“I don’t know why that would be so, Father. All I can say is that since I had to re-learn so many things, and was able to hear about our situation as if being an outsider, I think I have simply gained a better view of it. It is like stepping away from a complicated tapestry, where I have worked just on one little detail, and seeing the whole big picture in a better light for the first time. Things seem to have fallen in place and I have seen what I should be doing - what we should be doing - from a different angle than before.”

Sansa had circled her fingers around his and now squeezed them, gently, hoping her explanation would make sense to him. Startled, she realised she wanted nothing more than to be trusted by this man, this near-stranger, who still felt so close to her.

“I was just a foolish young girl before, thinking of my own pleasures and wishes before anyone else’s. I think I have grown out of it, because of this.” Surely that was something that could be true? Their arrest and Ned’s imprisonment must be enough to make even the most naive person re-evaluate things anew.

“That you have, my sweetling. I suppose I didn’t know you before as well as I should have. I was too occupied with my many tasks and duties,” Ned sighed. “I paid more attention to Arya simply because she had a harder time fitting in in King’s Landing, and thus neglected you without meaning to. I am sorry, I am so sorry.”

“Oh, don’t be! You were always a wonderful father,” Sansa exclaimed, hoping that the real Sansa had not been too hard on her old man. The impression she had formed of her previous incarnation was not harsh, only tainted with a hint of selfishness and thoughtlessness, as could be expected from a sheltered and naïve young girl. Sansa herself had been a bit like that when younger, to her later embarrassment, and she at least had had the privilege of learning second-hand lessons of life through books and screen - which was more than people of these times had.

“What about him?” Ned lowered his voice although Sandor sat far enough at the back of the cart, not to overhear them.

Sansa knew it was the opening she had been waiting for; an opportunity to try to save Sandor, if she truly wanted it - and she did. For reasons she couldn’t explain even to herself, she did.
“He…he is not as bad you think he is. He was the only one who tried to help me when he could. He told me many of the things I told you earlier, and I don’t believe he ever lied to me.”

Ned raised his eyebrow. Sansa wondered what had made him form such an unflattering impression of Sandor; whether it had been something that Sandor had actually done, or based only on hearsay. Suddenly she recalled something her father had said earlier, something about a butcher’s boy…

“I know he has done many reprehensible things. That boy you mentioned… I don’t recall it, but if he did something bad, it must have been at the behest of his masters, not of his own accord?”

Ned shrugged. “He killed that boy, that little friend of Arya’s, only because Joffrey told him the boy had attacked him. A butcher’s boy, attack a prince! He should have dug deeper.”

“With all due respect, if you tell one of your men to kill someone who has threatened you or one of your children, how many of them would stop to ask you for proof?” Sansa withheld her breath, hoping she hadn’t crossed boundaries of daughterly respect.

Ned opened his mouth, then shut it. He turned in his seat to look at Sansa, but rather than being angry, he seemed to be somewhat abashed.

“If you are comparing me to that spoiled boy, it is not a fair comparison. But you are right, it is not up to a soldier-in-arms or a sworn shield to challenge the orders of his superiors.” Before Sansa had time to rejoice that small victory, Ned turned back and muttered, “What I didn’t like was that he took such joy in it. Killing is never easy and should never be enjoyed.”

“True. Yet I doubt he took any real joy of it, or of anything, for that matter. I don’t know how much you know of his background, but it isn’t a good one. His brother…” Sansa stopped mid-sentence, remembering Sandor’s threat that she was not to tell the story of his scars to anyone, or else… She wasn’t sure if he would go through with the threat if she did, but she decided she would rather not face his wrath in any case.

“Gregor Clegane, you mean? Did you see him, as well? Are you going to tell me next that he, too, is not as bad as he seems?”

“No, he is worse. I only mean that he didn’t treat Sandor well when they were growing up, and it has left its marks. From what I gather, Lord Tywin was the only person who cared about him – just as a tool, I suspect, but nonetheless. For a man who needs recognition - of any kind - that is better than nothing.”

“Sandor?” Ned repeated, his posture stiffening. Then he nodded slowly. “I think I hear what you say. Still, he’s the king’s dog and it is his duty to apprehend us and take us back to King’s Landing, should he have a chance.”

Sansa took a deep breath. What she was going to say next was a gamble, and she didn’t know if there was even a shred of truth behind it. If she were right, all would be so much better, but if she were wrong… the consequences could be dire.

She took the risk.

“Father, I think he could be turned to our side, I genuinely do. I believe he is not happy in the king’s service.”

She sat up straighter, tensing her shoulders, and waited.

Ned frowned.
For a man to change sides - to turn his cloak - was regarded the lowest of low acts. In the feudal system personal loyalties were everything, and anyone breaking the sacred bond between a bannerman and his overlord took the risk of being cast aside and ostracised as an oathbreaker. Sansa had read all about it in the history books, but actually living inside that system had given her an even better appreciation of the concept. Hence she knew it was not an easy thing to propose, not to Ned or to Sandor.

“You mean he might be ready to leave the Lannisters? Why?”

“I can’t speak for him – and I can’t say with an absolute certainty that he would do so. But I believe it, in my heart. Call it a woman’s intuition, call it a gut feeling, but I honestly think that if he had even a small chance and a good reason to leave his past life behind, he would do so.”

Sansa felt nervous sweat break out on her back. She hoped she was not pressing too hard. If Ned asked Sandor about it right now, he might still be so vexed that he might decline, if only to aggravate Ned. First Sandor needed to get over his anger. Both of them needed to move on from their opposing stands.

“In any case, I think he needs some time. To let go of his anger, to get reconciled with the thought of being here now, with us. You need it too, to see that he is not so bad. So all I ask of you is that time; a few more days, a week. He is quite settled currently, after all, and I told him that you’d have no hesitations to kill him if you thought he was a threat. Besides, he is still trussed and tethered, so he can’t take us unawares.” Sansa spoke fast, hoping that small steps at the time would win the day.

Ned urged the horse on, tightening his hold on the reins. He turned his head and, following his gaze, Sansa saw it landing on Sandor in the back of the cart, watching the changing scenery of shrubs and willows by the roadside. His usual scowl had left him and his expression was calm, serene even.

“What does it mean to you? Why would you ask such a thing? I can’t believe it would be for the usual reasons why ladies ask favours for someone, he being so uncouth and rude.”

“I am just thinking what is best for us all. Not only would it eliminate the immediate danger he represents, but surely such an experienced man and soldier would be of value to anyone in the current conflict?”

Yes, that’s why. Sansa almost believed her own words: they were all very good reasons.

Ned exhaled noisily, then, after a long silence, capitulated.

“So be it, then. He can stay as he is for a few days and I will observe him to see if he truly is as you say. But note, if he does anything - anything at all - that I deem a threat, I shall not hesitate.” He tapped the dagger at his waist. “I will use this, and nothing you say will stop me.”

“Of course, Father,” Sansa said earnestly. “I trust you in all things when it comes to our safety. We have gone too far to let anything go wrong.” She tried not to smile too openly. Now all she could do was to hope that Sandor wouldn’t do anything stupid.

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So they travelled that day, the day after, the one after that. Their peace was not disturbed by internal or external threats, and by the third day, a certain kind of rhythm had developed to punctuate their travel.

Sansa took care of domestic matters such as preparing their meals, cleaning afterwards and setting and tending the fire. She took great enjoyment in having succeeded in becoming so useful so
quickly; she would have hated to just sit idle and wait to be served. To her delight and due to a
crane meeting with a trapper one day, she soon had a chance to start contributing even more.

She had gone to the forest to attend to her needs, and what an irksome business it was; an aspect of
living in the past she never warmed to. Not only did she have to struggle with her skirts, bundling
and lifting them up to make sure she didn’t accidentally soil them, there was no toilet paper and no
real privacy. What she wouldn’t have given for a real WC, soft toilet paper, and an opportunity to
wash her hands afterwards with warm running water! And for a shower or a bath… Sansa shook her
head; better not get into the downward spiral of missing all the things that made life comfortable from
her modern life, as it would only make her miserable.

Just as she started to scoop her hems and bend her knees, a loud clearing of a throat caught her
attention. She spun up, alarmed, and looked around. There, not twenty steps away from her, stood a
man.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to frighten you,” he said, looking anywhere but her direction - he must have
guessed why she was here. He was young, not quite a boy but not a grown man either, with jet-black
hair and blue eyes, and looked harmless enough. After her initial alarm, Sansa’s heart slowed down
to its usual beat.

“Oh, no matter. I just thought I’d be alone here.”

“So I gathered.”

*What, is he blushing?* It was so endearing to see someone so discomfited by her that it made Sansa
immediately at ease with him. Then she noticed a dead rabbit hanging from his belt, and some kind
of contraption in his hand.

“What is that, did you catch the rabbit yourself?”

He glanced down, then, apparently grateful for a change of topic, proudly announced that indeed, he
had.

Sansa asked him more questions: where had he learned to do it, where had he gotten his snares, how
they worked, was there much game in the forest? He answered all of them patiently, and as he
talked, Sansa got more and more excited about the prospect. Maybe she could talk to Ned or Sandor
and suggest they would do the same? She was getting tired of the diet of bread and cheese alone, and
some fresh meat would do them all good.

She looked at the rabbit again, hanging limp and lifeless, a few bright drops of blood in its nostrils.
*Poor animal.* It had done nothing to deserve to be butchered for food – but then again, that was life,
always had been. Sansa had never tried to fool herself into believing that her own hands were clean.
She ate meat, and even if she didn’t kill the chicken or cows with her own hands, she was still
responsible for their deaths, in a way.

Would she be able to cook game, if they caught some? Of course she could! She was a mean hand in
cutting and preparing whole chickens, even rabbits, whenever their local butcher had some. They
were small and fiddly, but cut in chunks and cooked on the bone, they were delicious… Sansa’s
mouth watered just thinking of it.

“…your name?” The man had spoken, and Sansa shook out of her musings.

“I am Arwen.” That was the name she had chosen, in case she was asked to give one. Ned was
Edbert, her father, and Sandor was Stafford – although Ned and Sansa hoped he would never have
to speak to anyone or show his face. He was to be presented as Arwen’s uncle, Edbert’s wife’s brother, who had been injured in the Battle of Trident, thus explaining his scars.

“I am travelling with my father and my uncle, they are right over there.” She pointed towards the campsite, sure in her knowledge that if this nice looking young man tried anything, she could scream loud enough for them to hear her. She was not worried though; he didn’t look the type who molested random women in the woods. He was actually very handsome, now that Sansa took a closer look. Not that it mattered. She stifled a smile thinking what Ned or Sandor would say, should she be found flirting with a stranger. No, what she wanted from him was information about trapping game. After a few more questions they were interrupted by Ned’s shouts calling for her – luckily by her false name, as they had agreed to do unless being absolutely sure they were alone. Reluctantly, Sansa told the trapper that she had to go, thanked him one more time, and rushed back to the camp. Only later she realised that she hadn’t even asked that nice man’s name, or what he was doing there – but soon concluded that he must have belonged to one of the many groups of travellers roaming the roads, and in any case, she would probably never see him again.

After she told her travelling companions about the meeting - and after she endured Ned’s admonishment about how she should never talk to strangers, and Sandor rolling his eyes at her - they saw the wisdom in what she was suggesting. Both Ned and Sandor were familiar with the concept and even knew how to make traps themselves, eliminating the need to find a place or spend a coin to buy them.

So it was that Sansa learned yet another new skill, and after a few lessons on how to skin and gut the game, she started to supplement their meals with nourishing if somewhat bland stews – and she couldn’t have been happier.

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Ned was on his guard at all times, taking most of the responsibility of leading their journey and their safety. He and Sansa talked a lot; sometimes about important things, sometimes about nothing of great consequence at all. Continuing to blame her lost memory, Sansa asked all she could think of about her family and home, confessing that should she see her sister or brothers now, she would probably not even recognise them, and how awful that made her feel. Ned helped her by telling her about them, painting a picture of a big family with its joys and tribulations. What he couldn’t hide was his pride and longing, especially when he talked about his wife, Sansa’s mother.

He also told her about Jon Snow and Theon Greyjoy, members of the family by extension, although Sansa detected a wary tone in his voice when he mentioned Jon. She wondered why, but not knowing how to ask him about it, settled with trying to alleviate Ned’s possible concerns by showing keen interest towards her bastard brother. She knew some things about him, of course, but they all related to his time as the Targaryen heir and the king of all Westeros. So, given this chance, she was keen to see snippets of the boy he had been before that, yet unaware of the greatness future held for him.

Ned, in turn, seemed pleasantly surprised by her interest and told her more about the quiet, dark-haired boy he had raised alongside his trueborn children. Nonetheless, neither of them approached the elephant in the room - what Sansa had told him about Jon in the black cells. Sansa was relieved, as she couldn’t have explained to him how she knew about Lyanna and Rhaegar, or what they had to do with Jon. She got an impression that Ned, too, preferred not to bring it up, possibly in fear of what she might tell.

Things were good between them, although Sansa sometimes caught Ned looking at her when he thought she didn’t notice, his head tilted to the side with an odd expression on his face.
Contemplating, measuring. From that, Sansa knew there were still things that needed to be said sooner or later, but for now, she preferred later. Their newfound balance and Ned’s acceptance of the changes in Sansa were a bit too fragile to be disturbed yet.

Theon Greyjoy’s name also sparked a memory in her. What had Layla said? ‘You probably think he deserved all he got, and maybe he did – but then again, nobody deserves that.’ Greyjoy had been close to her brother Robb – and yet he had betrayed him. Why? What could have caused such a rift? Sansa wasn’t sure what she should do with that information – assuming she would have a chance to do anything at all. Should she warn Robb of the coming betrayal – could she prevent that altogether?

During those days of building trust between her and Ned, Sansa hoped the foundations of the same were also being laid between Ned and Sandor. To her great relief, Sandor behaved - mostly. He was still reserved, and growled his frustrations now and again, but didn’t cause trouble or challenge Ned. He also started to take care of his equally ill-tempered horse, who behaved quite differently with its master, being if not exactly docile, at least much calmer. In the evenings, Sandor seemed to be listening in to their discussions, though not noticeably and rarely contributing. Once she caught his shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter during Ned’s rendition of the time when Robb and Theon had thought it a good idea to let Arya ride the big sow after she had asked them time and time again to take her riding. The sow had ended up displeased, Arya in a heap of muck, and Robb and Theon cleaning the stables for a month, after a firm hiding by Ned himself.

Observing Sandor thus observing them in turn encouraged Sansa to think that maybe he, too, would eventually realise that they were not so bad, either.

Ned still didn’t trust Sandor enough to release him from his bindings at any time, and for their travel, he had concocted an elaborate trapping at the back of the cart that secured him to it. Ned explained it by saying that he didn’t have eyes at the back of his head and couldn’t concentrate both on driving the horse and making sure that he was not going to be attacked from behind. Sandor scoffed at that, retorting that it was not his habit to sneak at people’s backs, but appeared to tolerate it as he did his whole situation. Waiting, assessing, biding his time. Since he had freedom of some movement, was fed and given a place to sleep at nights, Sansa consoled herself that he could hardly blame them for treating him too harshly, all things considered.

She was also happy to see that Ned was true to his word and seemed to pay special attention to Sandor when they sat around the fire in the evenings. He asked him questions about his home and family, and his time with the Lannisters, and listened – truly listened - to his replies. Not that Sandor always did; sometimes he rebuffed Ned’s enquiries and sometimes lashed back with a mocking comment, but those types of responses decreased as the days went by.

One thing increasingly bothering Sansa was that she never got to talk to Sandor – not freely. She had hoped for more chances for it, with just the two of them, as she doubted that Sandor would be ready to open up to her in Ned’s presence. However, Ned was watching over her even more than before, going out of his way to ensure that the two of them were never alone. Without openly challenging her father, there seemed to be no chance for her to talk Sandor on her own.

As tolerable as things were, the delicate coexistence between them allowing them to journey onward, Sansa knew that the situation could not stay like that forever. Sandor was still their prisoner, and that, and his forced inactivity due to being tied at all times, was chafing on him. Sansa could see that clearly, and she was afraid of what it could mean for her hopes of seeing Sandor voluntarily changing sides. Once Sandor japed to Sansa and Ned how times had truly changed when it was he, not even a knight, who was being served and cosseted by a lord and a lady, while he was not allowed to lift a finger.
It was a joke, delivered with his usual deadpan style, but behind it, Sansa sensed real frustration. Something had to give, sooner or later.

But what – and how?

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to the kind anon on FF who alerted me to a couple of writing mistakes in the previous chapter (rabble/rubble, vein/vain) – thank you! I am definitively grateful for any such corrections and welcome constructive criticism too, should you feel so inclined. And any other comments too.

The next chapter POV? We’ll see how Arya fares and what she and her travelling companion are up to!
Chapter Notes

Just a friendly reminder that in this fic, Arya is somewhat older than in the canon at this stage. She is not an adult, but rather a girl on the cusp of womanhood. This change is not because of a desperate need to include some ‘sex-ey’ times for her or anything like that, but simply because in this story it suits to have her a bit more mature in her thinking, actions and behaviours. And yes, also because of a bit of – ahem – relationship reasons too…

Thanking Hardlyfatal for patient betaing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya

Arya rushed inside the stable, throwing the heavy wooden door against the wall with a resolute bang in her excitement to share the news. A cloying scent of manure, horse and dry hay greeted her, but she hardly noticed it.

“Gendry, I found one!”

A tall figure rose to his feet from the back of an empty stall, lowering the raised block of wood in his hand.

“About time. It would have been faster had we both gone to search on our own, you know.”

“How could I not, when you have told me ten times already? It was too risky, someone could have recognised you and prattled to the gold cloaks. Who knows how much they are still after you?”

“Why would they care about a blacksmith’s apprentice anyway,” Gendry muttered while collecting his things from the floor. “Bastard is a bastard, who cares if…”

Arya ignored the rest. Gendry had been like that ever since he had accepted Arya’s assessment of the situation: that they had to flee King’s Landing and head towards the North. He had agreed to the plan but he didn’t like it and wasn’t shy about expressing his views.

After many arguments and assurances from Arya that they both would be fine as long as they found the Stark army or made it to Winterfell, all met with sullen skepticism, she had at least understood Gendry’s position. After all, he had never in his whole life been outside King’s Landing, and what lay ahead for him was vast and unknown.

Now she just had to prove him wrong.

After assessing their options, they had agreed that they had a better chance of making it if travelling as part of a bigger group. Gendry knew his own strength and that his looks alone might thwart many who might want to take advantage of them, but he was still just one person, still only one man.
As to how to find such a group, Gendry knew exactly where they needed to go: a small marketplace near the Dragon Gate, the one leading north to the Kingsroad. It was a place where travellers leaving the city towards the north gathered, some stopping to buy last-minute supplies, others to wait for a convoy to join, for security in numbers.

Arya wanted no time wasted, as it could be just a matter of time before Varys or the gold cloaks – or whoever had sent them – would start looking for Gendry. So they made their way to the Dragon Markets without delay, and Arya took the task of asking around for anyone who might be heading north. The final destination didn’t matter, be it Salt pans, The Vale, White Harbour - they would be happy even with any of the smaller villages along the way.

Eventually, after a disappointing morning, she had stumbled into a company that was perfect for their needs: a merchant and his family returning to the Twins in the Riverlands after many years spent in King’s Landing. What had inspired the move, Arya didn’t know and didn’t really care. What mattered was that the party was over twenty strong, consisting of able-bodied men, their wives and children, and a few hedge knights hired to protect them. It also had a strong leader, the merchant, who might even have served as a hedge knight in his youth, judging from his size and build and the way he carried a sword on his hip as if he was used to its weight.

Nonetheless, Gendry was the one who had to do the negotiating, and hence Arya had rushed to get him.

The talks processed amicably enough, the group awaiting some last minute supplies and the leader thus having time to attend to them. After the usual amount of haggling about the cost and conditions, and after the man had assessed them both to judge their value or lack thereof as part of their group, the deal was struck.

Whether it was Arya’s announcement that they could supply their host’s food stores with small game and fish caught along the way, or Gendry’s revelation that he was a trained blacksmith, which tipped the scales in their favour, they didn’t know – but whatever it was, after a while it was agreed that they could join the group.

Arya was so excited she hugged Gendry fiercely then and there, ignoring the merchant’s smirking and Gendry’s apprehension. He didn’t seem to know where to put his hands, and after first just hanging them by his sides, he lifted them and patted her on the back, stiff as a plank.

It was the first time they had touched, with intention. Arya was used to hugging and holding hands with her family and close friends, and only later she realised that Gendry had likely lacked such gestures of affection, explaining his awkwardness. It made her feel sad, somehow. How could one live a life where a kind touch was so strange?

“What game, what fish?” queried Gendry after Arya disentangled herself from him and they started to walk away.

“I know how to trap them. Jory showed me in Winterfell and I used to do that with Jon whenever we had a chance to sneak way,” she replied. “All we need now is some snares, and I know a place where to get them.”

Arya brimmed with restless energy. Weeks and weeks of doing nothing, but surviving from day to day and hoping against all hope that Robb and her mother would come and in one swoop restore her family, had sapped her spirits. In time, she had realised that her expectations were unrealistic and futile – whatever was going to happen, it was unlikely to be the triumphant reunion of her dreams. After that, she had been aimless and merely gone through the motions until the day Varys and the gold cloaks had shown up for Gendry. The alarm it had caused had been the push she had needed to
take her life into her own hands again; a trigger to jolt her into action. And now she was finally doing something, and she couldn’t wait to see her plans through.

Arya’s knowledge of many shops around Flea Bottom was going to be useful in the situation they found themselves, and after some more headshaking, Gendry followed her.

Soon they had acquired all the supplies they considered necessary and could afford: a few blacksmiths tools for Gendry bought from a back-alley stall where people asked no questions, snares and fishing nets for Arya, two bedrolls. Arya’s pouch of coins depleted worryingly but they had no other options. Besides, Arya was optimistic about Gendry’s chances of being able to earn some coin on the journey by doing odd smithing jobs for other travellers or villagers in places they travelled through. She remembered their journey to the south, and how there always seemed to be some trouble or other of that kind; horses dropping their shoes, carts and wheels needing new nails and fastenings.

They picked up their other belongings from the warehouse, including Needle, from which Arya couldn’t dream of separating, and returned to the marketplace.

As Master Elrond’s caravan filed out of the gate, Arya threw a last look back towards the city she had entered such a short time ago with so much - and now left with so little. Yet, as much as she hated leaving her father and even Sansa behind, she was also relieved. She was going home!

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Being on the road was much like it had been before – except there were no horses for Arya to ride or soft beds for her to sleep on at nights. No more a nobleman’s daughter, she was just an ordinary girl that nobody paid much attention to.

On the first evening, when Gendry asked the Master’s eldest son Haldir where they should sleep, he took a long look at them both.

“Not that it is any of my concern, but she is a bit young for you, isn’t she?”

Gendry flushed bright red. “She is my sister!”

Haldir shrugged his shoulders. “Whatever you say - not my concern. For now, you can sleep under the goods wagon. We’ll be selling the bolts of cloth as we go, and when there is room enough, you may sleep inside it.” A sharp glance. “If there is a piece of cloth missing, I’ll know it and that’ll be the end of your journey with us. You hear me?”

Gendry mumbled his agreement to the terms, and so they made their beds under the mentioned wagon, one of many pulled into a tight circle around a large campfire. His face burned red for a long while and to know that it was because the man had thought them to be a couple made Arya feel odd. Embarrassed, but also pleased, in a most peculiar way.

It was only the second night they were sleeping together, after the spice merchant’s warehouse, and then Gendry had been angry at her and stayed as far away as he could. It was not much different this time either, he making his bed a good distance away from Arya. She didn’t mind as much, although she would have welcomed the additional warmth staying closer would have provided. She had slept with her brothers often enough, after sneaking into Jon’s or Robb’s or Bran’s room for a bedtime story, or to hear them recounting their adventures of the day – always infinitely more interesting than her own lessons with Septa Mordane. More often than once she had dozed off in the middle of a tale and woken up in the middle of the night to the steady breathing of her brother beside her.
But her brothers were not there and the one friend she had didn’t want to come near her, so Arya settled down as well as she could and slept through the night, a deep, dreamless sleep. And the next night, and the next, and the ones after that.

At least she was busy enough during the day to fall asleep easily in the evenings. One of the stipulations of their joining had been that she was expected to help in the camp’s kitchen, which she did, gladly. The work involved peeling and cutting and chopping and stirring, and at the end of the meals, scouring the kettles, pans and griddles.

Another stipulation had been that she had to dress like a girl, and despite her initial protestations, having grown used to freedom allowed by wearing breeches, Arya had given up and accepted a hand-me-down dress from one of the merchant’s servants. It felt odd to wear skirts, and Gendry had hooted in laughter seeing her in it for the first time, but she got used to it soon enough. Apparently, Gendry did so too, as he didn’t laugh at her after that – although he sometimes looked at her with a pinched expression.

Arya tried to make the best of things, including making friends with the other girls, younger daughters of the merchant and his extended family, and household servants. There were sisters Salla and Annylin, the servant girls Rosan and Bethe, and a few others, all under the rule of formidable Mistress Alwen, the chief cook. She also made friends with the sons and grooms, but somehow her wearing the dress had raised an invisible barrier between her and them – it was not like it had been before in Winterfell.

Gendry, too, made himself useful. He loaded and unloaded the carts in the mornings and in the evenings, set up the trestle tables when they stopped in villages or holdfasts to sell their wares as they went. He also repaired all kinds of things people started to bring him, from misaligned wheel hubs to broken pot handles. His skills and unassuming ways earned him the respect of their travelling companions, and by their association, Arya too was regarded well.

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Arya had taken a habit of laying her snares the first thing when they stopped to make a camp, then checking them for game the first thing next morning for that evening’s supper. In the beginning, the pickings had been slim, with nary an animal caught. She tried different locations and different set-ups and eventually discovered the importance of placing them right where the animals passed through: near water, if possible, or along the almost invisible paths they made in the forests.

After that her luck changed, and more often than not she was rewarded with a fat rabbit or two, sometimes with a fowl or a squirrel. Gendry started to help her by checking the traps when she was busy in preparations of the morning meal, and soon they both gained even more appreciation from the company, glad for the fresh meat introduced to their diet.

One particular morning Gendry had gone to check the snares, but instead of returning swiftly, he took his time. Arya grew impatient; she had to skin and gut the animals before the start of the day’s journey and time was running short. After huffing and puffing for a while, she lost her patience and set to follow Gendry’s trail to check what on earth could be the cause of the delay. Maybe they had caught something bigger this time, maybe even a deer? If so, he might need all the help she could give.

Arya walked surefooted along the ridge, following the path she had found the previous evening. The place where they had camped was on an uneven terrain and the ground was broken by ridges and ravines – difficult to traverse, but beautiful to behold. She enjoyed those parts of her days; walking in the woods, inhaling the air rich with smells of the forest. When she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine being back in the North, on one of her many illicit excursions away from her boring lessons.
She reached the first trap. It had been removed, meaning that Gendry had already gone through it. Good. She scouted ahead towards the location of the second and stopped.

Gendry was there – but he wasn’t alone. He was talking to a tall girl who had her back towards Arya. She didn’t look like anyone from their company and Arya frowned. Who could she be and what was she doing in the forest?

Then she was stopped by the expression on Gendry’s face. It was… for lack of a better word, she could only describe it as stupid. He was staring at the girl, who was gesturing with her hand towards the opposite direction of their camp. Gendry’s eyes were wide, his face flushed, and his mouth agape – he looked as if he had seen all his birthdays coming at once.

Arya had seen such expressions before, in faces of men and boys when they were staring at a beautiful girl, and for some reason, it made her angry. She threw another look at the girl – what was so special about her to make Gendry behave so stupidly? However, she couldn’t see her face, only her back and her hair, flowing free from under a simple scarf. It was the same shade of auburn as her mother’s and sister’s, and something in Arya’s heart twinged.

She missed her sister. Yes, they had had their differences, and Arya still hadn’t forgiven Sansa her role in Lady’s death and Nymeria’s exile – but still, she was her only sister, her own blood. When they had been younger, they had been close. Sansa had enjoyed playing mother to Arya when she had been little, and later they had played games together and slept in the same bed and it had been fun – until Sansa had grown up and become interested in dresses and songs and stories of knights and maidens.

Arya wondered where she was and what she was doing. From the gossip she had heard in the city, she was not in the dungeons like their father, but had been seen in the court, still betrothed to the king. Arya scowled; if Sansa had turned traitor, she would never ever forgive her! But if she was being held against her will… Arya huffed. She just needed all of her family back, and soon.

Gendry and the girl were still talking, and Arya decided to join them and find out who the girl was and why she was holding Gendry away from his duties. They had a long journey ahead, they could not be dilly-dallying because of some stupid girl!

A deep ravine separated her from the pair, but she descended the hill-face fast, stepped carefully over the rocks to cross the narrow stream at the bottom, and ascended the other side – just in time to see the back of the girl disappear behind the trees.

“Arya? What are you doing here?” Gendry noticed her as she was catching her breath after reaching the ridge.

“Never mind me, what are you still tarrying here? We should be on our way soon, and if you caught anything, I still have to clean it.” She spoke harsher than she had intended, and Gendry took a step back.

“Calm down. I wasn’t here that long. And we caught just one rabbit, so it will take no time at all. I can do it if you are too busy.”

“Who was that?”

“Who?”

*Gods, he can be such a blockhead at times!* Arya closed her eyes and tried again.

“The girl, you bullhead. Who was she?”
Gendry glanced in the direction the girl had gone.

“She said her name was Arwen. She is travelling with her father and her uncle, going to the North.”

“Why was she here, with you?”

Gendry smiled sheepishly. “I think I interrupted her when she was coming to the woods to, you know, relieve herself. She had a mighty scare when I announced I was there, I’ll tell you.”

“Hmph.” It made sense. There were no outhouses on the road and everybody sneaked into the woods when and where they could when nature called. Arya was still angry, for reasons she couldn’t rationalise. “Well, did you cop an eyeful?”

Gendry looked at her in horror. “Of course not! I made my presence known well before she had time to do anything. What do you take me for?”

“I’m sorry,” Arya muttered. She really was. What was wrong with her? She tried to make amends.

“Are they travelling on their own? Maybe they would like to join our group? Master Elrond might be interested in having two more men to help him.”

“I was going to suggest that, but she said they preferred to travel in their own company. Didn’t ask why, but it’s up to them, I guess.”

“Where in the North they were going?”

“She didn’t say. Just North. What does it matter?”

“Nothing.” Arya was secretly relieved. Offering help to fellow travellers was a right thing to do – but to see Gendry with that stupid face every time when that girl was near him would have been too much.

“Well, we better get back then, seeing we are in so much of a hurry,” Gendry announced and turned to go, not waiting for Arya. She followed, deep in thought.

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That same evening, Arya observed Gendry during the meal and after, when the group gathered together as usual at the campfires. For the first time, she noticed how many girls appeared to seek his company, even as he sat among the other men. Gendry was generally well-liked, that was true, but it seemed it was not just his skills but his looks and build that fuelled a different kind of admiration among the young women in the company.

Arya continued her observations over the following days, and more often than once she saw one or another of the maids coming to Gendry with a made-up excuse, batting their eyelashes and swinging their hips. If Master Elrond’s sharp-eyed wife caught any of that, they were admonished and sent away, but they always came back. And it bothered Arya more than she cared to admit.

What Gendry thought of his admirers, she was afraid to ask. She knew him to be uncomfortable about the assumption of them being a couple and Gendry being a ‘cot-thief’, as one of the boys had teased him - so what better way there would have been to dissuade such notions than to keep company with one of the other girls? Yet he didn’t, brushing them away politely and always returning to Arya at the end of the day.

As for Arya, she wasn’t sure what she thought of it all. Gods, she was too young for such things!
Had she stayed with her family, there wouldn’t have been talk of her betrothal for years – at least not with an actual intent to marry her off. Even for Sansa, who was older than she, their parents had demanded an extended period of betrothal before the wedding.

Besides, it was not as if there was any basis for the gossip, aside from them sharing the sleeping quarters under their wagon. Gendry still made his bedroll on the other side of their little area, Arya staying on the other, and neither ever raised the topic between them.

Some things were better to be ignored.

Nonetheless, Arya was glad of Gendry’s company, although as time passed, even that wasn’t enough to ease her growing loneliness. There were days when her excitement of leaving the city was just a pale memory; days when she caught herself thinking of her family and how much she missed them and her home. The memories and doubts about the success of her mission assaulted her those evenings - the more, the further they travelled.

One night, not long after the incident of the girl at the ridge, she could not sleep despite a long day behind her. She lay still, staring at the bottom of the wagon, feeling fragile. She missed Jon. She missed Robb, and Bran, and little Rickon, and even Sansa. Most of all, she missed her father and mother.

Arya shivered. When was she going to see them again? How could anyone believe her father to be a traitor? They had to release him, they simply had to… For the hundredth time she wondered whether her plan would work. Would she find her mother and Robb, or would she be able to travel across the whole realm all the way to Winterfell?

She felt miserable, and without even noticing it, she started to cry, tears rolling down her cheeks leaving a wet trail behind them. One sniffle escaped her, then another, and she pressed her eyes with her thumbs to stop the tears. She was not a child anymore, there was no use in crying.

She heard a sound of Gendry shifting on his bedroll, then a disembodied voice in the dark. “Arya? What is wrong?”

“No-nothing.” Arya swallowed, forcing her voice to be as natural as she could. “I was just having a bad dream. Never mind me.”

Silence. Then another rustle, louder. “Do you want to talk about it?”

How could she tell him that after all her bravado and declarations that she could look after herself, she was just a stupid child missing her mother? “No, it’s fine.”

Another silence.

“Do you want to scoot over here? Might keep the nightmares away if we face them together.”

The offer was too tempting – and then there was the warmth. The nights were still not exactly cold, but not warm either. Arya gave in.

“If you mean that you want protection from nightmares, I am happy to help,” she tried to jape as she dragged her bedroll next to his, arranging her blankets so that they overlapped his.

“Whatsoever you say,” Gendry murmured and without further ado, fell asleep, his breathing soon settling into a steady rhythm. Something in it reassuring and familiar – and not long after, Arya followed suit.
After that night, they slept next to each other and shared their blankets, and Arya felt safer and slept better to the tune of Gendry’s breathing. He didn’t touch her, nor she him – the notion didn’t even occur to her - but his mere presence so close soothed her. The others seemed to have noticed that too, and the girls started to leave Gendry alone. Some of them gave stinking looks at Arya and spoke loudly how it was a shame that girls were spoiled at so young age – but Arya ignored them.

She knew that she and Gendry were only friends - very good friends - and what anyone else thought of it, she didn’t care.

So they journeyed on, day after day, towards the North.

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And then came the wolves.

Chapter End Notes

Finally home! With a million things still to do, sort and get in order! Oh, why did I go for a holiday at all, when I would have been better off staying at home!

As usual, comments are warmly welcomed. I am especially curious to see your thoughts about Arya’s storyline, it having played so far mostly a second fiddle to the others...

Oh, the next chapter? Will be from Catelyn's POV...
No Tears

Chapter Notes

So many plots, so many plot points and events, so many characters all over the place… it is starting to be hard to keep track! I hope it is not as difficult for you readers…

Once again, a million thanks for Hardlyfatal for betaing, and my apologies to her for being so stubborn sometimes… Any mistakes in writing are truly owned by me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Catelyn

The next morning saw Catelyn curled in the same position she had fallen in sleep; on her side, knees tucked up close to her body, arms hugging her torso. She opened her eyes wearily, dully registering the rays of sun falling through the empty window pane and the dust dancing in that bright bridge.

She shifted to her back, her whole body aching from the exertions of the previous day and the bone-chilling cold that had permeated her on the stone floor. She stayed like that for a while, just lying, thinking. The despair of the night before was still fresh in her mind, but besides that, something else.

Determination.

Eventually, she got to her knees, then on her feet, pressing her hand against the spot on her back that protested the loudest.

_I am too old for this._

Somehow, the light of day revealed her the situation anew. Yes, she had lost Jaime Lannister, and that was a dire blow to their chances of using him as a trump card in their dealings with Stannis and Lannisters alike. Yes, a brave maiden had lost her life to save her. Catelyn winced, ashamed by the thought that her life could be considered by anyone worthy of sacrificing their own. Especially by Brienne of Tarth, whom they had doubted, imprisoned and planned to hand over to the brother of the man of whose murder she stood accused.

_She is gone._

Catelyn shook her head. Unfortunately she didn’t have the luxury of dwelling on it now, she had to keep moving. She had to do that for her children, for Robb – for Ned. Her family needed her.

She followed the plan she had devised the previous day, riding through the forest aiming towards the Kingsroad some distance north from the inn at the crossroads. She recalled the stories her father had told her about the times when he and his brother, the Blackfish, had adventured in the Riverlands. He had pointed out to her their favourite hunting grounds when they had travelled through these regions, regaling funny stories and painting a vivid picture of two young men enjoying their life to the fullest. Where it had gone wrong between the brothers Catelyn had never truly understood, and it still made her sad, but now those snippets helped her to find her way, and for that she was grateful.
She trailed along a small stream for a while, stopping at one point to catch some food at the insistence of her increasingly noisy stomach. Her own childhood adventures with Lysa, Edmure and Petyr came to her help then; knowing how to wait patiently at the shadow of a rock in a stream and catch a lazy trout unaware with her bare hands. She needed to be fast, but she was a bit rusty and it took several attempts before her reflexes rewarded her with a catch. Holding a flapping fish in her hands, Catelyn smiled at the thought of how strange her children would find her, the perfect lady, capturing her own meal in the middle of the forest. She had nothing to cook it with, of course, but she didn’t shy away from eating the orange-tinted flesh raw.

So Catelyn continued: on guard at all times, sometimes getting off the saddle and walking up or down the steepest hills, shying away from all signs of humans nearby. These days she could never be sure whether they were friends or foes, and with her plan straightforward in her mind, she preferred to follow it as speedily as possible rather than risk further complications.

Catelyn lost her way a few times and was forced to backtrack her steps to where she thought she knew her bearings once more, but it didn’t deter her. It was quiet in the woods - eerily so - and she wondered how many parties of destruction had gone this way before, and how many frightened villagers had escaped for their life past these same trees and bushes. The war had not broken out fully as yet in those regions, but Lord Tywin’s campaign of intimidation was just as bad, and Catelyn seethed at how the costs of battles between highborn were always borne by those who least afforded the price.

And yet she was on her way to escalate it.

She was no fool: she knew herself to be a hypocrite for condemning the actions of one and justifying those of another, but she couldn’t help it. Her family, her daughters, her husband, peace on their lands. She was willing to fight for those things, and if that made her a hypocrite, so be it.

Catelyn didn’t reach the Kingsroad before sundown that day, and spent another cold and lonely night in the bushes, huddling for warmth under the saddle blanket borrowed from her horse. The misery didn’t stop her, though, and sunrise saw her up again, single-mindedly trudging on.

It was mid-afternoon when Catelyn finally hit the main road, luckily devoid of traffic. Emboldened, she urged her horse on; the sooner she got into what she hoped was at least the relative safety of the inn, the better. She was dirty, she was hungry, she was sore – and she had things to do.

The first reassuring sight greeting her at the inn was the number of horses and men. Even before Catelyn was close enough to identify individuals, she recognised their attire and a huge wave of relief washed over her.

Gerrick from Pinkmaiden saw her first.

“My lady! You are safe!” The unadulterated joy on his face brought a smile to Catelyn’s.

“I am, thank the gods.” She dismounted and looked up at him. “What about the others?”

Gerrick’s expression darkened. “We are as good as can be expected after that cowardly attack. We lost some men and some are injured – hence we are still here, gathering our strength.”

“And Ser Rodrik?” Catelyn held her breath waiting for the reply. She had grown to rely on that stern old warrior more than she had realised, somehow not even considering before that he might be one of the casualties.
“He is here, wounded at the leg and grumpy, but here.”

Catelyn took a deep breath, then released it slowly. “Please, can you take me to him?”

In no time, the surprised and overjoyed Ser Rodrik had engulfed her in a bear hug, an unusual sign of affection, which Catelyn however fully returned. Then, taking another look at her dishevelled state, he ordered the innkeeper to prepare a warm bath and their softest bed for the lady, and in the meantime bring her something to eat. Catelyn welcomed all suggestions wholeheartedly, and while sitting in the common room practically inhaling the first two bowls of hot soup she was given, she listened to Ser Rodrik’s account of the recent events.

As she had suspected, the attack had been carefully orchestrated. Not long after she and the prisoners’ cart had disappeared, the attackers had withdrawn at speed, leaving Catelyn’s men to regroup and launch the first of many search parties after them. The fallen and the wounded had been taken to the inn, where Ser Rodrik, unable to take part in the search due to the sword wound in his calf, had grown increasingly frustrated over time. He had immediately sent a fast rider to relay the news to Robb with urgency, and party after party to comb the countryside for any signs of Catelyn and the prisoners - to no avail.

Catelyn asked for the names of the dead, and as sad as she was at each, to her joy the final tally was less than what she had feared. She insisted on seeing the wounded next, and despite the old knight’s protestations she didn’t give up before she had visited every one. All were visibly delighted at seeing her, which in turn gladdened her own heart. How Ned – and Robb – had succeeded in inspiring such loyalty in their troops was an achievement in itself, when it was not a man’s own choice but rather his duty that saw a soldier serving one liege lord or another.

Catelyn set things in motion: she told Ser Rodrik the approximate location of the mill where they had been taken, so men could be sent there to seek whatever useful information they could find. Catelyn harboured no expectations of finding anyone there after such a long time, but she thought it nonetheless prudent to follow the only lead they had.

Finally she gave in to her own exhaustion and after a long and luxurious bath she fell on a soft bed and slept for the rest of the day and the night, dreaming of nothing at all.

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The next day Catelyn related more of her own misadventures to Ser Rodrik and two other commanders, themselves recently returned from one of the search expeditions. That Jaime was lost for good was obvious to all of them, but they took it in their stride as just one more drawback in the uncertain game of war.

She made it clear that all credit for her own release was due to Brienne of Tarth’s self-sacrifice, and following that, an uncomfortable silence descended on the room, eventually broken by apologetic declarations of respect and admiration for such a deed. When Catelyn declared her the truest knight she had met for a long, long time, nobody objected.

Too little, too late, she couldn’t help thinking, and once more her heart broke a little bit more for the young woman she had learned to appreciate more and more as time had gone by.

Catelyn assessed their situation and possible next steps as rationally as she could with Ser Rodrik. Yes, they had lost Jaime, and with him possibly the best advantage in their talks with Lord Stannis about him sending his troops to Robb’s aid. Nonetheless, she still had a powerful alliance to offer Stannis: the Starks, the Tullys and – with a just little bit of embellishment – the Arryns of the Vale. That should count for something.
So they decided to continue their journey and salvage whatever could be salvaged from the wreck they had found themselves in. However, hearing about Ser Rodrik’s message to Robb, Catelyn deemed it best to wait for his reply before setting on the road again, thus also giving time for the injured to recover from their wounds. This included Ser Rodrik, who despite his protestations to the contrary was still weakened by his own injury, and without whom Catelyn could not contemplate continuing.

The troops sent to the mill returned with unsurprising news that the place had been abandoned once more. They had seen signs of a struggle but no bodies – just the remains of a funeral pyre burned to the ground. Catelyn listened to the account with a stony face, wondering if Brienne’s body had been burned as well. Better than than to be left for scavengers, but she felt sorry for the maid’s father who wouldn’t be able to bury the bones of his only child. That the bodies had been burned was one more indication about the attackers origins from across the sea, where customs were different. They still didn’t have knowledge who was behind the attack, but Catelyn had her suspicions; it could only be Lord Tywin.

That night she prayed with extra fervency for the Maiden in the memory of Brienne of Tarth.

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What followed was a period of calm, with not much to do while waiting for their next move. Catelyn made herself busy by taking care of the injured, although to her delight most of them were well on the mend. From the innkeeper, she obtained some cloth and sewing materials to mend her dress, damaged during her escapades. Masha Heddle, who remembered well their previous visit with King Robert, told Catelyn how the inn had later almost been taken over by Lord Tywin’s troops. At the last minute, the news of Jaime Lannister’s capture had pulled him away and he had withdrawn after burning only a few outhouses and slaughtering some livestock – an outcome with which Masha nonetheless counted herself lucky.

Life was as peaceful as it could be in the eye of the storm, and Catelyn tried to appreciate it as much she could.

One day as she was walking back from the enclosed vegetable garden at the back of the inn, where she had begun a habit of strolling to contemplate things whenever she wanted to be alone, Ser Rodrik came to meet her at the steps.

“Lady Catelyn, a man has arrived from King’s Landing… with news.” He was uncomfortable, she could tell, the seasoned warrior shifting uneasily on his feet and his eyes refusing to meet hers.

That alone was enough to alert Catelyn and make her nervous. News? From King’s Landing?

“Take me to him,” she spoke sharply, wiping her suddenly-clammy hands in the folds of her dress. Whatever it was, the sooner she heard it, the better.

Her anxiety grew as she walked through the first common room towards the smaller chamber at the back, reserved for private parties and distinguished guests. The men sitting on long wooden benches stopped talking when they saw her, and just like Ser Rodrik, averted their gaze. Their slumped shoulders and general air of disquiet told her as clearly as if it had been shouted out loud that the news was not going to be to her liking. Her heart started thudding loudly in her chest.

Oh, Ned. Please, not Ned!

The messenger was still dusty from the road, gulping a tankard of ale that he let down on the table with a thunk when Catelyn walked in.
“Please, leave us,” she commanded. The few men milling around left the room, silently and unobtrusively. Ser Rodrik stayed but Catelyn didn’t mind him.

“Lady Catelyn.” The man stood up and attempted to bow, but Catelyn shook her head and sat opposite to him.

“No formalities needed, my good man. Just tell me the news, whatever it is. It seems everyone else here knows it already, so why not me as well?” She didn’t mean to sound so sharp, but there was a cold band around her chest and she needed to know what had made grown men cower like that – and immediately.

The man looked at Ser Rodrik, then at her.

“Go on,” urged Catelyn, aiming for an encouraging tone, but failing miserably. Her voice quivered and the thumping of her heart against her ribcage had intensified so that it was almost painful. From the corner of her eye she saw Ser Rodrik nodding at the man, who sat down again.

“My lady, I come from King’s Landing. Nobody sent me, I just needed to get away from there to return home.”

Dully, Catelyn registered his accent as that from further North, somewhere near The Gift. She nodded at him again, stiffly, hoping the man would just get to the matter at hand.

“Things are in a bad way, a bad way indeed. You see, what happened was that the Hand of the King – I mean, the previous hand of the King, Lord Eddard Stark, your lord husband…” the man took a deep breath, ”…he has been executed at the command of King Joffrey.”

For a moment Catelyn didn’t register the words. Or rather, she heard them but refused to acknowledge their implications.

Executed.

For another long moment, the world stood still. The palpitations in her chest ceased and for a split second, she forgot how to breathe. And yet, not a single separate and distinctive emotion played in Catelyn’s mind at that horrible news. She knew her expression had not changed either, despite both the messenger and Ser Rodrik watching her warily.

The silence in the room continued, stifling and uncomfortable. She broke it, eventually.

“Tell me everything you know and leave nothing out. Please.” Catelyn was surprised at how strong her voice sounded this time.

“He was beheaded with his own sword, according to the heralds. The king decreed that he had given him the courtesy of a private execution in recognition of his many services to his father, King Robert, but that his treachery was so serious that he couldn’t be pardoned.”

Catelyn closed her eyes and listened to the man, numbly. When she opened them, she saw Ser Rodrik hovering on her side as if ready to catch her if she fainted.

“Tell me more.”

“This happened a few weeks ago, and I left the city soon after. I feared it was not safe, with the consequences that may follow…”

In an odd, detached way, Catelyn wondered if the man had been around the last time when Lord
Stark had been executed in cold blood by the king. He looked old enough, deep wrinkles and the grey of his hair telling a tale of his years.

“Was there anything else? Spare me no details.” Good, her voice still hadn’t broken.

“His head… I am so sorry, my lady, but it was put on a spike on top of the Red Keep.” The man looked nauseous, clearly not wanting to be the one to tell the grieving widow about the disrespectful way her husband’s body had been treated.

Again, Catelyn closed her eyes. She remembered how Ned had kissed her the last time they had departed, and how he had looked at her as if wanting to memorise her every feature in his mind. She remembered his grey eyes that could be so stern when he was serious and acted the part of the lord – and so soft and tender in the privacy of their bedchamber.

Oh, Ned.

“Is that all?” Her hands had curled into fists, so tightly that she felt her nails digging deep into her flesh, but somehow it felt better. She had to stay composed, she couldn’t lose control now. She simply couldn’t.

The man and Ser Rodrik exchanged glances. Then the messenger cleared his throat.

“The king also announced a reward for anyone who would find and kill his sworn sword, the Hound, and bring back his betrothed, Lady Sansa of House Stark. The Hound stole her from the court. No one has seen them since.”

Catelyn’s posture stiffened, if possible, even more. Sansa. My sweet child Sansa.

“And what about my other daughter? Lady Arya?” Her voice was shaking now; no such amount of self-control existed that could have prevented it.

The man appeared confused. “Nothing about another daughter, not a word. My lady. But some say the Hound stole Lady Sansa to ransom her back to her family. That he is only after coin.”

Catelyn sensed, more than saw, Ser Rodrik shifting closer to her on the bench, and she gave in to the temptation, leaning her shoulder against his big bulk. She was still stiff as an iron rod – but something about the closeness of the man who had known her from the time she had first set foot in Winterfell gave her some comfort.

“Anything else?” she succeeded in saying before an involuntary gasp made her double. Ser Rodrik’s arms were around her shoulder in an instant, his grip strong.

“I will talk to him more and get every little detail he has, my lady. For now, you may want to retire into your room. This has been grave news, grave indeed,” Ser Rodrik said, and despite his solemn tone Catelyn could hear that he was close to the breaking point as well. No wonder; he had seen Ned grow up from a newborn babe, had given him his first lessons in swordfight, and had laughed at the antics of Ned and Brandon when they had been children and tearing around Winterfell as only young boys can.

Catelyn wanted to get up on her own, she wanted to show strength she in truth did not possess, but the weight of the man’s words had finally hit her with all their power.

Ned, gone. And Sansa – oh, Sansa!

Catelyn knew the man had added the part about ransom only to make her feel better. It didn’t help, as
she knew otherwise. The Hound had won the Tourney of the Hand and the generous purse with it not that long time ago – he had no need for coin. She knew what men like him did to girls under their power, and she wanted to claw her eyes out thinking of her poor maiden daughter being ravaged by that… by that monster.

“Please, Ser Rodrik,” she murmured, holding onto the last shreds of her dignity, allowing herself to be escorted out of the room and up the stairs to the room appointed to her. Ser Rodrik muttered something about sending a maid to help her but Catelyn didn’t listen, instead falling onto her bed slowly, stiffly, keeling over like a tree falling onto the forest floor.

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That evening Catelyn lay on her bed, pulse beating in her ears so loudly that it blocked out all other sounds. She stared at the ceiling, and at the flickering shadows thrown by the torches in the yard; after they had been snuffed for the night, she stared at the cold silver light of the moon.

She waited for tears to come, as they had done the night after her escape – but her eyes stayed dry. The enormity of it all had broken her, and she could do nothing about it. At times she felt as if she was paralysed, unable to move; at others she writhed and trashed, an unbearable itch making her want to escape her own skin, her own body – leave it all behind.

Most of all, she was numb, her world spinning slowly out of her control. Looking back to her despair at losing Jaime and Brienne made her wince. How could she have taken it so hard when none of that had actually mattered? Nothing mattered anymore. Not even guilty contemplation of her remaining children, who still needed her, helped to rouse Catelyn from her listlessness.

No, her strength had left her when they had killed her beloved Ned; when they had removed from his shoulders that lovely head she had held in her lap so many times, ran her fingers through his hair, teased him about his long face and the serious lines on his brow.

They might as well have killed her, too.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the gloomy ending! The reasons for the strange news will come up in the next chapter, where we hear from the little bird and the spider.
Best Laid Plans

Chapter Notes

The mystery behind the odd message delivered to Catelyn in the last chapter is revealed – but will it have unexpected consequences…?

Thank you Hardlyfatal for bearing with me and my writing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Varys

Varys had always been justifiably proud of his handwriting, which produced neat, ordered lines and precise, even-sized letters. Even better was that when he wanted, he could change it into bold, aggressive script, or into flowery, feminine characters. Yet his most useful skill was to be able to squeeze large amounts of information into a limited space on paper.

That evening he was doing just that; sitting on the most comfortable chair in his solar, stooped over a pile of precise little sheets, writing. The latest turn of events had left him with too many questions with no answers, and he needed the services of his whole secret network to find them.

He paused and rubbed his wrist. How was it possible that he, the master of the game, had been so fooled by a mere maid?

That Sansa Stark’s visit to her father was somehow linked with Ned Stark’s subsequent escape was glaringly obvious, but still, he had temporarily fallen for the feigned innocence she had displayed when he had baited her about it. Not truly fallen, but enough not to do anything about it; to set guards to follow her every step, or even his own little birds. That the girl would be so brazen as to actually follow Lord Eddard…Varys’s cheeks burned of embarrassment that he had let that happen.

The thing that bothered him the most, however, was his inability to deduct how exactly she had done it. Had Stark rushed out of the dungeons wielding a sword and escaped through a bloody rampage, Varys would have understood it. Or had he slipped away with an assistance of one of the gaolers, bribed and bought, that would have made sense as well. But to just disappear…it simply wasn’t possible.

Varys had questioned the gaolers, save their leader, who had been found in Stark’s cell with a dagger through his heart. Given Varys’s experience in extracting information by any means necessary, he had eventually been convinced that none of the remaining guards had been involved with the escape. They were too simple, too clueless and all had ironclad accounts of their comings and goings during the critical periods, including staying in the guard’s room where they would have detected any suspicious comings and goings. Since there had been no bloody assaults through the front door, it only left the possibility of secret tunnels as a means of escape. And only the head gaoler as a possible helper – but if so, how?

Because there were no secret tunnels in that part of the keep, not so deep in the dungeons.
Varys sighed and went back to his writing. Of course he couldn’t absolutely deny the possible existence of such a tunnel, so many of them having been built in the foundations of the keep – but if he didn’t know of one, how on earth could Ned Stark have, or even the head gaoler? Varys had made it his mission to foster the relationship with that pitiful man exactly for that reason; to know what he knew, and Varys was quite sure he had achieved that.

Another bit of news that rankled his already irritated state of mind was the one about the boy. Could an insignificant smith’s apprentice be somehow involved with the escape as well? Was it purely a coincidence that he, too, had disappeared at about the same time? All Varys had wanted from the lad had been to remove him from danger and stash him somewhere for safe storage, in case he was going to be needed as a piece of his elaborate game someday. Cersei had been too obvious in her campaign to get rid of all Robert’s bastards for Varys to risk losing yet another possible pawn.

Yet they were all gone now, his carefully cultivated pieces, and Varys’s game-board was in disarray once again.

Steps on the corridor and a loud knock on his door interrupted his musings. Stifling his annoyance, he called to enter and Ser Arys stepped in, white cloak flowing behind him, appearing out of breath.

“Lord Varys, the king demands your presence in his solar, immediately.”

Varys sighed. How much would it cost for small courtesies; ‘requests’ rather than ‘demands’? He suspected, though, that Joffrey specifically preferred the latter and would have been thoroughly offended should anyone present his demands as requests, no matter what the reality behind them was.

“Thank you, Ser Arys. I’ll be there presently.” When the man just stood there, Varys felt a need to add, “You can leave now. I know my way to His Grace’s solar well enough.”

After securing his messages in a hidden compartment in his intricately decorated desk, Varys left his room and braced himself for Joffrey’s wrath.

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Varys had not been wrong about Joffrey’s displeasure.

“How did this happen? How is it possible that the man could escape from the black cells of the Red Keep? – the dungeons that are which are supposed to be the tightest and the most secure in the whole seven kingdoms!”

Joffrey had worked himself up to a mighty rage and was pacing back and forth the length of the room, waving his hands in the air. Cersei was sitting in the chair at the back of the room, looking equally displeased, but calmer.

“Your Grace, I don’t know yet, but I have made it my mission to find out,” Varys said, bowing first in Joffrey’s, then Cersei’s direction.

“However he did it, he has vanished, and what matters now is to get him back! He can’t have gone far, not in the condition he was in. I was told his leg had suppurated and gone bad.” Joffrey stopped in front of Varys, his nostrils flaring.

“All available troops have been sent to scourge the city, and...”

“I know – I commanded so!” Joffrey interrupted him, brushing past Varys and continuing his pacing.
“If I may suggest, Your Grace.” Varys bowed his head in deference. Handling Joffrey had turned out to be even harder than handling King Robert, but Varys was a quick study.

“Yes?”

“It might be prudent not to let the word out too widely that Lord Stark has escaped. If the Northerners hear about it, it will damage our chances to get Ser Jaime back.”

That roused Cersei, who rose to her feet.

“He speaks sense. We don’t want anything to jeopardise that. Surely the commanders have been told about the importance of discretion?”

Joffrey shrugged, and Cersei continued.

“As a matter of fact, if people hear that anyone has escaped the black cells, we’ll be the laughing stock of all the kingdoms. We must not let it be discovered.” Cersei’s pride was getting the best of her, as always. This time, however, Varys didn’t mind.

“I agree. As a matter of fact, I’ll go one step further; I’ll announce that the vile traitor Lord Stark has been executed for his many crimes. What do you say to that, Varys? I know he will be found, dead or alive, and if alive, that state of matter is easily resolved.” Joffrey had cooled down enough to sit down, seeming pleased with his plan.

Varys had to think quickly on his feet. If Stark’s family and retainers believed him dead, a revenge was sure to follow, the march to the capital continuing and gaining momentum when the other great lords realised that if Joffrey could get rid of one bothersome lord so easily, he could as easily get rid of the others.

Then again, if the Starks heard of their lord’s escape and he somehow evaded Joffrey’s net, the most likely scenario would see Lord Eddard retreating back to his cold lands to lick his wounds and leave the affairs of the realm for good. Varys knew how loath Stark had been to come to the capital in the first place, and it didn’t take a great leap of faith to see him preferring to stay as far away as possible from southern politics.

Should that happen… where the Starks went, the Tullys followed, and the Arryns in their hideaway would not move in one direction or another anyway. Stannis would be left alone with his claim, which was unlikely to gather a big following simply because nobody particularly liked the man. Sansa Stark’s virtue and reputation having been spoiled, her marriage to Joffrey had now become impossible, and if Littlefinger’s suggestion for the king to marry Renly’s widow eventuated, the Tyrrells would throw their support behind the crown. That, in turn, might lead to an overall pacification of the realm. In a few years’ time, Joffrey might have truly solidified his hold on the throne, maybe have an heir or two to carry on his line…

Varys couldn’t let that happen – too much was at stake. Neither young Aegon or Viserys were ready yet, needing more time to prepare for the second Targaryen conquest. And they could not be left to face a peaceful, stable government with a secured succession when they finally made their way across the sea.

He made his decision.

“Very wise, Your Grace. If I might suggest furthermore, as it is most likely that Lord Stark has escaped with his daughter and the other traitor, if you would make an announcement of a significant reward to anyone who captures the Hound, your betrothed, and any companions they might have,
that would ensure the whole countryside rising to haunt them down.”

Joffrey’s expression changed from pleased to upset.

“That ungrateful bitch – and that stupid dog! I can’t understand what the Hound sees in her, she’s not even that pretty, with all that moping and simpering. That he would leave me, and everything I have given him, for her…” Joffrey’s stare was pained and his hands clenched into fists.

Varys suspected it was the betrayal of the one person who had been the most stable presence in his whole life - besides his mother - that hurt Joffrey the most. He might have called Clegane a dog and acted dismissively towards him, but deep down, Varys believed the Hound had been closer to the boy than his own father had been.

“Don’t you worry about that, my dear. The Hound has chosen his path and will pay dearly for it.” Cersei hovered next to Joffrey, her hand almost touching his shoulder, the epitome of a concerned mother angry at anyone who had hurt her child.

“I’m not worried. I am furious!” Joffrey snapped. “I will offer a prize of ten thousand gold dragons to anyone who brings the Hound and the girl to me. With their companion, Ned Stark. I want to show that dog personally what happens to those who betray me. I am going to burn the other side of his face while he begs for mercy, I am going to --”

“Your Grace, I am sure he deserves all that and more, but asking him to be caught alive and brought back all the way to King’s Landing is a quest not many men, even the boldest and greediest, are ready to undertake.”

Varys didn’t care about the Hound one way or another, bar as an object of vague curiosity that made him wonder what Lady Sansa had promised – or given - him to make him do her bidding. The Hound had never struck him as someone who would easily succumb to female charms.

Joffrey pouted while Cersei agreed to his suggestion.

“I approve. Announcing that the Hound can be and should be killed will attract much more interest, and send more men after them. Revenge is sweet, but you can exact it on that conniving little bitch instead.”

“Fine, it is decided.” Joffrey banged his fist on the table. “Do the necessary arrangements, Varys. The sooner the word is sent out, the sooner this sorry mess can be sorted.”

“I suggest that you announce that due to many services Lord Stark did to your honourable father King Robert, you in your great mercy allowed him a dignity of a private execution. We can take a small party to the dungeons; Your Grace, the Queen, Ser Ilyn as the executioner, and I as a witness. We can find a body with similar appearance and take his head, tar it and place on the battlements. If we all say it is Lord Stark, who would dare to argue against it?”

Joffrey nodded at Varys’s words, as did Cersei, then seemingly lost his concentration and gesticulated impatiently at Varys.

“Yes, yes, it all sounds good. You take care of all of that and let me know when it has been done. You are dismissed.”

Bowing once more, Varys turned to go. On the way back to his rooms he wondered whether he had made the right decision in supporting the king’s plan, in the end concluding that it had been the best cause of action in the circumstances. Now he just needed to carry out the plan— find a body, draw the declaration about the reward…
A fleeting thought about whether Clegane might have been the instrument behind Stark’s mysterious disappearance crossed his mind, but he found it unlikely. The Hound was not likely to know anything about secret passages and, once again, didn’t strike him as a cunning conspirator. The small length of the thread he had found in the cell pointed to a feminine touch, and so his deduction led again towards Sansa Stark and her recent strange behaviour.

That evening Varys laboured late into the night, writing missives and sending words; some official in the king’s business, some unofficial in his own.

So much to do, so little time.

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Sansa

The landscape through which they travelled was beautiful and endlessly fascinating for Sansa, who marvelled with fresh eyes at every shack, every village and every person they came across. She noticed that unlike in the court, where women were expected to be docile and deferential – the role which she had learned to play rather well – among the common folk there were some who were strong and loud and stood their ground. That, in turn, encouraged her in her own behaviour, and from thereon she didn’t look down demurely when others were present.

However, the opportunities for that were not presented often, as they preferred not to mix much with the other people they met at the roadside stops such as watering wells and occasional stalls selling the season’s bounty. Only once did they stop at a real inn, where Ned bought more staples for them. Nonetheless, as they didn’t want to stand out either, they made an effort to exchange affable greetings with the others when it seemed safe.

Sansa had stitched a crude hood from the hem of Sandor’s white cloak so he could cover his distinctive scars, to which he had submitted with surprisingly little resistance. Stranger, too, had been relieved of his saddle and his flanks had been smeared with mud to make his appearance less distinctive. His magnificent form and shape could not be altered, of course, but Ned had also started to tie some half-full sacks on his back to make him stand out less. It must have been undignified for a war horse, Sansa thought, but after Sandor took it as his task to load and unload them, his horse seemed to take his clues from his master by enduring his lot with quiet dignity.

After their first encounter with fellow travellers, when Ned had changed his speech from his usual highborn manner to a guttural northern twang, it had been Sansa’s turn to be surprised and delighted by the new side of him. Afterwards Ned explained to her that he had not spent a large part of his life with soldiers and retainers of the North and the Vale for nothing, and had picked up his manner of speech from there.

Encouraged by it, Sansa too returned to her modern speech pattern the next time they conversed with strangers, steering away from her newly-learned refined way of speaking. It seemed to cause great amusement for both Ned and Sandor, each telling her separately how well she was acting, her ‘pretend’ speech considerably resembling that of the common folk.

However, their journey was not always leisurely; they knew the king must have sent troops after them, and that fact coloured their every action. It was easy enough to shrink in their seats when groups of soldiers in Lannister colours rode past them in a hurry, but avoiding roadblocks and targeted searches was more difficult. Luckily Ned was familiar with the route and had a good knowledge about which locations were most likely to be used. Their approach to such places was
even more cautious than usual, and more often than once Ned had gone ahead to scout the situation before coming back to tell if the route was safe or if they had to redirect to the woods and take one of the many back roads, which were so small and rutted they were more like paths.

On those occasions, he had made sure that Sandor was safely secured, and had apologetically handed Sansa a dagger telling her to keep it, just in case. Ned had been clearly uncomfortable about putting Sansa into a position where she might even be imagined to having to defend herself, but Sansa had assured him that as little as she knew about the use of such weapons, at least she knew which end to stick to a possible attacker. And besides, Sandor was not going to do anything foolish, nor could he, being so tightly trussed.

Once they had been caught by surprise by a roadblock in an unexpected location. That time Ned and Sandor had unceremoniously jumped down from the wagon, Ned first, dragging Sandor behind him, and Sansa had passed through the blockade on her own. Luckily it had been near a village, so she had explained having been on a nearby errand for her father and on her way back home. The soldiers had poked around at the back of the cart and asked her if she had seen a big man and a girl, just the two of them or in a company, and after her assurances that she had seen nobody but a few villagers, had let her go without further ado.

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As days went by, to Sansa’s increasing bewilderment another kind of transformation seemed to be happening to her. The faces she had seen in her mind earlier returned to her more and more frequently: the long-faced young girl, the toddler with reddish hair, the boy with knowing eyes, and the woman with a sunset hair. After having heard Ned’s stories, she knew who they were, and somehow putting a name to a face made them even more real.


Furthermore, not only their faces but also incidents from the past started to appear to her. Some of them were brought alive by Ned’s tales, but still, she began to see – no, to remember – many incidents as they had happened. When Arya and Bran had thrown snowballs at her after a rare summer snow; when Rickon had been born and she had laid her eyes on the squalling babe for the first time. Her mother brushing her hair in front of a fire, talking about the events of the day with her as if she were a grown-up…

An offhand comment by Ned about direwolves had brought another memory; a recollection of soft fur, big paws and bright eyes. It had been so clear that it had been almost a physical sensation, followed by a sharp, painful jolt and a horrible feeling of loss.

“Lady,” she had said then, almost without thinking, and Ned had stopped mid-sentence and stared at her.

“You remember her?” he had asked, and suddenly Sansa had started to sob and the pain of losing her beloved pet had washed over her as fresh as if it had happened that very day.

What was odd was that she had never even had a pet; not a cat or a dog, and even less a direwolf. Drying her tears, she had remembered the sadness that had engulfed her in that old lichyard in Winterfell - in another time, in another place - and she knew then that it had been her. Her Lady.

But whose memories were those, if the memories of Lady’s life and loss occupied her mind as well?

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One afternoon Sansa was contemplating how to solve the issue of Sandor’s indeterminate standing in their party, while they were driving along yet another stretch of road somewhere halfway between Rosby and Harrenhal, by Ned’s reckoning. It was a beautiful day, sunny and clear, and so much like any day of her past spent on a road trip with her family.

When she closed her eyes and listened to the birds and the wind in the trees and let the warmth of the sun caress her face, she could almost imagine that all the recent events had been only a dream. That she could open her eyes and see her little brother next to her, poking at her side and moaning “Are we there yet?”, her mother turning at the front seat to give him a lecture about the virtues of patience, and her father promising everyone an ice cream if they could just hold on for a little bit longer.

Then she opened her eyes and saw the back of the horse, trundling along patiently, Ned on the seat next to her, focussed on driving, and the sandy road and the mostly untouched forest by the roadside… She sighed.

Then, she looked again. A small distance ahead they saw three people and three horses stopped in the middle of the road. Men with arms. Ned pulled the reins to slow the horse down while assessing the situation suspiciously.

“Go to the back, Sansa. Pull his hood up and stay out of the way while we pass them. They look harmless enough, but better to be safe than sorry,” he muttered to Sansa.

Indeed, one of the men turned out to be just a young boy, Sansa noticed as they got closer. She did as she was bid, nonetheless, and climbed over the driver’s seat to land next to Sandor at the back.

“I am sorry, but if you’d just let me…” she said as she reached to pull the hood from his back and over his head. He didn’t say anything, only watched her closely, his eyes focussed on hers. He didn’t resist, though, either. Sandor, too, then turned his head and observed the group from under the hood.

“Gnats,” was his scornful statement, and he turned his attention back to Sansa.

She settled down more comfortably, leaning against the side of the cart. She understood without needing to be explained that it would be better for a young woman like her to be out of sight when strange men were around. Ned would take care of this, whatever it was.

“Ahoy, is there trouble?” Ned called once they were close enough to be heard. Something appeared to be wrong, as all three men were walking up and down the road and staring intently at the ground.

One of them, a dark-haired, broad-faced man, who couldn’t be much past his twenties, raised his head and assessed them thoughtfully.

“The trouble is that my horse lost a shoe. I know exactly when it happened, and it was right here – and I want to find it. Horseshoes are bloody expensive and I rather not throw my coin away if I can avoid it.”

“I see. ‘Tis a shame when it happens, can spoil a man’s whole day,” Ned agreed affably, leaning his elbows on his knees with reins loosely in his hand. The other two also looked up; an older red-faced man with the scruffiest beard Sansa had ever seen, and a skinny boy hardly out of his childhood.

From the looks and possessions of them - the men carrying shields, swords, bows and well-worn but decent looking half armours without banners - they seemed to be just a pair of hedge knights and their squire. They had run across a few of them already, always on the move from one master to another, in search of a better position or a secure employment.

“It sure does. Especially as we have no time to waste. We didn’t ride like devils all the way from
King’s Landing just to be stranded here, in the middle of nowhere.” The man who had spoken, looked around, scowling.

“King’s Landing?” Ned perked up. They hadn’t seen anyone from there, especially not anyone who might have left the city after their departure. Sansa immediately understood his curiosity – maybe they could hear some news. Had their escape been made public, what had been said about it? Maybe these men had heard something?

“Aye. Rode day and night, bloody hard. And look at us now!”

“So what’s the news from the capital? Haven’t heard anything for a long time, news travels so slowly here in the countryside.” Ned’s studied nonchalance didn’t fool Sansa, but was hopefully enough not to raise too much attention with the strangers.

The second man, with the scruffy beard, spat on the ground.

“Well, some justice has been served, at least. That traitor, the ex-Hand of the King, that Northerner, was finally put to death for his crimes against the good king Joffrey.”

Sansa wasn’t sure if she had heard correctly, and from the poorly disguised astonishment at Ned’s face, he wasn’t sure of it either.

“Executed? The Hand of the King?”

“Ex-Hand of the King. Lord Stark or whatshisname. It was about time. I only wish King Joffrey would have made it public, to teach a lesson to anyone who thinks they can betray their king without repercussions!” The man spoke animatedly, then spat on the ground to express the extent of his displeasure.

“How was it done, then?” Ned asked, after schooling his expression back to mild curiosity. The other two had gone back to their search, combing the sides of the road by now.

“His head was hacked off in the Red Keep, the King’s executioner doing the deed with the man’s own sword, we were told. They say it was kept private in respect of his previous services to the crown. Bugger that, I say, he should have been shamed publicly for what he did.” The man spat again. “But at least his head was put on a spike over the battlements of the Red Keep. There he stares now, with empty eyes and tarred face, over the court he tried to slander. Serves him right.”

Sansa closed her eyes. Why would Joffrey have done that? When he knew Ned was anything but dead; that he had escaped and was going to announce his presence sooner or later… She rubbed her forehead. It simply didn’t make sense.

“Well, that is good news indeed,” Ned said mildly. “So what is it that drove you here so hard, anyway? Surely not just to spread the news?”

The hedge knight smiled then, revealing a row of broken teeth.

“We are going hound-hunting!”

“Hound?”

That caught Sandor’s attention, and he cocked his head to hear better.

“Aye. Not only was King Joffrey betrayed by his father’s Hand, he was betrayed by his own dog too. The Hound, his sworn shield. He took off with the king’s bride, the Northern girl. Stole her right
under the king’s nose.”

Sansa’s eyes widened and she held her breath to hear what was said next.

“Stole her?”

“Indeed he did. Must have wanted her badly, to do such a thing. I hear she is a pretty young thing, so maybe that’s why. Now King Joffrey is furious and has offered an award of ten thousand gold dragons to anyone who brings the girl back. And we are going to get that coin!” He winked at Ned. “After what that poor girl has gone through with the Hound, we might have a little taste of her, too. It would not be like she was still a maiden. No, she would be thoroughly used, and might even be grateful to a couple of likeable lads like ourselves for saving her from the hands of that monster.”

Sansa felt sick at the stomach. Every now and then, hearing something like that reminded her that women’s rights were still in abysmal state at that time.

“And the Hound?”

“That’s the thing, the king’s announcement specifically says that the money will be paid only if the Hound is killed. None of this dead or alive nonsense – which is fair enough. Makes the task easier. He is a mean beast, everybody knows that, so it is just a matter of sniffing them out, putting a quarrel to his back and picking the spoils.” He chuckled. “The king must be really wroth wanting him dead. Can’t say I blame him.”

Slowly Sandor turned to look at Sansa. There was something burning in his eyes; rage, fury. Whether his ire was directed at them for forcing him into the position he was in, or at Joffrey, she couldn’t guess.

She held his gaze and didn’t let go.

Chapter End Notes

So what will happen now? How will this turn of events affect our merry travelling companions? Or not? Well, that reveal has to wait for a while, as in the next chapter we pick up with Brienne again, in her tight spot...
Finally – it is time to find out what Brienne did next, and what about Jaime…

My thanks go to Hardlyfatal for vigorous discussions around this chapter!

Brienne

As Jaime walked away, he turned for one more look over his shoulder.

“In all fairness, and considering that you’re here to save me and take me to my Lord Father, I guess I should warn you. If I were you, I wouldn’t touch her with a barge pole – unless you want your cocks to shrivel and drop off.”

The two men were still standing, but their heads rotated in unison in Jaime’s direction.

“What the fuck?” the man with a braid barked.

“Oh, just that she has a pox,” Jaime said nonchalantly. “Nasty one, too. It seems to affect women differently – she looks fresh as a daisy, but I have heard there were men in Renly Baratheon’s troops who became pitiful wrecks in a matter of months after tumbling her.”

The men had turned their attention to Brienne, who had gasped at Jaime’s words. Pox! The curse of all armed troops, a scourge that could maim men just as mercilessly as a sword.

Jaime nodded thoughtfully. “A shame, really. They were some of his best soldiers, before.”

“A pox?” the other, apparently slow in comprehension, questioned.

“Sadly, yes. She must have gotten it from one of the many men she has fucked.” As the men stared at Jaime again, their mouths slack, he shrugged his shoulders.

“What else can one expect from a freak who dresses up as a man and fights among them? Don’t tell me you thought her to be a blushing maiden still? Hells, she has voracious appetites, has fucked half of Renly’s army and wanted to fuck the other half, except everyone with a smidgen of sense started to avoid her like the plague.” He grinned. “She would probably be grateful for a little bedsport – it has been a while since she has been served well, I wager.”

With that, Jaime strode away without another look at the stunned party.

Brienne bristled. What horrible things to say about her - why? Her confusion and indignation overshadowed even the imminent threat of her current situation.

“I want no pox,” the slow-witted man said to his companion. “I ain’t that desperate.” He kicked Brienne at the shin, not too hard. “She ain’t even much to look at. Ugly.”
“And you think I want to see my cock fall off?”

“Do what you will, I’m off. I’ll get better cunt in the village.”

Mumbling something intelligible the men left, leaving Brienne dumbfounded and seething in her ropes.

As soon as the men had gone outside a hearing distance, Jaime crept back.

“You can thank me now,” he whispered, that familiar smirk on his face. Brienne wanted nothing more than to wipe it off his face one day.

“The things you said! I would never… I have never… if I…” she spluttered.

“Yes, yes, you are quite welcome.” Jaime raised his hand to silence her and slumped back against the millstone. His bearing was fatigued and he seemed annoyed.

After her immediate resentment subsided, Brienne realised what had truly taken place: Jaime had just saved her from a brutal rape with his brutal words. Especially with brutal words; he had not done it to be cruel, but quite the opposite. Brienne’s face, neck and ears flushed hot in embarrassment for initially missing it. Abashed, she looked at Jaime and was about to apologise for her outburst, but Jaime cut her off.

“Let’s get some rest. I wouldn’t mind some of that food and drink, either. Really, is this a way to treat a nobleman? I am sure my father will pay them handsomely enough once I am returned to him. Ungrateful louts!”

Brienne swallowed her words – Jaime didn’t seem too receptive for apologies that very moment. Instead, she assessed the situation. The leader, Zaggo, was still brooding, gulping his drink with increasing frequency. He was talking to himself and shouting at the two men across the fire, arguing about something, but the men paid him no heed.

There was nothing else to do but to wait for the arrival of their commander, who was clearly the one making the decisions. Brienne sighed and tried to settle into a better position; the broken stones and rocks pressed hard into her legs and backside where she was sitting, their jagged edges a continuous discomfort. The air was cooler than before, sending shivers down her spine.

Jaime raised his voice again. “Men, bring us some food and drink! You will be paid handsomely, so the least you can do is to share your rations with the one who made it happen!”

The two men looked up, then went back to their interrupted drinking, ignoring him.

Jaime glared at them, his nostrils flaring. “I am getting sick and tired of being jostled about. I am cold and hungry and thirsty, and damned if I am going to just sit here while they feast.”

“I think you shouldn’t antagonise them any further,” Brienne pleaded. She had seen her share of men in their cups and how unpredictable they could be. "Let’s wait until their commander returns. I think he is the one with whom you can reason.”

Jaime muttered low curses, reluctantly turning away from the camp. It was clear that he was not used to being treated indifferently; not him, the Lion of Casterly Rock, the oldest son of Lord Tywin Lannister, the youngest member and the Commander of the Kingsguard, the winner of many tournaments.

They settled in as comfortably as they could; it was going to be a long night. Brienne looked
longingly at the fire and the rations the men were eating with a good appetite. She was hungry too, and thirsty, but that was not an unusual state of being for anyone who had travelled with an army.

Zaggo didn’t seem to care about food, getting more visibly drunk at every sip of his skin. He glowered at them under his brow with increasing frequency; it seemed he had found a new focus for his attention after having burned the body of his lover. Brienne didn’t like it, especially after seeing him fingering the dagger on his side.

Her worst fears came to fruition when after a while, Zaggo got up, swaying alarmingly on his feet, then walked towards them. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot and the expression on his face did not bode well.

“You killed him,” he hissed at Brienne.

Brienne didn’t know what to say, so she stayed silent.

“He let a woman get to him. He deserved it,” Jaime muttered.

“Shut the fuck up!” Zaggo shouted at him.

Brienne flinched. The man was drunk, furious, grieving – what was Jaime thinking of, taunting him like that?

“Jaime, please. Be quiet - the less attention you draw on us, the better,” she whispered.

“You killed him, you bitch!” Zaggo dropped the skin and launched at Brienne, punching and kicking, shouting something in his own language. Brienne might not have understood the words, but their meaning was clear. He kicked her hard; once, twice, thrice. Her thigh, her stomach, her flank – she bit her lip and scrunched her eyes tightly shut. Every kick hurt like hell but Brienne crouched down and tried to offer as small target as possible.

“Let her go!” Jaime raised his voice, indignation and anger competing in his tone.

Shut up, Jaime.

Zaggo obviously thought the same, as he spun around to face Jaime, and continuing shouting lashed at him and after first kicking and punching him, hauled him bodily off the ground. He was stronger than he looked, handling a man of Jaime's size with ease, lifting him like a ragdoll and throwing him into the pile of stones. All the time he was shouting, cursing, veins in his forehead bulging.

The other men got on their feet, perhaps afraid that they would lose their reward should their leader kill their prizes. They ran to the site and tackled Zaggo, and after a brief struggle, subdued him. Two men against one, even if in a drunken rage, had its inevitable outcomes; throwing dirty looks at Jaime and Brienne, they soon dragged Zaggo back to the fireside. There they dropped him unceremoniously on the ground, where he stayed – after a while starting to snore loudly.

Things quieted down. Brienne was hurting from the blows but when she gingerly tested her limbs, it seemed that nothing had been broken. She couldn’t see Jaime fully, only his outline as he was lying on the ground, motionless except for a faint movement of his chest.

Good, at least he is still alive.

“Jaime?” she whispered. No answer.

Brienne sighed. She hoped that would teach him a lesson – although she doubted it very much.
While she had been hunkering down in an attempt to be inconspicuous, she had felt an especially sharp edge of a stone burrowing into her thigh. She tried to find it again, shifting her position one way or another, sweeping the ground with her hands. There!

She had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Invigorated, Brienne started her task.

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For the next few hours, she patiently sawed the rope binding her wrists with the jagged edge of the rock. It was slow work, and every now and then her hands cramped and she had to rest for a while before continuing. Slowly, slowly, she felt threads breaking.

Every now and then she peeked at Jaime’s form, still lying where he had landed. She got no reply to the few whispered queries she made, but he was still breathing. Once she saw his head lift before it fell back again. Brienne was worried, but there was nothing she could do for him for now.

The men at the campsite had fallen asleep, Zaggo where he had been dropped, snoring loudly, and the other two on their bedrolls, their backs to Brienne and Jaime. The fire had died but embers remained, glowing faintly in the dark permeated by the dim light of the half-moon. The commander had still not arrived, and the knowledge of it being unlikely before the morning gave Brienne new hope.

If she could just get free, she could sneak to the sleeping men, dispatch them, get a horse and escape… Where, she would have to think that later.

As she laboured away, another thought came to her. If she managed to escape with her own skin intact, should she try to recapture the Kingslayer? She could leave him, of course, to be picked up by the mysterious commander and his troops, taking him to Lord Tywin – but why would she?

Brienne had heard her share of the stories travelling in the countryside about the atrocities committed by the Lannister troops. She also knew how Jaime had been a valuable asset for the Starks, the one thing that could tip the balance of power in their favour.

But why should she care? She hadn’t been exactly welcomed with open arms at her arrival in the Stark camp.

Brienne stopped to rest and gather her strength for the last push to sever the last remaining cords. She glanced at Jaime’s prone body, considering her options. To leave him behind seemed a foolish thing to do… Whatever she did, he could be useful. If she was captured by the Lannister forces, he could be her ticket to freedom. If she returned to Starks, they would have to believe her honour and good intentions.

Deciding to revisit the notion once she was actually free, she pressed on.

Eventually, the last threads broke and Brienne’s arms were free. She stretched them and pumped her hands into fists to get the blood flowing, then untied her legs. She was free!

The rest of her plan eventuated exactly as she had envisioned; a soundless crawl behind the braided warrior, whom she assessed to be her most dangerous adversary in the light of drunken stupor of their leader, a quiet removal of his dagger from his belt, a swift slice across his throat while pressing her hand against his mouth.

Brienne closed her eyes for the last bit. She didn’t like killing in the first place, and killing a sleeping man went against her nature. Yet there was no avoiding it; it was either him or her.
After the last faint gurgles had faded and the man’s struggles had subsided, she lay low for a bit longer to see if that had woken his companions. It hadn’t.

She dispatched the other man in a similar fashion, and then it was Zaggo’s turn. As Brienne watched him snoring, she didn’t feel the hate she probably should have felt. He was just a man; older than she was, grown up in some foreign land and gods knew how ending up in Westeros, a bit-player in the games of nobles. He had cared for his companion a great deal, judging by his unhinged behaviour at his death. Had that been love? Brienne was aware of unnatural habits and itches that were as much part of army life as were the camp followers, but she had never stopped to think of it any deeper.

Was that what Renly had had with Loras? Instead of the thought disgusting her, she found herself oddly pleased. She had never had a chance of having Renly in any way or form, so knowing he had loved another didn’t truly sting. If that had made Renly happy, who was she to judge?

“Go to him in peace”, she whispered when she sliced Zaggo’s throat – and she meant it.

Having thus gained control of the camp, she stood up and surveyed the scene. The sooner she left, the further away she would be when the others arrived and saw what had happened. But first, she had to check on Jaime.

His position was the same as before, his body curved on top of a large piece of stone carved from the millstone, at an awkward angle.

“Jaime!” She knelt down and shook him from the shoulders. “Wake up!”

His head lolled back and forth a few times, then she felt the muscles of Jaime’s neck stiffening. He opened his eyes, flicking them around in an uncoordinated manner before focussing on Brienne. A small smile spread on his face.

“Wench?”

“Brienne, to you.” Brienne almost smiled, relieved that he seemed to be fine. “I have slain our captors and it’s time for us to go.”

Jaime’s smile faded. “Go?”

“Yes, I am taking you with me. Get up.” Brienne was embarrassed about how she was about to repay Jaime’s kind deed with an unkind act – but she had to be practical. She could and would still thank him, maybe speak on his behalf to anyone who held him next, but she couldn’t allow him to be returned to Lord Tywin.

Brienne got back on her feet and started towards the horses. Swiftly and efficiently she swept the place for anything useful: food, tools, clothes, bedding. Blaze welcomed her with a soft nicker when she went to her, saddling her with one of the oddly-shaped saddles of their captors.

“Good girl! We are leaving this place, right now. We have done that before, you and I, and we can do that again, can’t we?” Brienne murmured. Blaze rubbed her nose against her palm.

She had to saddle another one for Jaime, then bridle the third horse so they could take it with them. One never knew when one needed an extra horse.

“Brienne!”

She stopped and sighed. She didn’t have time for Jaime’s japes or taunts – but then again, his voice had sounded oddly strained.
“Yes?” she said without turning.

“Brienne… I can’t feel my legs.”

She twisted around and stared at Jaime. He was still where she had left him, his head raised and arms stretched by his sides. Glancing at his legs she saw they were fine; no broken bones or visible cuts. And yet…

She looked at Jaime’s eyes and saw something she had never seen before.

Fear.

Chapter End Notes

Jaime has really rotten luck, doesn’t he? Once again, more is revealed in a few chapter’s time…

The next chapter picks up from Sansa and Sandor’s travels – and oh, Ned’s too. :-)

Comments are warmly welcomed, including concrit should you feel so! Also, come and say hi in Tumblr, if you want, where I can be found as ladytp.
Our trio of misfits is still reeling from the unexpected news – so what next? For those who may have missed sansan interactions (like me), there is a tiny bit more of it here…

Thank you Hardlyfatal for betaing!

EDIT: Just thought to add a friendly note and reminder that in this fic, Sansa has been aged up. I am hesitant to give any exact number for her age, but as in the modern world she was about to enter university, it certainly places her age way past the canon 12, and definitively makes her a young *woman* rather than a *child*...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

_Sansa_

After they left the hedge knights to their search and continued their journey, it took a long time before anyone said a word. Sansa had moved back to the driver's seat with Ned, but she kept glancing at Sandor over her shoulder every now and then.

Just as when he had first heard the news, his face betrayed nothing of what he was thinking. He sat still, staring ahead at the side of the road with unfocused eyes, and Sansa couldn't decide whether he was sad, angry, or something else. Once or twice he noticed her watching, and their eyes met but didn’t linger, he soon turning his head away again.

Sansa studied Ned as well, and he, too, seemed to be deep in thought. Both were obviously pondering the news they had just heard, maybe being as confused as Sansa. Why would Joffrey have made such an announcement? What did he expect to gain from telling the world about the execution that had not happened? Maybe she had missed something, being still so new to this world and its politics?

“Father, do you know why Joffrey would have done it? Announced that he has executed you when he very well knows that you escaped?” she finally blurted.

Ned frowned. “I have been trying to figure out the same myself. He is rash and not particularly astute in affairs of state, but something like this… he must have known that there would be a reaction to it.”

“What kind of reaction you’d expect?”

“If what you said about Robb and Catelyn having started to advance to the capital…” he paused, swallowed, and turned ashen. “Cat! This is going to hit her hard, her and Robb. And if the news travels all the way to Winterfell…”

His knuckles turned white as his grip on the reins tightened. Sansa put her hand on top of his, wanting to comfort him.

“Maybe we will reach them first, or soon after. Imagine how wonderful it will be to see bad news
turned around.” She knew her attempt to console him clumsy, but Ned didn’t seem to notice anything amiss, turning his hand to squeeze her fingers, his posture relaxing a bit.

“You are right, sweetling. There is nothing we can do about it anyway, so we must just continue as planned. As soon as we reach the inn at the crossroads, we will send a word to Riverrun. Someone there must know where to reach them, even if they are campaigning in the field.”

He turned to look at her under his brows. “What about you? I am sorry you had to hear that vile talk. It was hardly suitable for your ears.”

Sansa shrugged. “I guess it is only natural to assume that Sandor had stolen me – the timing was just too coincidental for anything else.” She didn’t tell him what really disturbed her: the readiness with which the notion had been accepted by Joffrey and everyone. That they would think Sandor doing something like that… Then again, she couldn’t claim to know the man that well, after all. Maybe they were right and she was wrong. Maybe he was capable of such a thing?

Sansa turned to look at the focus of her musings, meeting the same stony-faced expression as before. She touched Ned’s arm to get his attention.

“This changes things for him, you know? He can’t go back now, even if he wanted.”

“Maybe – but that doesn’t make him any less dangerous.”

“I think this would be a good time to talk to him earnestly about his future. What I said before – I still believe it. And this makes it even more possible.”

Ned didn’t say anything for a while, and Sansa didn’t press him. She liked to think herself as a reasonable judge of character, and during their time together she had learned that Ned could sometimes be slow to respond. He was one of those people who thought things through before making up their mind, and he liked that.

“So, you want me to talk to him?” Ned eventually said.

“I think that is the only way. He might listen to me in small matters, but this is serious.” As much as it irritated Sansa, their world was still run by men. That in turn meant that all important matters were decided by them, and she didn’t flatter herself to be able to change thousands of years of tradition all by herself.

Ned gave a noncommittal grunt.

“Let me talk to him first, though. He might give some indication of his readiness to be approached about the matter. For now, I can’t really tell what he thinks,” Sansa said.

It was Ned’s turn to glance at their captive.

“He doesn’t reveal much, that is true. Can’t imagine why he would say anything to you, though.” He hesitated for a moment before continuing. “Sansa, be careful with him. He is a hard man, and I’m afraid that in your innocent mind you are making him into something he is not. I don’t like to see you with him, but as long as he stays with us there is not much I can do about it. I wish we could just part our ways with him…”

“…but the risk is too high unless we sort the matters between us one way or another,” Sansa continued his sentence. “I’ll do my best and if you do yours, at least we would have tried. Just be honest with him. I think he hates lying and dishonesty more than anything else. The way he has spoken of the games people play in the court – I think he would appreciate sincerity.”
“That is the only way I know.” Ned sounded almost hurt, and Sansa felt chastened. From everything she had found out about Ned’s downfall, it seemed that his weakness was too much honesty, not too little. Which was admirable, perhaps, but not always wise.

Hopefully she would be able to help him with that. Subtly, sensitively, the way women had done things throughout all known history.

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Sansa had wished for an opportunity to talk with Sandor for a long time, but now that she knew she was going to have one, she found herself strangely short of things to say. Yes, she was going to ask him to keep an open mind when speaking with Ned – but there was so much else she had wanted to say.

What had it been, again?

She had observed him during the journey whenever she could do so without attracting his attention, and had liked what she saw. There was something appealing in the efficient utility with which Sandor did most things, be it harnessing the horse, cutting firewood or carrying water: effortless, pragmatic, not a wasted movement or a wrong move.

And he was strong – stronger than any man Sansa had met. Once their cart had gotten stuck in the mud, and after Ned’s futile attempts to help the horse by pushing it, Sandor had stepped in and lifted the back of the cart so that both back wheels had been high in the air – a small nudge to the horse and they had been on a hard land again. That cart must have weighed a ton, and yet Sandor had hardly broken a sweat.

That night Sansa had wrapped herself in blankets and dreamt about muscular arms straining under tension, broad shoulders and a strong back. The next morning she had felt abashed; how shallow of her to pay attention to such matters, when much bigger things were at stake.

Yet she continued watching Sandor, and not only for the appreciation of the strength of his body. She noticed that his lips – apart from the burned corner – were surprisingly sensuous, with a full lower lip. And that his eyelashes were long and dark, throwing shadows under his eyes in certain light. And that his eyes were deep grey and always alert, missing nothing. Sometimes Sansa felt like squirming under their scrutiny, even though he never stared at her for so long that it could be construed as rude.

The burns, which had so startled her when she had first seen them, started curiously to fade to the background – or not exactly fade, but merge; to become just a normal part of him. Sansa found herself studying them quite dispassionately, assessing what could be done to them with the help of modern medicine. Just to pass time, and not because she actually would have preferred him that way. She had, after all, been on her way to study medicine, and merely considered him as an interesting case.

After some consideration, Sansa estimated that a few skin transplants, a prosthetic ear, and a bit of reconstructive surgery for his jaw would be enough to make him quite normal looking, and remove the stigma of a monster he apparently thought himself to be, and which he carried around as a warped badge of honour.

Yet what most bothered Sansa about Sandor’s scars was not the way they looked, but how they had changed the man who carried them. Had made him withdraw into himself and build a wall around him to keep other people out. It was all so unnecessary, and so heartbreaking.
Sometimes she felt sorry for him, and then scolded herself for being just a silly girl foolishly falling into one of the most overused romantic tropes, the one where within every villain resides a tragic and tortured soul, and all that is needed is a good woman to show him the path to righteousness. The Elder Brother’s poem didn’t help, painting the Hound in a sympathetic light and as someone worthy of compassion.

But this man was not a tormented character in a silly romance, nor a troubled hero of the songs. He was a living and breathing brute, who had done terrible things and had shown no signs of wanting to become a better person.

So why was she so obsessed with him?

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After the evening meal, Ned went to the cart and started tinkering with it, fixing a fitting here or a wheel hub there. Sansa took it as a sign for her to make her move, so she approached Sandor, who was leaning against a big tree trunk staring at the fire. He had continued his silence all evening and Sansa’s heart raced as she sat down. Would he lash out at her, had he built his anger all through the day and now make her pay for the unfairness heaped upon him?

“Sandor, I am sorry about what happened.”

He turned his head slowly, as if only then realising she was sitting right next to him.

“Why?”

That caught Sansa by surprise.

“Well, you know, it’s always horrible to be accused of something one didn’t do, isn’t it?” she stammered.

“Why would you care?”

“Because…” Sansa tried to find the right words to reply but then decided that it was not worth it. She had more important things to say.

“That Joffrey would believe so easily that you would do something like that, not even offering you a chance to explain, is not fair.”

Sandor shrugged. “Can’t blame him. Was the obvious thing, I fathom.”

“But still…”

“More likely that the Hound had stolen Sansa Stark than the other way around.”

There was an odd tone in his voice and Sansa glanced up. Was that a hint of amusement in his face? Could it be?

“Well, whatever it might be, you are in a difficult situation. You have no liege lord you can get back to, and if anyone finds you, they will kill you.”

If that had been a smile, it disappeared as soon as it had arrived, Sandor’s mouth turning into a scowl.

“Who’s to say I won’t capture you and take you back, and thus regain my position?”
“Well, first of all, you may not get far. The closer you’d be to King’s Landing, the more people there would be, and more of those who could recognise you – and kill you without asking questions. Secondly, should you reach the court and hand us over to Joffrey, he would have to accept that he had been wrong in blaming you. And I don’t think Joffrey likes having to admit his mistakes.”

Sansa held her breath while her words sank in. And in they sank, she noticed from a slight stiffness in Sandor posture. She plunged in further with her momentary advantage.

“He is not a fair lord to you. Has he ever treated you with nothing more than disdain and as a tool at his disposal? Calling you a dog, making you do his dirty bidding. Has he ever thanked you or shown his appreciation for anything you have done?”

No response.

“Please, Sandor, join us. Get yourself a new house to serve, a house that doesn’t condone lying or empty words or games played by those in power. I know you think my Father is naive, but he is a good, honest man, and he is direct and doesn’t play games.”

“Is he, now?” Sandor’s tone suggested he didn’t quite believe her.

“He is. If you would accept his offer, you would be a free man again, joining us of your own volition. You could come to Winterfell with us and share a bed and board with our household. You could give him advice when you think he is being too trusting, if you wished. And you could continue advising me, too. There is still so much I don’t remember or don’t know; things I should learn.”

“Did he send you to ask this? Doesn’t sound very direct to me.”

“No, he didn’t. He wants to speak to you man-to-man, but I asked to talk to you first.” Sansa’s palms sweated. So much depended on the outcome of this discussion.

“Why?”

Why did he have to ask her that? It was unnerving. Sansa decided that it was her turn to be honest after talking up its virtues so much.

“Because I care what happens to you. I think you are a better man than you think, or what anyone else thinks. It is true that I have not known you for long, and half of that I have forgotten, but I truly believe that. All you need is a chance to show it.”

Well, that sounded like straight out of some silly romantic novel, Sansa realised as she spoke. Yet she couldn’t have worded it any differently; she truly believed what she had said.

While she had made her plea, Sandor had leaned closer, their heads now less than two hand-widths apart, and something in his scrutiny made Sansa lightheaded. She had not been so aware of his proximity since that day in the small garden of the Red Keep. Instinctively she straightened herself from her hunched position but didn’t shift back - as if accepting his challenge, whatever it was. They were now even closer to each other, and Sansa could feel Sandor’s breath on her cheek.

The tension between them was palpable, but unlike what Sansa could have imagined, she was not nervous. Not like when she had had her first fumbling experiences with boys, butterflies in her belly. Of course, this was not her first nor even her second interaction with a boy. There had been Edric, her ‘almost boyfriend’, with whom she had spent a lot of time during her last school year. They had shared good times together - also in the bedroom - but when Edric had left to study in another city, the end of their ‘almost relationship’ had been amicable and painless.
But Sandor was not a boy, he was a man - a fact Sansa was becoming increasingly aware of. His closeness, combined with his manly scent of sweat and horse, was starting to raise all kinds of sensations in her, the origins of which she recognised much too well.

*My gods!*

In another time… in another place… in other company… For now, she simply *couldn’t* start anything that she wouldn’t have a chance to finish. The whole world was against it, and besides, Sansa was still planning to find her way back to her own time once she reached Winterfell. What would be the point of setting off something that could cause only trouble and strife?

Neither said a word for a while, and neither moved. Sansa hoped Ned wouldn’t see them from where he was, as if he did, he would surely disapprove them sharing such close proximity.

Finally Sandor took a deep breath and the spell was broken. He looked over his shoulder – probably assailed by the same thought as Sansa – but seeing Ned still occupied with the cart, he turned back to her.

“So you are as stupid as your father, then?” There was no sting in his voice, and as Sansa interpreted his response as a feeble attempt to downplay the gravity of what she had just said, she took no offence.

“I guess I am,” she said instead, and smiled. Then something else occurred to her, something that had been bothering her for a while, but she hadn’t had a chance to address it.

“Why did you lie to my Father that day, when I made the fire and you said you had told me how?” Sandor studied her, then shrugged. “You looked like you needed help.”

“But why?” Sansa was determined that he was not the only one who could play that game.

“Where did you learn it, anyway? I suspect it is not something septas teach to noble maidens.”

So, he was following Sansa’s suit by deflecting a question with another. Damn, he was good!

“I don’t know. It just came to me. Maybe I knew it from my childhood and it was just one of those things that came back to me after the accident.”

The blessed accident again – Sansa was eternally grateful that she could blame it for almost anything that might be construed as odd with her. It wouldn’t have survived against the analysis of modern knowledge, but in the past, people seemed to accept it with less scrutiny.

“Hmmm. You’ve changed in many ways since then.”

A thought flashed through Sansa’s mind. Did he like the old Sansa better? Was he disappointed at her? If he had had any feelings for *real* Sansa, was he regretting them now?

It was ridiculous - what did it matter? And still…

“For better or for worse?” she blurted, then tried to backtrack. “I mean, I know I have changed, and I know many of the changes may seem odd. But have I become…” she struggled with words. *A better person? Or a worse one?*

“Different.” Luckily Sandor saved her the trouble of figuring out the rest of the sentence. “Not a trained pretty little talking bird anymore. You’ve found your talons – nothing wrong with that.”
It didn’t exactly answer Sansa’s unspoken question about whether he liked the old or new Sansa better, but it was all she got.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Ned returning. Without waiting to be told that their time was up, Sansa got up and fussed with her skirts.

“All I ask of you is to keep an open mind when my Father speaks with you. And be as honest with him as you would wish him to be with you. Please, do it…for your sake. And for mine.”

Not knowing what else to say, Sansa nodded at Sandor and returned to her father, who followed the proceedings with arms crossed over his chest. She walked past him with a smile on her face, hoping it conveyed her optimism about the important discussion looming ahead.

Sansa couldn’t sleep that night, tossing and turning well past the midnight. She took some comfort from the fact that Sandor seemed equally disturbed, as far as she could judge it from her place on the other side of the fireplace. He slept, as usual, secured to the cart to prevent him from setting upon them in their sleep, and the creaking of the wooden boards gave away his restlessness.

She had a sudden urge to get up and go talk to him, but as soon as she thought of it, she dismissed the notion. In modern times it would have been possible because of the more relaxed social codes and the acceptance that men and women could be just friends. However, in this time it was not as easy, especially not for a maiden of noble birth. A presumed maiden, she corrected herself, before wondering whether that particular part of her body was the other Sansa’s, and indeed intact. Knowing that sexuality was as much about the mind as body, and she having lost her ‘mental’ virginity a while back, where did that leave her?

Sansa spent an entertaining half an hour trying to figure out how it would feel for her to have sex now. Would it hurt? Would there be blood? What would her partner say if she behaved as if she knew what to do, but her body said otherwise?

Then she spent another good while trying to forget all such notions, having realised that the only even remotely possible partner for such activities would be one Sandor Clegane, who was lying in the cart only a small distance away. What would he say if he knew Sansa was thinking of such matters? Would he be shocked, dismayed, horrified?

Thank the gods, sleep finally claimed her and removed the need to think of anything at all.

Chapter End Notes

Will Sansa ever get a good night’s sleep again? Will Sandor guess what’s in her mind? Will Ned notice anything? Does any of this actually matter? We’ll find out soon enough – but first, we’ll find out what’s going on with Arya…

You may remember in Chapter 23... “And then came the wolves. “
Arya

And then came the wolves.

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First only as a few tentative voices in the darkness of the night, a lonely howl echoed through the distance, followed by another, to dwindle into silence again.

Then there were more howls – every night more and more, closer to their camp. The horses grew restless and the horse-master started spending his nights near them, spear and bow in readiness.

Then came the wolf dreams.

Soon enough Arya realised that she did not dream of wolves, even though she saw them in her visions: slender forms slinking through the trees, grey fur silvered by moonlight, large mouths gaping, deadly fangs revealed.

No, she was a wolf. She felt the forest floor under her feet - except they were not her own, hairless and pale, but paws, furry and padded. She inhaled the scents of the forest: the pungent decay of rotting leaves, rich aroma of animal droppings, sharp smells of the many creatures inhabiting the woodland. Her chest filled with a yearning to declare her presence to the world, to proclaim that she was ready to hunt in her pack’s domain.

And when she opened her mouth, a mighty howl filled the night.

The first time it happened, Arya woke up with her heart pumping, skin covered in cold sweat. It took her a while to realise that it had been just a dream, and that in truth she was lying next to Gendry just as she was every night, so real had it felt. The dream both terrified and thrilled her, especially the eerie sensation of being one with the wolf.

The second time she was better prepared. Letting herself go, she marvelled at the sensation of running wild and free with her cousins. She was strong and swift and covered ground effortlessly,
and when they caught a scent of prey, she was among the first to reach the herd of deer. When the pack hunted down a buck, she sank her teeth into its flesh and felt the tang of blood sour on her tongue…

When Arya woke up, she licked her lips and tasted copper.

Arya didn’t speak about it to anyone, not even Gendry, but from thereon she paid close attention to anything she heard people saying about wolves.

That they were bolder than ever before, everyone agreed. That among them a wolf of unusual size had been spotted, divided opinions. Some said it was just another wolf, mayhap a tad bigger in size than its peers, but the others swore it was the size of a horse... or even bigger.

_Nymeria_, Arya understood and was not surprised. The pain she had tried to bury deep inside returned with a vengeance, mixed with the relief that she had survived. The direwolf pup she had loved so much had gone wild and found herself a new pack, as was right and proper. ‘Direwolves are beasts’, King Robert had said. ‘Sooner or later they turn on people’, he had said.

Arya was sure it was not true – Nymeria would have never turned on her - but she couldn’t deny the truth of direwolves not being meant to be pets, like dogs. She wondered if Nymeria would even remember her anymore, having lived most of her life among her own kind. It pained Arya, but she knew there was nothing she could do about it.

A few nights later she was dreaming a wolf dream again, stalking through the woods, proud and strong, when she suddenly felt the earth falling under her. Desperately scrambling for purchase she fell down into a pit, narrowly avoiding sharpened stakes pointing upwards at its bottom. She tried to climb up again, but the walls of the pit were steep and smooth, and no matter how many times she jumped and clawed and clambered, she couldn’t get up.

Arya felt the tension of the struggle in her own muscles, and she willed the wolf to try harder, to find the way, but by the time she was woken up by a shake at a shoulder and opened her eyes to meet Gendry’s worried face, she knew she had been trapped.

Could it have really happened? Were her dreams true? Arya was restless and miserable the whole morning, hoping that it all had been just a figment of her imagination, that Nymeria was still running in the woods, far away from trouble.

Yet she couldn’t stop worrying. She snapped at the man who wanted more sausage for his breakfast and talked back to Mistress Alwen over a simple matter of a burned loaf of bread, and once the caravan was on the road again, she walked alone, apart from the others, stewing in her temper. Even Gendry avoided her when she was in such a mood.

As they approached yet another village later that day, they were met by a throng of people milling about near the village square. There was a sense of great excitement in the air and it didn’t take long to find out what was going on.

“They have captured the big wolf!” exclaimed a man stopped by Hardil. “The one with the pack. ‘Tis been displayed in a cage, for anyone to see.”

Arya’s breath hitched. _No, it couldn’t be!_ If it truly was Nymeria…she would be killed, and forever lost to her. Just like Lady, one more direwolf of House Stark gone.

She had to see her. Arya started to run and push through the crowd to the middle of the square. It was like any other she had seen in countless villages they had passed; a hard-packed ground
surrounded by low wooden buildings greyed with age. The rectangular area was flanked at one end by a communal well and at the other, by a tall tree with branches stretching wide and far.

There, under the tree, stood an open cart, at the back of which stood a large iron cage – and inside it, the biggest wolf Arya had ever seen. She didn’t need more than one quick look to recognise Nymeria without a shadow of a doubt: the same grey fur and dark golden eyes, only with a body much bigger than when they had parted. *When I drove her away.*

Arya swallowed hard but the lump in her throat didn’t go away.

“Kill it! Kill it now, what are we waiting for?” shouted an angry voice from the crowd. Next to her, Arya heard one of the two men guarding the cart explaining that the wolf would be dispatched as soon as the lord of the nearby keep had arrived. The men who had caught the wolf wanted to offer the privilege of the kill to him, against coin, of course. Its hide would make an impressive rug or a wall decoration, for an extra coin, and the hunters wanted some compensation for the damage the wolf pack had caused to their cattle.

Arya stared at her wolf, blinking hard to control tears that threatened to spill over. She desperately tried to think what she could do - if anything.

“When is he expected?” another voice piped from the crowd, and the guard shrugged his shoulders.

“Mayhap tomorrow. It is a half a day’s ride to the keep and the messenger was sent not long ago.” The man raised his voice above the racket. “We’ll be keeping guard until then. Look as much as you want, but no touching – unless you want your hand to be ripped off its socket. No throwing either – we want to present the beast in one piece to the lord.”

Arya saw that the warning had some merit, as spectators had already started to throw stones at the wolf. One man was sneaking closer with a sharp stick in his hand, but as soon as he approached, Nymeria turned its head towards him and snarled, her ears drawn back almost flat against her neck, a low grumble emanating deep in her throat. When the man didn’t step away immediately, she snapped – and the audience was offered a terrifying sight of a huge mouth with sharp teeth and deadly incisors. It didn’t take much imagination to realise that those jaws could rip a man’s arm in no time – a conclusion also made by the approaching man, as he cursed and withdrew back to the safety of the mob.

Arya felt drawn towards the cage, although by then even the most enthusiastic gawkers had withdrawn to a safer distance. She had to see Nymeria one more time, maybe the very last time. She had to see if she remembered her - even if it was with hostility towards the girl who had chased her away with rocks. Once again she felt the prickle of tears burning behind her eyelids but she forced them at bay.

She took a step forward, then another. Nobody paid attention to her, a mere girl, the crowd now arguing with the guards why people were not allowed to exact revenge on the killer beast for their losses and sleepless nights.

*Nymeria.* Arya wasn’t sure if she had breathed the name out loud or only in her mind when the wolf turned her head towards her. Her golden eyes bore through Arya, calm and composed as if she had known Arya would show up.

“Nymeria”, Arya said, this time a whisper. The direwolf cocked her head, ears pointed forward. One more step, two more, and she had reached the cage. Tentatively she raised her hand and extended it towards the wolf, who instead of shying away, pushed her head forward. Arya held her breath.
Just as Nymeria was lowering her snout towards Arya’s hand, she was jerked back so hard her teeth rattled and she almost bit her tongue. The force of the pull unbalanced her and she hit the ground, air punched out of her lungs from the impact.

“Arya!”

It was Gendry, his face contorted with fear and worry and something else, panting from the exertion of having run after her.

“Are you crazy?! Do you have a death wish?!”

Nobody seemed to have noticed the incident, the arguments still flowing and ebbing all around them, the guards having started to bang their spears on the ground to make their point.

Arya pushed herself from the ground and glared daggers at Gendry. “What’s wrong with you? I was perfectly safe – it’s Nymeria!”

Since revealing her true identity to him, she had shared many things from her old life and times in Winterfell with Gendry. At first he had been ill at ease and said little, but as time passed, he had become more comfortable. Much later Gendry had made a confession: that he had thought Arya would start putting on airs and graces like all the other noble ladies as soon as her ruse as a commoner was no longer needed. Arya had smacked him on the head so hard he had fallen off the chair, laughing.

“Nymeria or not, she could have bitten your head off. And there is more. We better leave, and now.”

Gendry’s lips were pursed and he scanned their surroundings under his brow, all the while pulling Arya from the arm. She had no choice but to follow him as he marched through the crowd, which closed behind them as if wading through a stream.

“Wait, what, where are you taking me – ouch!” Arya cried, after another hard yank.

“Away, before people start asking questions about who’s that girl so friendly with the wolf. Before you start attracting unwanted attention.”

Arya started to protest but stopped before the words escaped her mouth. Gendry was right. People would find it odd to see the beast not trying to kill her and would start asking questions, and that was never a good thing. Chastened, she hurried to keep at pace with Gendry.

“I…am sorry. I just had to know. I just had to see her.” The tears were back and Arya hated how helpless they made her feel.

They were walking side by side now and Gendry had let go of her arm, seeing as she was following him voluntarily. He glanced at her, his expression softening.

“I am sorry, too. From what you’ve told me, it meant a lot to you. I wish they wouldn’t have caught it. But they did, and they are going to kill it, and the best you can do is to stay away and mourn for it afterwards.”

“They can’t!” Arya’s voice trembled and she hated that, too.

“They can and they will. Haven’t you listened to any of the stories about the wolves? They have become bolder than before, and some say it is because of the giant wolf among them. They see it as the cause for all their troubles, so of course they want to get rid of it.”
“She only did it because I chased her away,” Arya whispered, the consequences of that action hitting her hard. *It was all my fault. No, it was Sansa’s fault. No, it was Joffrey’s fault, and Cersei’s!* All the hate she already harboured towards the two multiplied when she thought of all the misfortunes they had brought upon her and hers.

*They will pay for this. One day they will.*

The walk back to their caravan was quiet. When they approached it, Gendry told her that Master Elrond had decided to camp for the night there. The crowds the wolf’s presence attracted meant good opportunities for a trade, and he never missed those. Besides, most of the group were as keen as the villagers to see the notorious beast put to death, so nobody had objected to the decision.

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Arya was quiet and miserable for the rest of the evening. She hid inside the goods wagon among the fast-dwindling bolts of cloth, refusing to help in the camp kitchen as was her duty. She didn’t care what Mistress Alwen was going to say, she didn’t care if people were going to starve, she didn’t care about anything.

She crouched against the sideboard, arms crossed around her knees, and rocked on the spot, back and forth, back and forth. She cried; first silent tears down her cheeks, then wracking sobs deep from her core. *Nymeria.* The big fluffy ball of fur she had loved and raised, and whose warm presence had been a comfort for her when life had treated her unfairly. When she had heard she had to leave her home for the stupid capital, and later on the road, when she had to endure the stupid royals and condescending courtiers. Arya remembered their favourite game of chase, where first Nymeria chased her and then she chased her back, the joys of hugging her and burrowing her face in her soft fur…

Gendry came by a few times, but after getting no responses from her, he left her alone.

The evening came, and with it, twilight. Arya had stopped crying – she had run out of tears – and stared into nothingness. She knew she should let this go, concentrate on finding her way back to her real family. That she had lost Nymeria already once, and that this was to be only a final confirmation. Yet deep inside her, she realised she simply *couldn’t.*

When Gendry came again, carrying a platter of food that he laid quietly next to her before turning to go, Arya surprised him by calling him back.

“Gendry.”

He stopped, then looked at her. “I am so sorry, Arya.”

“I know. It’s not your fault – and you didn’t know her as I did.” Arya took a deep breath. “I can’t let it happen.”

Gendry climbed into the wagon, the tray swaying under his weight. He settled down next to Arya and sighed. “Don’t tell me you have cooked up some hare-brained plan.”

“Not hare-brained - or maybe only a little. Gendry, she is *my* wolf! I betrayed her once, I can’t do it again!” Arya pleaded. She had to make Gendry understand – besides, she needed his help.

“Spit it out, then. You want to go there, amongst that crowd, and let it free - is that it?”

In a nutshell, that *was* her plan. Arya didn’t know how she was going to execute it – but she had to
try.

“Yes. The crowd won’t be there forever. They will get tired sooner or later and go to their homes for
the night. Maybe she will be left alone. Or if the guards are still there, it’s only two men. Surely we
can do something about them?”

Gendry fiddled with the small dagger he always carried around, staring at it in his hands. “When did
it become ‘we’, in this plan of yours?”

Arya swallowed. Of course she could not take it for granted that Gendry would agree to help her. If
they were caught, no good would come of it for either of them. Besides, Nymeria was not Gendry’s
wolf – he didn’t have any particular reason to save her.

Arya knew Gendry was satisfied with things as they were. He had friends in the company, and he
was appreciated for who he was, nobody caring whether he was a bastard or not. He had even
brought up the possibility of them continuing all the way to the Twins and settling there, at least for a
while. The Freys were Tully bannermen, and Arya would have opportunities to send a word or reach
her family from there as well and even better than leaving the company and making her own way.

Arya also knew that Gendry still harboured some doubts about the reasons why they had left King’s
Landing in the first place. He had only Arya’s word that something bad was about to happen to him,
and on that word and that alone he had left a good position as an apprentice with one of the best
armourers in the only city he had ever know. He never voiced it out loud though. No, once he had
given his word to do something, he stuck with it – he was that kind of stubborn. Nonetheless, Arya
knew him and his moods well enough to know that sometimes he missed what he had left behind.

And here she was, asking him to leave everything he had put together from the scraps, all over
again?

“I…I can do it alone. I will find a way.” Arya mumbled. It could be hard – but she would do it
somehow. She had to.

After a moment’s silence, Gendry threw his hands in the air in exasperation. “Of course I’m going to
help you! Couldn’t leave you to muck it up on your own. But have you thought about what happens
after? Let’s assume you free the wolf – what then? Are you absolutely sure that it is not going to turn
on you? I know it was your pet and all, but that was a long time ago. It’s with a pack now.”

Arya bit her lip. Gendry spoke sense. Still, if she was sure of one thing, it was that Nymeria had
recognised her – and that she would not harm her. She might go back to her pack – but that was her
right. Arya couldn’t expect her to simply return to her as if nothing had happened; as if Arya hadn’t
abandoned her when she had still relied on her.

“I know she will not hurt me. If…if she goes back to her pack, I’ll be happy for her. This is not about
what I want, this is about what she deserves.”

Gendry pushed his hand through his mop of dark hair, as he did when he was especially perturbed.

“And what if it doesn’t? What if it decides to stay with you? Are you going to bring it here, let it
sleep next to you? Eat scraps from the kitchens with the other dogs?”

Notwithstanding the momentary amusement from the mental image such a scenario raised in her
mind, Arya had only one answer to give.

“If she follows me, I shall leave and make my own way with her.” She stopped herself before she
went too far, before she asked what he was going to do in such a case. He had already given up so
much for her – though for his own benefit as well, although he might not have seen it that way. She couldn’t ask him for more.

Gendry stared at her. “Alone? Just you and the wolf?”

“She will protect me, and keep me warm. Maybe even bring food. I don’t know how it will turn out! I haven’t done it yet – but I don’t have a choice.”

Gendry raised his eyes towards the roof of the cart and muttered something to himself, too low for Arya to hear, then shook his head, stood up and opened the flap to get out.

“We’d better start preparing, then. Try to behave normally. We make our move when the night is darkest.”

He jumped down and walked away, leaving Arya to combat with mixed emotions. He had promised to help her – and then what?

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Arya tried to follow his advice to the best of her abilities. She concocted a story for Mistress Alwen about having felt poorly and hence abandoning her duties – leaving the description of her sudden bout of illness unexplained, hoping it would be assigned to the mysterious ‘women’s troubles’. She redeemed herself by taking care of all the cleaning and washing after the meal, all the while burning from the inside with impatience and nerves.

She saw Gendry behaving as if nothing was amiss, sitting and laughing with the other men by the fire and drinking from the cask of ale Master Elrond had ordered to be opened for the occasion of an impromptu carnival. Everybody was in the good mood – not only in their camp but also in the village, judged by the distant noises of merrymaking from that direction.

After she was done, Arya returned to the wagon and collected all her things. Not that they had multiplied much during their journey. She pulled Needle out of its safekeeping and rolled it inside a blanket. After that, there was not much else to do but to wait. Gendry returned eventually, and they made their beds as usual under the wagon.

And she waited.

Arya didn’t dare to fall asleep in fear that she wouldn’t wake up when needed, so it was a long night for her, staring at the bottom of the cart, listening to the sounds of the camp dwindling and dying out. After all was silent, she crawled out into the open and spent the rest of the time leaning her back against the wheel and thinking whether what she was about to do was absolute lunacy or the best thing ever.

Never finding a satisfactory answer, she gave up, and after an indeterminable wait when she finally judged it to the right time, she shook Gendry awake.

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They made their way silently towards the village, Gendry carrying all his belongings with him, just as Arya did. She wasn’t sure how to read it – was it just in case if things turned horribly wrong and they had to run for their lives? Or was he really going to come with her, if Nymeria decided to stay with her? Arya didn’t think she had the heart to chase her away for the second time if she did. Besides, she was family. She couldn’t abandon her family.

*So is Gendry. You know he is,* said an insistent voice inside her head.
The village was quiet, all lights out bar a lonely torch flickering in its stand near the cage. Arya surveyed the surroundings and saw just one guard – just one, Gendry too confirmed after a while. The man was leaning against the tree and if he was not asleep already, he was not far off, judging from his slump.

Gendry took care of him by smacking him in the head with the blunt end of his hammer, then muffled him and pulled a sack over his head so he couldn’t see anything even should he gain consciousness.

Arya rushed to the cage. Nymeria had been walking back and forth inside, observing the events as they unfolded, but not making a noise.

“Nymeria, it’s me, Arya. I am here to get you out,” Arya whispered while attending to the latch. It was crudely made, with no lock but an iron chain coiled around it to make it more difficult to open. Carefully, very carefully, Arya started to uncoil the chain, moving each loop over another as fast as she could while ensuring the ends didn’t clang against each other.

She had no time to spend with Nymeria, but from the pointed ears and a tail that was steadily swishing from side to side, she concluded that she knew they were there to help her.

“I am so sorry about what happened. I never wanted to drive you away, but I had to, to save you,” she muttered to the wolf while her hands worked. One more loop, one more tug and lift, and the door of the cage opened.

“Gendry, behind me,” she hissed. He had been keeping guard but at her urging moved closer. Arya didn’t truly worry about Nymeria attacking him as long as he was with her – but Gendry didn’t seem as confident. The whites of his eyes flashed in the darkness as he stared at the wolf, his whole body tense.

The door was open by then, but instead of jumping out, Nymeria stopped in front of it and raised her nose towards the sky. She took in the smells, pricked her ears – and finally, leapt. She landed softly on her paws and without stopping, ran towards the end of the square that was closest to the edge of the forest.

Arya watched her go; while part of her rejoiced, another part ached. She had hoped there would have been time for even short goodbyes, for one last hug…

She heaved a sigh and stepped down from the cart: time to return to the camp. Most likely nobody had even noticed they had been away, and tomorrow they would move on--

“Arya.” Gendry’s voice was tight.

“Yes?” She looked at him, concerned. Had they been seen?

“I think it’s waiting for you.”

Arya glanced at the direction here Nymeria had run – and there, she had indeed stopped, looking at her over her shoulder. As she had done when they had played chase – waiting for her to follow her.

Something vast and warm bloomed inside her chest. No matter the inconvenience, no matter the dangers of the road, she knew her journey had taken a new turn.

“So she is,” she said softly to Gendry, bending to pick up her bedroll and sack of belongings from the ground. Straightening, she turned to look at her companion. “I must go.”
Gendry stared at her, an odd look in his face.

*Please, come with us,* Arya wanted to say, but didn’t.

It had to be Gendry’s own decision. He had to forge his own path and make his own decisions. She owed it to him, just as she had owed it to Nymeria.

Chapter End Notes

Arya and Nymeria, together again – yay!! I hope this was not too obvious…(Oh, what the heck, even if it was obvious, I still liked writing it.)

In the next chapter we’ll meet Brienne again – and Jaime. How is our favourite blonde, after his shocking statement from the last time??
Lion Defeated

Chapter Notes

This chapter was rather difficult and challenging for me to write, mostly because of Jaime. I hope it comes off as intended; a study into his personal development and things surrounding it… Million thanks for Hardlyfatal for betaing once more!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brienne

No. It can’t be.

Brienne dropped Blaze’s reins and hurried back to where Jaime was lying and kneeled on the ground. Sharp stones pricked her knees but she ignored them.

“What do you mean? Are you hurt?”

Jaime only stared at her, the whites of his eyes flashing in the dim light. He looked more intense and serious than Brienne had ever seen him before. She skimmed her hands over his legs exploring for wounds, protruding bones, anything. All she could feel was the shape of them, well-muscled and strong, although slack and unresponsive when she prodded him in the thigh.

She tried to think. She had heard of such injuries before, of men losing the use of their legs. Yet for a strong man like Jaime, so suddenly – how could it be? She, too, had been manhandled by Zaggo in his frenzied attack, but she had only a few bruises and cuts to show for it.

She shook Jaime’s shoulder. “Can you move at all? Can you move your hands?”

Jaime’s eyes were wide and vacant, as if he weren’t truly there.

“I can’t feel my legs. I can’t move them.” His speech was slurred.

He is still in shock, Brienne understood.

She looked around, at all her preparations for a swift escape. Jaime was clearly in no condition to ride, nor for much else. She rubbed her face wearily. What should she do?

After a moment’s indecision, Brienne got up. She couldn’t leave Jaime behind. She had to find a way.

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Since they couldn’t rely on a fast escape, Brienne had to think of something else to deter possible pursuers. She mounted Blaze and guiding the two other horses by their reins, rode back and forth through the camp, trying to leave behind as many hoof-prints as possible to make it look like a large group of riders had been there.

She dragged the bodies away from their bedrolls and pursing her lips in distaste, sliced their limbs with a few carefully planned sword thrusts to make it appear they had died fighting. After that unpleasant task, she positioned them in the middle of the camp and placed swords in their hands. Anyone finding them would soon enough discover their slit throats, but they might think it was done after they had already fallen for their other wounds.

Brienne hoped her charade would give an impression of a group of soldiers surprising the sellswords, killing them all in a short and decisive fight and then fleeing with the captives. Every now and then she glanced in Jaime’s direction, but he hadn’t moved. He didn’t seem to pay any attention to her actions, lying flat on his back, staring up at the starry sky.

After Brienne was satisfied that she had done all she could, she unsaddled Blaze and muttering her apologies, harnessed her in front of the cart. She didn’t want to risk it with the others in case they were not trained as draft horses. There would be time for that later.

Getting Jaime into the cart was not easy. His whole body was unresponsive and his limbs dangled uselessly as Brienne pulled him up, but she got him there in the end nonetheless. She had already removed the ropes binding his hands, and after getting him settled as comfortable as she could, she noticed Jaime rubbing his wrists - so at least he still had a use of his hands. Good. Brienne decided to leave further probing of his condition for later, as for now it was imperative that they get out of there as soon as possible.

The pale sky in the horizon, the first harbinger of dawn, urged her on when she finally steered them along the small road at which they had arrived. Driving the wagon meant she had to rely on roads or an open flat terrain, limiting her choices for the escape route.

North, she decided; she would turn as soon as she found a fork in the road leading that way. They could travel first in that direction to distract anyone seeking them from the west or immediate east, and after making some distance, they could turn back towards the inn at the crossroads. That’s where they had been heading, and that’s where the Stark forces would be waiting. Where Lady Catelyn would be waiting, Brienne hoped.

Her lady would know what to do next.

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Brienne kept up a good pace for as long as she could after having identified a dirt track leading towards the north. That time of early morning there was no other traffic, but even as the day went on, they met nobody. It was just as well, as although she tried to keep an alert eye on their surroundings, on the horses, and on Jaime, her head was heavy and more than once she found herself in a slumped position, tiredness seeping into her bones after the sleepless night. The horses did better than she, having rested in the camp, but by midday Brienne couldn’t fight the fatigue any longer and pulled to a stop near a small stream.

Jaime hadn’t said anything during the drive, and when Brienne checked on him, he seemed to be asleep. She hesitated for a moment. Should she wake him up for a proper inspection or let him rest? In the end, she thought getting stock of the extent of his injuries was more important than his sleep.

“Jaime?” she whispered and shook his shoulder. Jaime groaned but didn’t open his eyes. “I need to
have a look at you. Of...what’s wrong with your legs. I am sorry, but I have to move you a bit.”

Getting no answer, Brienne prodded his legs again with her hands. Deciding she needed a better look, she unbuttoned Jaime’s breeches and lifted his body to allow her to pull them down. His smallclothes she left on, already feeling embarrassed of invading his privacy in such an intimate manner.

Besides some minor scrapes, his legs looked perfect. As a matter of fact, more than perfect. Long, shapely, covered in a fuzz of golden hair. After turning him on his stomach – a move Jaime feebly protested against but she ignored – Brienne lifted his tunic and saw his whole back covered in fresh welts, still red and swollen, but already showing signs of developing into deep shades of blue and purple, given time.

She saw no blood, no obvious signs of broken or misshapen bones; absolutely no reason to explain the lack of response and control Jaime had talked about. Brienne turned him over again and lifted his right leg up from the knee into an arch – but when she let go, it fell down with a thump.

“It can’t be, it can’t be,” Jaime mumbled. He reached his hand on his thigh and squeezed it, slapped it, hit it. “I can’t feel anything. This can’t be!”

Brienne felt woefully inadequate to handle the situation. Had it been a broken bone, she could have tried to set it right. Had it been an open wound, she had experience in cleaning and dressing them. For this – she had nothing.

“I’ll take you to a maester. They’ll know what to do.” She knew it was not much solace, but that was all she had.

Brienne helped Jaime’s breeches back on, offered him a skin of water, but when he just pushed it aside, she covered him with a blanket and patted him awkwardly on the shoulder. Then she watered the horses, ate and drank a bit, and lay down for a small rest, dozing in the sun.

Her last thoughts before drifting into sleep were about Jaime. What had truly happened, and how bad was it? Where could she find a maester to have a look at his legs?

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Brienne woke up to an eerie sensation of someone watching her. She lifted her head, still groggy, and tried to focus on her surroundings. The road was empty and the horses were grazing peacefully next to the cart, their tails swishing lazily to deter flies. The scene couldn’t have been more peaceful.

And then she saw Jaime. He had dragged himself to the edge of the cart and was staring at her, his features contorted into something terrible, fires of fury and hatred smouldering in his narrowed eyes.

When he saw that Brienne had noticed him, he spoke. “You.”

Brienne blinked.

“It was your fault.” His voice was strained, words clipped. “Had you not decided to play hero and attack them, I would be now feasting in my father’s camp, getting ready to do what I do best: lead the attack on Stark forces.”

“I... I did what I had to do. I couldn’t -“

“Your actions angered him and he took it all out on me,” Jaime spoke over her as if she hadn’t
opened her mouth at all. “Yes, your actions, and you lie there as if nothing happened, all hale and hearty - and look at me!”

Brienne stood up but hesitated on her spot. Should she try to argue with him, talk some sense into him? Would that only fire his fury even more? The worst thing was that Jaime was right; if she hadn’t interfered, none of this would have happened.

But then Lady Catelyn would have become a Lannister prisoner, and who knew what would have happened to her?

Whatever she could say was going to sound hollow and empty, so she decided it was better to say nothing at all. Instead, she walked up to Blaze and guided her between the cart’s shafts; it was time to move on.

The rest of the day Jaime kept to himself and Brienne didn’t try to engage him. Slowly and surely, they covered a respectable distance before the night fell.

Having seen no signs of human inhabitation, Brienne chose a clearing a small distance away from the road, still reachable by the cart. It was not as well-protected as she would have hoped, but there wasn’t much she could do about it.

She set the camp with practised ease, unharnessing and rubbing down Blaze, hobbling her and the two other horses. One was a skittish chestnut mare, the other a placid bay gelding. It took a while, as did cutting some grass for them in addition to what they could eat in their spot, and carrying a water bucket – filled earlier – where they could reach it. Then she set the bedrolls on the ground, collected dry branches from the forest and made a fire.

Carrying Jaime from the cart to his bedroll she wrinkled her nose; he smelled like urine.

“What did you expect? I couldn’t hold it any longer.” His voice was low, bitter.

“You should have told me,” Brienne started, then stopped. “What do you mean, you ‘couldn’t hold it any longer’? Could you hold it? I mean, do you have control over it?”

“What do you care how I piss?” Jaime muttered. His face was drawn, dark circles under his eyes. That was the first time Brienne had seen him without some kind of smirk or sneer on his face, as if he had knowledge of a jest nobody else knew about. It was disconcerting to see him so… expressionless.

“I only mean that if you can hold it, you have at least some control…down there,” she finished weakly. She remembered an ex-steward in her father’s household, who had lost the use of his legs and spent the last few years of his life in a chair, looked after by his daughters. He had been unable to control his bodily functions and needed to wear swaddles like a babe, a sad ending for a once-strong man.

To imagine that as Jaime’s fate gave her a cold chill.

Jaime snorted. “The next time I need to piss, shall I tell you? Will you hold my cock for me? Are you now not only my jailor but my nursemaid as well?”

Brienne blushed. If she didn’t want to let him foul himself further… the smell was already bad
enough.

“I guess I’ll have to. So tell me.” Then another thought crossed her mind. “What about… the other thing?” If possible, her cheeks felt even hotter.

“Shitting, you mean? I wouldn’t worry about that unless I start shitting air. I haven’t had a bite to eat for ages.” Jaime heaved his upper body to rest on his elbows and pushed himself clumsily on his side to face away from Brienne, seemingly having had enough of the discussion.

Brienne let him stew in his spite and examined the food supplies she had gathered from their captors. She settled on a simple meal of bread, pickled onions and hard cheese, cutting enough for both of them. When she offered the platter to Jaime, however, he ignored it.

“You have to eat.”

“Why?”

Brienne was baffled by the question. “To maintain your strength. To stay alive.” He prodded the platter against his back once more.

“What strength? Who cares if I do? You should have just cut my throat and be done with it.”

“I couldn’t…”

“Of course you could!” Jaime interrupted her and turned to look at her. If Brienne had wished for some life in him, plenty showed now on his face: he was furious. “I am useless! What kind of life do I have left if I can’t use my legs? What kind of man will I be, what kind of a soldier?”

“You are still a Lannister, your family…”

“Family!” Jaime cut off her words again and laughed, a bitter, mocking sound. “Do you think the great Lord Tywin would put much store on a cripple? Imagine that: a dwarf, a woman and a cripple carrying his legacy. Oh, how House Reyne would laugh to hear that - if there was anyone left to laugh, that is.”

“Fathers love their children regardless,” Brienne said, an image of her own father, so patient and understanding with her own shortcomings, passing through her mind.

“You don’t know the Lannisters as well as I do, clearly. And Cersei…” Jaime closed his eyes and ground his teeth. “Cersei wouldn’t understand. She has always detested weakness – as have I.”

Brienne didn’t know what to say. What was between Jaime and her sister, she didn’t know for sure and didn’t want to think of.

She ate her meal, added more wood to the fire, checked on the horses one more time and finally, wrapped a blanket around her body and settled on her bedding. Jaime lay still, his blanket abandoned on his side. He had been quiet since his outburst, but just as Brienne was about to close her eyes, he spoke.

“This is how the gods pay me back for what I did to that boy.” There was no heat in his words anymore. Nor emotion of any kind, his tone flat and lifeless.

“What boy?” Brienne had no idea what he was talking about.

“The Stark boy. The one who fell. He didn’t fall – I pushed him.”
Oh! Brienne had heard of Bran Stark from Lady Catelyn. The deep grief caused by his accident had been still raw, and Brienne had felt sorry for her suffering, and for the boy. And now the Kingslayer was telling that it had been his doing all along?

“You! Why?”

“He saw us, Cersei and me. I couldn’t let him tell it to others; Robert would have killed Cersei.” Jaime stared at her, some of his old defiance back in his eyes. He had turned his head but his body was immobile, his arms laid unnaturally straight against his sides.

Brienne felt sick at the stomach. So it was true, all those horrible rumours of abominable acts. How could she have ever felt sympathy for this man?

Jaime must have detected the shift in her, as he continued.

“Some say it’s unnatural and wrong, but on the contrary; it’s the most natural thing in the world. Targaryens knew it, they practised it for thousands of years. We were always together, she and I, we were as one. Then came Robert and the Kingsguard… but the bond we share couldn’t be severed by a mere blustering fool and his cronies.” Jaime’s features had come alive again, his mouth pinched and his eyes pained.

He stared at his legs, and instinctively Brienne did the same, but they looked the same as before.

She didn’t know why she said what she did next; how she could even imagine condoning something so vile.

“Then she will still be yours. If you love someone, things like this don’t matter.”

Jaime curled his right hand into a fist and punched his thigh with it. The sound it made was a soft thump, but that was all the reaction it elicited.

“You don’t know Cersei. She abhors imperfection. Though she is not the same Cersei I grew up with any more, I doubt it has changed. So many other things have…” Jaime’s voice fell to a whisper.

Again, Brienne was left speechless. Jaime’s confessions were too much for her; she didn’t want to hear them. She had to concentrate on more important things.

For the rest of the night, Jaime stayed quiet and Brienne slept. In her dreams she was facing Zaggo’s rage again, trying to cover her head, her stomach – and suddenly her hands were free and she fought back, but once she grabbed a hold of Zaggo’s neck and threw him on the ground, he changed into Jaime and she was staring at Jaime’s green eyes, widening in shock and pain.

She woke up her heart racing, and it took a long while before she slept again.

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The second day was much the same as the first. Brienne tried harnessing the other horses to share the load of pulling, but it was clear that neither of them had had any experience between the shafts, so she had to abandon the attempt.

Twice she chose a route that cut across the fields, once she got lost, but overall they made decent progress. Jaime had withdrawn to himself once again and didn’t answer any of Brienne’s enquiries, not even with anger.

He did tell her, though, when he needed to piss, and Brienne dragged him to a sitting position at the
edge of the cart and balanced him when he did his business. She didn’t actually have to hold his
cock, but there was no way she could have averted her eyes completely and still hold him steady.
What she saw was very much like what she had seen before, flashed in front of her by someone who
thought it amusing to goad her that way. Her usual reaction had been an exasperated sigh, rolling of
eyes, maybe a quip if she knew the culprit well enough. Yet somehow it was different when it was
Jaime, the man who had driven her to exasperation, anger, sympathy and a whole host of other
emotions, one after another.

Brienne blushed and turned her head away. How embarrassing that her first close-up encounter with
the curious appendage that so many men and women seemed to hold in such special regard
happened this way, and with a man like Jaime: the Warrior come alive. Before.

She couldn’t help thinking how hilarious Jaime would have found the situation before, and how
remorselessly he would have teased her with his sarcastic comments. That he didn’t was even more
concerning than his foul mood or general listlessness.

Brienne knew she really should have done something about the state of his clothes, help him change
or something, but there wasn’t anything to change him into, and the thought of humiliating Jaime
further by leaving him naked was too much. Better to let him have his dignity for a little while
longer.

Jaime was morose in the evening, again refusing his food. Brienne tried to force some morsels down
his throat, worried that he would be too weakened to travel should he continue in that vein, but after
a few attempts where most of the food ended up on the ground, she gave up. She also tried to get
him to talk, about something, anything, but Jaime just stared into the fire and ignored her.

Somehow it felt even lonelier to travel with him than it had been when she had been all alone.

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On the third day, Brienne had to help Jaime with the ‘other thing’. It consisted mainly of carrying
him from and to the cart, and wrapping her arms around his chest and holding him steady while he
squatted by the roadside. By then, their forced closeness had left no room for squeamishness and
Brienne found her task just like any other she had to do; worthy to be done well if it had to be done.

When she carried him in her arms, the strange intimacy of it made her chest tighten, especially when
Jaime’s fingers squeezed her shoulder when he tried to hold his balance. His strength was still
palpable in his upper torso and arms, in stark contrast to the slackness of his legs.

In truth, had Jaime wanted to overcome her, he would have had his chance during those moments, or
many others when Brienne had her back turned to him. After subduing her he could have dragged
himself to the driver’s seat, turned the cart west, and driven until meeting someone who could have
taken him to his father’s camp.

Yet, he didn’t.

Brienne wanted to hate him as she had done before. She had even more reasons now, after having
heard about Bran Stark and Jaime’s abhorrent liaison with his sister – but she couldn’t. Much to her
own dismay and annoyance, what she felt towards him was…pity. Compassion, even empathy.

Maybe it was those emotions that made her pay more attention to Jaime as the day went on, and what
she saw worried her. There was something troubling in the way Jaime seemed so defeated, as if the
fire that had burned inside him so hot earlier had been quenched. Yes, he had driven her crazy, and
had been almost too much to bear – but the air of cold misery hanging around him now was too
thick, too suffocating. For some reason it made Brienne feel colder too, and stirred in her an unexplainable urge to make his life as comfortable as she could.

Once when checking on him over her shoulder, she saw something wet on his face, and his eyes gleaming suspiciously bright. He turned his head and wiped his face with the back of his hand as soon as he saw her looking, and Brienne did the only honourable thing she could: she looked away. However, the sight disturbed her - it disturbed her a lot.

Brienne had made a soft bed at the back of the cart from their blankets and extra hay she had cut for the horses. When she laid Jaime on it after another break and a piss, her hand touched something hard. Perplexed, she traced it with her fingers and picked it up.

It was a dagger; specifically, one of the daggers she had confiscated from their captors and thought to have been secured safely on her belt. A glance at her waist confirmed that only an empty sheath was left; Jaime must have seized it during one of the times she had carried him.

“What is this?” she asked, stupidly. “Why do you have it?”

“Nothing. For nothing,” Jaime answered, stony-faced.

“Why would you have stolen it, if it was for nothing? Do you plan to attack me from behind? That would be low even by your standards, Kingslayer.” Brienne spoke more harshly than she had intended, annoyed at such blatant lapse in her vigilance.

“Why? Why do you think? If you have no guts to finish a wounded animal, someone else has to do it!” Jaime snarled and reached out to take the dagger from her hand. Brienne stepped back, horrified. Did he mean what she thought he meant?

“Taking one’s own life is a coward’s way. Whatever I thought of you, I didn’t think you were one,” she scolded him and slid the dagger back into its sheath. Jaime withdrew and his face turned impassive again.

No more was said about the dagger, but the incident troubled Brienne for the rest of the day. For Jaime to want to kill himself…why was he giving up so easily? Where was his spirit, so strong even when he had been shackled and bound? Maybe his condition could yet be cured?

In the evening, after yet another unsuccessful attempt to make Jaime eat, Brienne felt she had to say something.

“Jaime, about the dagger earlier today…” It was like talking to a wall, but she had to try. “You still have much to live for. Being a soldier is not the only way of life. You can return to Casterly Rock, perhaps. Maybe serve in the Small Council. You could do good things…”

She was interrupted by a loud snort. Jaime threw his head back and laughed – but it was a hollow laugh, tinged with melancholy.

“Good things?”

Brienne took a deep breath and held it, releasing it slowly. A flash of suppressed ire ran through her entire body, her patience starting to wear thin.

“Yes, good things! What is so amusing about that? You have done enough evil deeds, it might be time to try something else!” She glared at Jaime, her nostrils flaring. For once, the familiar heat on her cheeks was from anger, not from embarrassment.
Jaime stopped laughing and fixed his gaze on her.

“I tried doing a good deed once. It is still remembered as the most monstrous crime in recent history. They gave me a nickname for it, too. You may have heard it: *Kingslayer*, they call me.”

“It was *not* a good deed. Robert Baratheon benefited from it, as did your father, but it was neither honourably nor well done. You broke your vows,” Brienne said, angry how someone could be deluded to think a deliberate murder of a king one was sworn to protect a *good* thing.

“You think so? Of course you do, all of you do. None of you knows about King’s Landing and its people, or what would have become of them had I not killed the mad king.”

“The people of the King’s Landing? What do they have to do with this?” Brienne stared at him. What kind of delusions had this man harboured all these years?

“Oh, them? They didn’t die.” Jaime smirked, but it was just a ghost of his old smirk, with no strength or conviction.

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that Aerys meant to set the whole city on fire. Not just any fire; he had caches after caches of *wildfire* buried under the city. Under The Great Sept of Baelor, under Flea Bottom, under all the city gates – even under the Red Keep.” Jaime shifted, pushing his upper body higher against the tree he was leaning against. “You may not have heard much about wildfire, but it burns green and hotter than the seven hells and even water does nothing to quench it.”

Brienne blinked. Yes, she had heard stories of Rickard and Brandon Stark’s demise by the foul substance, and the songs about the tragedy at Summerhall, rumoured to have had something to do with wildfire.

“Towards the end, King Aerys suspected treachery around every corner, and he was not going to let those who conspired against him to benefit from their betrayal. No, he was going to burn it all and leave them only charred remains. To Robert, to my father…” Jaime went quiet and stared into someplace only he could see, maybe into the throne room of the Red Keep. Brienne said nothing.

Eventually Jaime roused. “He commanded Rossant, his new Hand of the King and his favourite pyromancer, to take the word to all the other pyromancers waiting in readiness to light the fire. I was the only one in the room besides them, and I heard it all.”

He grinned, a sad, vacant grin.

“I killed Rossant first. Then Aerys, then all the remaining pyromancers within the next few days. And half a million people in the city went on with their pitiful lives never knowing how close they had been to burning to a crisp.”

Brienne listened to him in horror. *Could it be true? If so*…

“Why didn’t you tell it to anyone? If that is true, you should have been hailed as a hero, not a villain!”

“Who would have believed me if I did? Ned Stark took one look at me and decided I was not worthy of cleaning his boots. My father thought I did for the family. Cersei was too busy getting married to the new king. Tyrion was too young to hear any of that.” Jaime huffed. “See, even you don’t believe it. *If* that is true?”
'I didn’t mean…’

‘Forget it. I shouldn’t have said anything. Nonetheless, I have had enough of doing good things.’

‘Who knows about it?’ Brienne still couldn’t fully comprehend what Jaime was saying. Why had he kept that information hidden all these years? It didn’t absolve him from breaking his vows, but it did make a difference.

‘I do. And now you.’

With that, Jaime used his hands to haul away from her and lay down on the ground. He was done talking. Brienne wanted to ask him more questions and find out what had happened and why, but the last few days had shown her that if Jaime didn’t want to talk, there was no way to make him.

Brienne couldn’t sleep that night, troubled by what she had heard. The Kingslayer, saviour of innocent people?

A hero – or a villain?

Or just a man?

Chapter End Notes

Jaime’s path in this fic is harder than in the canon, or even in the show, and that is reflected in how he reacts and behaves – no more snarky, sardonic Jaime to whom everything can be mocked or disparaged. For me this path is believable and logical based on how I have interpreted his character, but I understand if someone feels that this is not him, not truly. I would be interested in hearing views about this, so don’t be shy to share if you have any!

In the next chapter we are back with Awesome Threesome No. 1, that is Sansa, Sandor and Ned – as soon as I get over this stupid cold that has taken over my life for the whole week – as if I didn’t have enough on my plate already! (Or maybe that’s why… *sigh*)
I can’t believe I am still sick! Even so much as not to get much benefit - writing-wise - from a whole week out of office… But here is one more chapter, at least.

When we saw them last time, Sandor was brooding over the unexpected news and Sansa was having trouble sleeping. So where shall Sandor’s broodings take him? Has Sansa caught up with her beauty sleep?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

The next morning dawned like any other day, but as they readied for the journey ahead, instead of securing Sandor to the strappings at the back of the cart, Ned went to him and started to untie the knots that bound his hands and feet. One after another he undid them, meticulously and painstakingly, the knots having seized after staying in place for such a long time.

Sandor observed his actions under his brow, saying nothing but his rigid posture betrayed tension in him. Sansa wasn’t sure what to expect; was Ned going to release him fully or only set up some new arrangement?

In the end, when all the ropes had been removed, Ned gestured towards the front seat.

“We have some things to discuss, Clegane. I have something to ask and I don’t like doing it with a man who is tied and bound. Can I trust that you’ll hear me out?”

Sansa drew her breath, wondering if it had been a wise move. Yes, it showed Sandor that Ned was serious and ready to treat him as an equal rather than as his captive. It also exposed him; if Sandor had it in his mind to reverse their roles and capture them, Ned wouldn’t be able to withstand him.

Sansa knew it, Ned knew it - and Sandor knew it.

Without further comment, Sandor climbed up and took his seat as if it was nothing unusual. Ned followed him and gathered the reins while Sansa clambered into the back. The cart started moving and soon they were travelling on the dirt road once again: slowly, steadily, in silence.

Sansa wanted to believe that she had been right and that Sandor wouldn’t do anything foolish. Yet to be precise, he hadn’t actually promised her anything the previous evening. Hadn’t said he would consider any offers Ned might make, had made no promises about not trying to apprehend them and take them back. As a matter of fact, he had challenged Ned’s good intentions, kept on asking why Sansa would care one way or another what he did, and then diverted the discussion to how she had changed.

Sansa was ashamed. She really should have gotten a bit more out of him; some kind of estimation of his stance, at least. A nagging inner voice at the back of her head told her that she should do something to reduce the risk - just in case if the worst case scenario eventuated. She knew herself to
be useless if it turned into a real fight between the men, but what little she could do, she should.

Quietly, without attracting attention, Sansa reached for the dagger she had snatched from Sandor’s arsenal of weapons at the start of their journey and kept in the pocket of her skirts ever since. She removed it from its sheath slowly, took a good grip of its handle and settled on a position placing her directly behind Sandor.

If he did anything alarming or if he tried to overpower Ned, she would hit him from behind. Sansa pressed her lips into a tight line and estimated the best place to strike him. Thigh? No, that would slow him down only a little, if even that. Back? That was no good either; she didn’t want to kill him. In the end, she decided on a shoulder or an upper arm, as that might remove Sandor’s ability to use his hand, at least temporarily.

Why she should be concerned about doing him harm if he turned out to be false didn’t cross her mind. Just the same, Sansa felt better after having a plan, so she settled as comfortably as she could on top of the bags and parcels, hand poised and legs tensed for springing up in case she had to actually execute it.

They were silent at first, the only sounds those of the crunching of leaves and twigs beneath the cart’s wheels. Eventually, Ned started talking, but his voice was so low that she couldn’t hear a thing. Sansa strained her ears as much as she could to hear what he said, but all her attempts were futile. She heard only an odd word here and there: ‘Winterfell’ and ‘honour’, from Ned, ‘bugger’ and ‘brother’ from Sandor – the last surprising her. What did Sandor’s brother have to do with any of this? Or maybe it was somebody else’s brother, instead?

It was not an easy discussion, that much was clear. The tension radiating from the two was unmistakable and for a moment Sansa feared the worst. Yet no voices were raised and the horse plodded on at its usual pace. Sun was shining and the air smelled of trees... Sansa started to relax a bit.

There were three possible options, as far as she could discern. The first and the worst option was that Sandor would still hold a grudge and decline Ned’s offer, maybe planning to try to take them back to Joffrey at the first opportune moment. In that case, he might make his move then and there, and depending on Sansa’s actions, Ned’s ability to overcome him, and pure luck, if they succeeded in defeating him they would have no other choice than to truss him up again – or kill him.

Sansa closed her eyes. She knew Ned hadn’t made his threats idly. His family was the most important thing in the world to him, and nothing would prevent him protecting it by any means necessary. He would give Sansa one of those ‘I told you so’ looks and dispatch Sandor quietly and efficiently, and that would be the end of it.

No, that option was simply unthinkable. Sandor couldn’t, he wouldn’t… Sansa sighed.

The second option - even considering it made Sansa’s stomach churn – was that he could agree to leave them in peace and try his luck in finding a new master. If so, he might even travel across the Narrow Sea to join one of the many sellsword companies always in need of new recruits. Sansa knew that to be a real possibility for masterless men, both from her readings of history as well as from what she had heard of such things in the court. Should that be his choice, Sansa might never see him again.

The notion discomfited her more than she would have expected. To never see him again, to not know what happened to him... She thought of the ‘Lament for the Hound’. If Sandor left, would he end up at the Quiet Isle as a broken man, after all? If he joined them or returned to Kings Landing, would the same happen? Were the future and people’s fates preordained and inevitable – or had she
already changed everything with her actions: for her family, for the realm, for Sandor?

The third and the most satisfactory option was that Sandor would accept that his life with the Lannisters was over and agree to join House Stark. Then everything would be possible. They could continue their journey as true companions, not as captors and their captive. Sandor could put his skills and knowledge in their service, and his intimate knowledge of the Lannisters and the court might even give them an edge in some matters.

Yes, that would definitively be the best option. Notwithstanding her own confused feelings about the man, Sansa wanted to see him in a good place. Who knew, maybe a different environment away from the Lannisters and his brother might even give him a chance to recover from his past trauma?

The discussion ceased and both men fell silent again. Sansa wanted to ask what had been decided but assessed that the time was not yet right. She would have to wait until their next break – even if the anticipation almost killed her.

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The ride seemed to continue forever, while Sansa’s impatience grew. She shifted on her seat, surveyed the roadside for an excuse for a stop, rearranged their belongings in order to keep her mind occupied, and fidgeted in general. Just as she decided she couldn’t wait a minute more, they heard sounds behind them. Steady trot of at least a dozen or more horses, accompanied with a clanking of metal signifying that the riders were carrying arms.

Sansa twisted her neck and there, at a bend in the road, she saw a band of soldiers wearing Lannister colours emerging. She grabbed a better hold of the side of the cart. They had been passed by Lannister troops before – but this was the first time when Sandor was sitting in the front seat in a prominent position to attract their notice, should he want to. All the other times he had been trussed and tied at the back, Ned’s dagger poised in readiness to strike him should he do anything unwise.

She looked furtively at Ned and Sandor, then back at the approaching soldiers. If Sandor had any inclinations to betray them, to attempt to play the card of redeeming himself…now was the time. All that was needed was a shout, a wave, a push to dislodge Ned from his seat to the ground to draw attention.

If he did that, Sansa’s dagger would be useless in face of such numbers.

It was all up to Sandor.

Cold sweat trickled down Sansa’s forehead and without thinking, she scooted closer to Sandor’s broad back. She dropped the dagger and reached for him with her hand and placed it on his thigh. It was highly inappropriate, she knew, but she didn’t care.

Please.

Sandor tensed and his leg turned hard as steel. He glanced down and stared at her for a moment – and lifted his hood over his head.

“Move aside! Make way for the king’s business!” the first rider shouted.

Ned steered the horse to the side of the road, then halted it altogether, waiting with downcast eyes for the riders to pass. Sandor did the same, and Sansa covered her head with her own hood, sliding down in her seat until she lay in a crouching position at the bottom of the cart.

The soldiers rode past in haste, not at all interested in them, so they must have been about some other
business than searching for fugitives. After an agonisingly long time – which probably was not more than a few minutes – the riders were finally well past them, the dirt churned from the horses’ hooves the last visible sign of them even having been there.

Ned clucked at the horse and gave it a flick of the reins and the cart creaked into motion. Sansa closed her eyes and only then realised that her hand was still resting on Sandor’s thigh. She withdrew it slowly and clasped her hands together. Relief made her giddy; Sandor had not betrayed them.

*Not that option, then!*

Sansa smiled but soon turned serious again. Sandor could still leave them. Yet the fact that they were still continuing ahead must mean something, didn’t it? If Sandor had decided to leave their company and Ned had agreed to it, surely he would have called a stop to saddle his horse and ride away?

Sansa itched to ask Ned for details, but the men had started to talk again and she didn’t want to interrupt them. She tapped her fingers impatiently against the blade of the dagger she was still clutching, and noticing it, sighed and sheathed it. At least she hadn’t had to resort to stabbing a man from behind.

After a while, their pace slowed down and then came to a halt. Even before the cart had fully stopped, Sandor vaulted down – and Sansa’s heart jumped to her throat. Was this it – was he going to take his things and his horse and ride away without looking back?

While Sansa sat frozen on her spot, Sandor walked to the back of the cart and reached across the back panel.

“Sandor,” Sansa gasped.

He glanced at her but didn’t stop to listen to what she had to say. It was just as well, as Sansa didn’t know what she wanted to say.

‘*Please stay*’?

‘*Don’t go*’?

Instead of his armour, securely wrapped in empty grain sacks, he grabbed the wooden bucket they used for carrying water to the horse. While Sansa stared at him, he strolled down the embankment to a small stream emerging from the bushes alongside the road and bent to fill the bucket with water.

Watering their horse in the middle of the day in itself was not unusual, but so far it had always been Ned doing it, while Sansa had held the reins. For Sandor to do that…

Sansa rose on her knees and prodded Ned on the shoulder.

“Father, what did you agree? Did you ask him, what did he say?”

Ned turned to face her.

“I asked. We argued.” His eyes turned to Sandor, stooping over the small stream, waiting for the bucket to fill.

“What did you argue about?”

“Everything. He said all the lords are the same. That he would be better on his own. That what in the gods’ names would he do freezing his ass off in the North under some snotty-nosed youth who
fancies himself a great warrior.” Ned glanced at Sansa. “His words, not mine.”

“Oh.” Sansa frowned. “What did you say to him, then?”

“I told him that the North is different, that we don’t care if a man is a knight or not. That he might find it difficult to find anyone to take him into his service because of his reputation, and that he could help me – and answer only to me – to strengthen our defences in case of Joffrey’s retaliation. Having a man who knows the southern ways could be useful for us.”

“Did he believe you?”

“He swore it was his brother’s reputation that smirched his name, but I told him he’s not exactly a septon either. And that if I and my family trusted him,” Ned glanced at Sansa again, “- at this stage it refers to you, mostly - my men would trust him, too. If he behaved in a way that invited trust.”

“But he agreed in the end, didn’t he?”

“He did – but said he’ll swear no oaths. I told him that in this case, his word as a man, given while looking me in the eye, was good enough for me.”

By then Sandor had climbed back on the road again, carrying a brimming bucket in his hand as if it weighed nothing. Ned pinched the bridge of his nose and heaved a heavy sigh.

“So for good or bad, from now on, Sandor Clegane is a Stark man.”

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“Why did you do it?”

Sansa dropped the basket of vegetables she had just picked up from the back of the cart. Sandor had appeared by her side so silently she hadn’t even noticed. For a man of his size, he could move surprisingly nimbly when he wanted.

Gathering the few loose onions that had rolled out of the basket, she turned to him. Sandor reached for the bedrolls behind her, hoisting the whole bundle up in one sweeping motion. It was the end of the day’s journey and Ned was unharnessing the horse in the front and couldn’t see them from where they were.

“What do you mean?”

Sandor stopped and looked at her, then at her hand clutching at an onion, and she understood. “Oh.”

Sansa had known at the time that touching him, especially so high up on his leg, was improper; touching another person not a member of one’s family was simply not done. Not only propriety, but general good manners prohibited such familiar gestures, especially between men and women.

“I… I am sorry. I didn’t truly doubt you, but…” Sansa tried to gather her thoughts. Would it be an insult to confess that she had had reservations about him, after declaring earlier how much she believed in him?

Just be honest with him, her own words came back to her. Sansa squared her shoulders.

“I had a moment of fear: fear that your old loyalties might dictate your actions. I guess I wanted to remind you that it was not necessary anymore. To ask you to consider, in case if you had any such inclinations.”
Sandor stared at her, but refusing to be intimidated by it, Sansa gathered the remaining onions and put them back into the basket. She pulled it closer to the edge but didn’t lift it just yet.

“You thought I was going to give you up, is that it?”

“No, not really, I only got scared for a moment. But then again, even just last night you said how you might capture us and take us back, and made no promises you wouldn’t.”

Sandor dropped his gaze and muttered, “I guess I didn’t.” Then he grabbed the bundle of pans and griddles into his other hand.

“Still, are you so naïve as to not know that proper ladies don’t grope on men? Only certain kinds of women do.”

Sansa blushed. He meant prostitutes, of course. And the damnable thing was that he was absolutely right.

“I am sorry if that was inappropriate. I meant no harm.”

“So don’t do it again, unless you mean it.” With that parting shot, Sandor turned on his heels and walked away, leaving a confused Sansa staring at his broad back.

Unless I mean it?

Was that a deliberate choice of words on his part? Could he have some inklings of the indecent thoughts in Sansa’s mind, had he seen the sideways looks she had diverted at him? Was that an invitation for something?

Shaking her head, Sansa lifted the basket and walked next to the fire Sandor was preparing, refusing to look at him.

Surely it had been just a figure of speech.

Sansa’s anxiety settled after the confirmation that exactly what she had hoped for had come to pass. Sandor had given his word, he had joined them, and her belief in him had been well-placed. She knew Ned was still cautious and would only become convinced of Sandor’s sincerity over time, but that was fair enough and to be expected. He was of the generation and culture to whom men’s actions spoke louder than their words.

Nonetheless, their journey became quite different after the resolution, although outwardly the monotony of the road remained the same. Sandor became truly part of their team and took upon himself many more things to take care of. He started to set and check the traps for game, leaving just the cooking for Sansa, and he took charge of loading and unloading the cart at the start and end of each day’s journey. He also shared the driving duties with Ned, and sometimes rode his horse and went ahead of them on scouting missions, and it was clear that both horse and rider enjoyed those outings immensely.

In the evenings he and Ned talked, sometimes drawing figures on the ground with sticks and pointing at them, apparently debating about the best plans for the defence of Winterfell. Often their discussions looked like arguments, both men alternatively throwing their hands up in the air in exasperation or raising their voice, but in the end, it all seemed to come good and peace prevailed.

To Sansa’s questions what it was that they argued about, Ned answered that their strategies were
somewhat different, but that he could see some truth in Sandor’s points of view and that he hoped Sandor could see the same in his, and that she needn’t really worry about such things anyway.

It was not that Sansa particularly wanted to learn about castle defences, but sometimes she felt excluded and would have preferred the opportunity to be more involved. And if she had thought that having Sandor become a Stark retainer would make Ned let go some of his vigilance, she was soon proven wrong. If anything, Ned was even more watchful of their interactions and Sansa had no more opportunities to talk privately with Sandor than before.

Not that she would have had much to say, anyway. The need for convincing him was over, Ned was telling him all he needed to know in his new position – so what could Sansa offer? Chit-chat?

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It was another warm day of travel and just another roadside watering hole. This one had an ancient stone trough built into a place where it was naturally filled with water from a small stream, providing relief for human and beast alike.

It was Sandor’s turn to drive the cart and he pulled over, leading the horse towards the trough. As soon as the cart stopped, Sansa jumped down to stretch her legs. She missed sitting up front with Ned, although riding at the back of the cart had its advantages, too.

She wandered a bit further ahead while Ned and Sandor took care of the horse and filled their water skins. The road had been quiet for a long while, apparently not so many people travelling in these parts. They had estimated soon to be at the inn at the crossroads, where they had to make their final decision whether to turn west towards Riverrun or continue north to Winterfell. It was likely that Winterfell would win, but only if they found a way to send a message to Riverrun to Catelyn and Robb.

Sansa brushed her hand lazily against a bush at the roadside with beautiful yellow flowers. She should remember what they were called - were they golden cups, perhaps? She picked one up and studied it so intently that she noticed the sound of approaching riders only when they were almost upon them. Startled, she looked up.

Sansa had never seen men like that. They had bushy beards and long moustaches, and hair as wild as the look of shaggy ponies they rode. Most of them shared the same rough look, dressed in fur and rough cloth, but among them she also saw a few wearing more traditional Westeros attire. One of them seemed to be a woman, another a child, riding in the front of the column.

Could these be Northmen?

Excited, she turned to Ned and Sandor – and stopped in her tracks. They, too, had noticed the group, and from the stunned expressions on their faces, Sansa could only conclude that the riders were not Northerners, and that their presence was not welcomed by either Ned or Sandor.

She turned back to the approaching group, and having a closer look at the figure in the front, dropped the flower in her hand.

Him?
Oops, I did it again! A cliffhanger… *smiles sheepishly* Because it is a big cliff, I am not even going to tell whose POV the next chapter is, as it will be a completely new POV. Any guesses?

Or come end say hi in Tumblr at ladytp…
Tyrion shifted in the saddle, his backside chafed after endless days of riding. His legs were cramping, and it didn’t matter how much he tried to stretch them. He was feeling sore, annoyed, tired and increasingly frustrated.

Pox take my father! He had expected so much more, something more, from his father, but he should have guessed he would never get the recognition he deserved from Tywin Lannister. For a moment, after seeing how occupied his father had been with the Stark revolt, Tyrion had even dared to hope… Standing in for him in the capital would have finally put him in the position he deserved. Tyrion Lannister, Acting Hand of the King, would have had a rather nice ring to it – but it was not to be.

Lord Tywin had been content enough to use him and his newly-acquired clans in the battlefield, but after that had followed an unceremonious dispatch to Kings Landing with no particular purpose but to “keep an eye on things and report about what’s going on”.

Still… if it got him out of the war zone, all the better.
Tyrion glanced at the sky and sighed. Several more hours to go before they would camp for the night, so there was nothing else for him to do but endure. They had just reached the Kingsroad and the going was easier, but his hodgepodge group of companions, a handful each of the Stone Crows, Moon Brothers, and Burned Men, were not in a hurry and neither was Tyrion. As a matter of fact, he would have been quite happy to delay meeting his loving sister and delightful nephew for as long as possible. Joffrey as the king and Cersei as the queen dowager, both undoubtedly drunk with power, was not a scenario that filled him with trust or confidence.

His gaze fell on the only source of delight on this miserable journey, Bronn’s unexpected discovery, Shae. She sat on her horse prettily, glancing at him every now and then, smiling wickedly and yet so innocently. To imagine leaving such a treat behind as his father had instructed... never.

Behind the girl was another fresh face, the squire Pod, whom his father had pushed into his service. Not that he looked much of a squire, riding with his shoulders hunched and head bowed. A skinny lad, and awfully quiet. Did his duties well enough, though – and it was probably better that he was not too talkative. Tyrion didn’t really need much competition on that front.

“So, what shall be my duties and their reward once we reach King’s Landing, imp?” Bronn drawled from atop his horse, riding next to him. He was the kind of man who might appear outwardly nonchalant, but Tyrion had learned that it was just a veneer. Bronn the sellsword was sometimes too clever for his own good – but as long as his goals aligned with Tyrion’s own, he didn’t mind.

“To protect my back, as you have done so far, that would be a good start. And to keep your eyes and ears open, and visit the places where I can’t …” Tyrion stopped mid-sentence and narrowed his eyes. They were just passing one of the roadside wells where travellers could let their horses quell their thirst, and his gaze had fallen on a small group of people next to it.

Tyrion raised his hand and pulled the reins of his horse.

Leading a cart horse to a trough was an exceptionally tall man – a man with exceedingly familiar appearance. With the man was another, filling water skins from the trough, but Tyrion paid no attention to him. It was the tall man who had caught his attention, as he was someone who could not be easily mistaken for another, even if he was wearing a hooded cape that covered most of his face.

The target of his attention noticed the approaching riders, looked up, and froze. It gave Tyrion a few more moments to look at him.

Yes. It can’t be anyone else.

“Clegane! What are you doing here in the middle of nowhere?” he greeted the man and rode forward to meet him.

The other man had also stopped and looked at him.

“Shouldn’t you be in King’s Landing babysitting my nephew?” Tyrion continued, puzzled by finding him there with no signs of the royal procession nearby.

The Hound blinked, apparently equally taken by surprise by Tyrion’s sudden appearance.

“The Imp. What are you doing here?”

“Oh, a bit this, a bit of that. After my adventures at the Wall, in the Vale and the Riverlands, I am now on my way to King’s Landing with my erstwhile companions.” He gestured towards his followers, who had stopped to stare at the exchange. “The mountain clans from the Vale, my squire Podrick Payne, and Bronn, the sellsword from...well, it doesn’t matter where.”
He left Shae out of the introductions; no reason to scare the girl any more than necessary with the Hound’s ugly visage. Still receiving no more than an angry stare from the Hound, Tyrion took a closer look at the other man – and received the second surprise of the day.

“Lord Stark! You look…” he sized the man up and down “…surprisingly hale and hearty for a man who is supposed to be languishing in the black cells.”

Eddard Stark – as indeed, there was no mistaking him now that Tyrion had recognised him behind his bushy beard and unkempt appearance – was no more forthcoming than the Hound, just glaring at him without a word. Thoroughly intrigued, Tyrion looked around once more and noticed a young girl some distance away watching the proceedings.

“This must be – of course it is! – lovely Lady Sansa.” Tyrion climbed down from the horse and grimaced at the jolt of hitting the ground. He executed an exaggerated bow in the girl’s direction while casting an appreciative look at how she had seemed to blossom since the last time they had met in Winterfell.

That was an odd assortment of travellers indeed. Tyrion’s curiosity was fully piqued, and he turned back to the Hound.

“You didn’t tell me what you and your companions are doing here. An odd company indeed, especially as the last I heard was that the honourable Lord Eddard Stark was imprisoned as a traitor by my dearest nephew.”

The Hound didn’t reply, but if looks could kill, Tyrion would have been dead for sure.

Tyrion eyed the three of them speculatively. Something was not right. Stark and his daughter were exchanging worried looks with each other, every now and then staring at the Hound, as if expecting him to say something.

“So what is the reason for this arrangement?”

“Secret mission from the King,” the Hound finally grunted.

“What kind of mission?”

“When I say ‘secret’, that means it is up to the King to tell about it, not me.”

Tyrion suddenly remembered why he couldn’t stand the man; he was stubborn, sullen and dour.

“I am the king’s uncle. My sister is the queen, my father is the Hand of the King, and I am on my way to the capital at his behest. If you are here on Joffrey’s business, it is quite appropriate for me to know what business that is.”

The two men measured each other. The situation was somewhat testing for Tyrion, who had to crane his neck sharply to look upright at such a tall man, but damned if he was going to yield. Whatever Clegane was up to – or rather, Joffrey – he was determined to get to the bottom of it.

Eventually the Hound seemed to give in and shifted on his feet.

“I was sent here for an exchange, quiet-like. King Joffrey and Queen Cersei organised it all, and it is to be kept under wraps, not to be talked around in taverns and whorehouses.”

An exchange – of course!
“Exchanging Lord Eddard for Jaime, you mean?”

The Hound nodded, while his companions looked intently at their feet, Lady Sansa leaning on Stark.

“Why you? Why such a small company? Why is Lady Sansa part of the deal? Surely even Joffrey is not so stupid as to give up both of his hostages for one?”

“Maybe not the king, but the queen agreed to it.”

Tyrion grimaced. Of course Cersei would stop at nothing to get Jaime back. He still didn’t understand why only the Hound had been assigned to the mission and why it had been kept so secret. Had Lord Tywin known about it?

Tyrion recalled how, a few days before, his father had received a message that had put him in a good mood for the rest of the evening. Tyrion had assumed it had been to do with some strategic advancement or such and thought no more of it – but now he wondered if it had been Jaime’s imminent release that had put a hint of a smile on that stern face. That Lord Tywin hadn’t seen fit to share the news with him irked him, though. How was he expected to be of help if he didn’t know what the hells was going on?

Seeing that their journey had been stopped for an indeterminate time, some of the Stone Crows had dismounted and led their horses for a drink. Burned Men followed, and after fidgeting a while, Shae stepped down from her horse. Tyrion nodded at Bronn to look after her and make sure she didn’t get into trouble before turning back to the Hound.

“Where is this exchange to take place?”

“At the inn at the crossroads. Robb Stark will go there with Jaime and a small troupe, covertly as well. We will do the exchange and each party gets back on its way.” The Hound turned his back to lead the horse away from the trough. “We are a bit early, as the journey here was faster than expected, so we’ll have to wait for the Starks. Five days from tomorrow, as was agreed. So if you have nothing else, we’d both better get on our way. You to King’s Landing, I towards the inn.”

Exchange.

The more Tyrion thought about it, the more he liked it. That Joffrey or Cersei had come up with the plan was astonishing, but trust them to fail in the execution of it. Why Clegane? He was loyal, that much was true, but hardly the diplomat needed for such a delicate assignment.

There was more to these kind of missions than just a simple exchange: the terms of the agreement had to be confirmed, and every concession and advantage that could be milked out of the situation had to be gained. Tyrion wondered what had been agreed so far.

At the very least they should get a written confession, where Ned Stark would confess his folly in denying Joffrey’s kingship, retract all his accusations and admit he had been wrong. That should go some way towards quelling the rumours Stannis was spreading around and make them look just malicious gossip by a bitter contender to the throne. Furthermore, Stark should give an oath of allegiance to the crown and swear to never again raise arms against it.

Maybe some of those things had been done already or at least agreed to, but Tyrion thought it unlikely. Stark wouldn’t have given such assurances before being sure about the exchange going through, and Clegane as a mediator and executioner of such refined documents seemed as unlikely as Bronn sprouting tits.

Tyrion’s mind raced. If he could fix this clearly haphazard and poorly planned arrangement and
ensure it benefited the Lannisters more than just gaining his brother back – even though that was a
good outcome in itself – that would have to make his father take notice. Had Tywin known how
poorly the whole thing had been arranged? He might not have, as otherwise he surely wouldn’t have
allowed it. Cersei and Joffrey must have left the details out, Cersei in her hurry to get Jaime back
between her legs, Joffrey simply because he was a dolt.

Tyrion couldn’t deny the thrill raised by his train of thoughts. Yes, this was something he should take
over.

“For once, I agree with Joffrey and my sweet sister. This is a good plan, and I approve it.” He spoke
lightly, knowing how prickly the younger Clegane could be. “And hence I shall support you in it. I
will join you.”

“You?” The Hound stopped once again and looked at him from under his brow. “If Lord Tywin has
sent you to the capital, it would serve you better to go there, sooner rather than later.”

Tyrion dismissed him with a wave of a hand.

“Never mind that. This is an important mission and I am sure if Joffrey knew I was here, he would
agree with me. King’s Landing will go nowhere for a little while, so it can wait.”

“You have your orders, I have mine.” Grumpy Clegane didn’t seem too thrilled about the prospect of
company, and Tyrion couldn’t blame him. Even a stuffy lord and a girl were bound to be better
company than his ragtag of misfits.

He also didn’t care.

“You know, every now and then it’s good to go against one’s orders. Quite refreshing.” Tyrion
turned to walk away, his mind firmly made. “Yet, I suppose you wouldn’t know about it, being such
a loyal hound to my wearisome nephew. Just as well. We shall need your services on this journey.”

He waddled towards Bronn, who was observing the proceedings with a sardonic smile, to relay his
instructions for his entourage.

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They turned around and resumed a new route, one that saw them bearing towards the north and the
crossing of the Kingsroad and River Road. By Tyrion’s estimates, which Clegane grudgingly
confirmed, they were going to reach the inn at the crossroads by the next evening, and he was
already looking forward to a rest – and something else – in a proper bed.

Shae didn’t take kindly to the change of plans, having already set her heart on an easy life in the
capital, but that couldn’t be helped. Tyrion placated her with promises of silks and jewels once they
reached King’s Landing, and soon she was smiling at him once more.

One of the first things Tyrion did was offer a horse to Ned Stark. Gruff-looking and dressed in
peasant clothes notwithstanding, he was still one of the great lords of the realm and his disguise was
no more needed. The Hound, also, donned his armour and saddled his magnificent courser, which
made him look somewhat better suited for the task of escorting prisoners. There was not much that
could be done about Lady Sansa, none of Shae’s dresses being suitable for a noble maiden, but Ned
Stark assured Tyrion his daughter to be fine as she was, riding the cart as a passenger, this time
driven by one of Tyrion’s men.

After they had fallen into the rhythm of the road, Tyrion took the opportunity and urged his horse
next to Stark’s.
"I have to say I find this arrangement somewhat unusual. I would have imagined at least a small troupe could have been arranged to escort you and Lady Sansa. All these disguises and the rough travel…was it by any chance Cersei’s idea?" Tyrion asked, wondering if Cersei or Joffrey had done it deliberately in order to humiliate the Starks one last time.

"Eeer… yes, or rather no, I don’t know whose idea it was," Ned Stark stammered. He was ill-at-ease, but Tyrion thought he couldn’t be blamed for that. He had probably thought to get away easily because of Jaime’s high value to his family.

“What kind of agreement was drawn, and what are the terms of this exchange?” Tyrion continued as he shifted in his customized saddle. He was still sore from so much riding, but at least he had something to occupy his mind to take it away from his many ailments.

Stark was silent for a while. “My daughter and I for your brother, Ser Jaime,” he said at last. “I signed a retraction of my support for Lord Stannis as the rightful heir to Robert, and swore to retreat to the North and withdraw from the matters of the crown.”

Tyrion raised his eyebrow. So he had signed a statement already? Well, it was of no consequence. If he had done it once, he would do it again. This time, Tyrion would write it and make sure that it covered everything he thought necessary.

“That sounds very prudent. I am sure you have no objections to signing something similar again? I just want to make sure it covers everything it needs to. In the absence of the Hand of the King, the members of the Small Council and my dearest sister and nephew might have overlooked some matters.”

Stark said nothing and they rode on for a while. Something tugged at the back of Tyrion’s mind and eventually he had to ask it.

“Why is Lady Sansa included in this exchange, if I may ask? Wouldn’t that have been an even better assurance of peace between our families, had she married Joffrey as planned? All this unpleasantness between our houses would have been buried and forgotten in time, and you could have been grandfather to a king.”

Stark gave him a sideways look. “She didn’t want to marry him anymore. Obviously he didn’t want to marry her, either.”

Tyrion thought the argument foolish. He had learned his lesson – no matter what the parties in question thought about the marriage, noble matches were not about wants or wishes. Besides, hadn’t the girl been smitten with Joffrey? It was true that imprisoning her father had done no favours to Joffrey in that regard, but with some time and patience, it could have been smoothed over. What could indeed have been a better way to secure peace than that? Oaths could be broken and signed agreements could be torn up, but which lord would wage a war against his own daughter and grandchildren? Cersei and Joffrey had been fools to let the opportunity slip by.

Once again, Tyrion wondered how much Lord Tywin had known about the whole affair.

His musings were interrupted by Stark, who cleared his throat and presented a question that might have been on his mind for a while, judging by the gravity he uttered it.

“My lady wife – I understand you met her lately. How was she?”

Tyrion winced. He didn’t particularly like to be reminded of that wretched episode; how the she-wolf had got him in her clutches, and how that madwoman she called a sister had almost got him killed.
“Ah, the charming Lady Stark. The last I saw her, she was trying to have me condemned for a crime I didn’t commit. Her equally charming sister was trying to throw me out of the moon door. I am sure you remember that particular door and its purpose?”

“I have heard she had reason to believe that you tried to assassinate my son. A broken boy lying in bed, unconscious.” Ned Stark urged his horse forward so that he was slightly ahead of Tyrion and turned on his saddle so he could stare Tyrion straight in the face. “Did you?”

The first thing that flashed through Tyrion’s mind was a relief that this time, he was surrounded by men loyal to him. Then his ire surged. What was with these stubborn Starks, who seemed to be hell-bent on pinning that particular crime on him?

“As I repeatedly told to your wife, no, I did not. I didn’t make any attempts against your son’s life, I didn’t know about any attempts against your son’s life, I had absolutely nothing to do with it.” Tyrion’s words were clipped and he clenched his jaw, staring into Stark’s eyes. They had stopped, and the men riding behind them almost bumped into them. The horses milled around, snorting, keen to move ahead.

Stark held his gaze for a moment longer, then dropped it and resumed the ride.

“I had to ask,” he muttered. “My wife is not usually wrong.”

“Well then, you are luckier than most men. Yet in this case, she was extremely mistaken. Why would have I done such a thing? How would it have benefited me? Unlike some assume, I am not a monster who goes about murdering innocent children. Besides, I see no advantage in pitting two of the most powerful families of the realm against each other. This whole sorry business with your obstinate claims about Joffrey’s parentage benefited nobody – not even Stannis, as he has no chance to get the crown.”

“I believe you. But who could have done such a thing, then?”

“Perhaps we’ll never know.” Tyrion could, as a matter of fact, make some guesses, but he was not about to blurt them out in the present company.

They rode together for a while longer, but Stark had become even more morose than usual, and after hardly getting a word out of him Tyrion got bored and moved ahead to join Bronn. That man had at least some stories to tell.

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That evening, Tyrion acted as a perfect host and extended his hospitality to the newcomers. The dinner guests in his tent were a curious lot, he mused, observing the Hound, Eddard Stark and Lady Sansa sitting opposite to Bronn and himself. In any other circumstances Bronn’s presence would have been unheard of, but Tyrion was damned if he was going to face the dour company all by himself. Technically speaking the Starks were still Lannister hostages, and not all the rules of the polite society had to be applied.

Not that there was much joy to be had of the company. Both the Hound and Stark were stiff and sullen, and even Bronn settled mostly to just observing the proceedings. Pod was serving them, and his face turned into an interesting shade of red every time he went past Lady Sansa, Tyrion noticed with amusement. Once Pod almost dropped the dish he was carrying when Sansa addressed him, and only Bronn’s fast reaction averted the calamity.

It might have turned out to be an awfully boring dinner, had Lady Sansa not surprised him. As per
Tyrion’s recollections, besides being very pretty, she was just another demure, well-behaving and obedient young lady. Not the kind of girl he would have expected to dominate a dinner discussion when so many people were present – but she did just that.

She asked a lot of questions about Tyrion’s travels, about the Wall and the Eyrie and his visit to his father’s camp. She also shared an interesting account of her recent accident, which had apparently left her unable to remember anything before it. She apologised Tyrion for not recalling any incidents from the recent royal visit to the Winterfell, and explained it being the reason for her many questions. Tyrion didn’t mind, as it was entertaining to talk with someone who was genuinely interested in everything, and soon Lady Sansa and Tyrion were the only ones talking.

Much too soon Ned Stark announced that they were ready to retire for the evening, in the tent Tyrion had generously provided for their use. He had made no provisions for the Hound and didn’t care where Joffrey’s dog slept.

After Tyrion’s guests had departed, he was ready for a different kind of entertainment, which Shae thoughtfully provided.

The last thing in Tyrion’s mind, as he drifted into contented sleep, was what a lucky coincidence it had been to run into that odd group. Now he would just have to make sure he could turn the situation into his own and his family’s advantage, and fix Joffrey’s and Cersei’s mistakes. Who knew what might follow from such a feat?

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The next day was like any other dull day of travel, bouncing in the saddle while watching monotonous landscape go by, except that to Tyrion’s surprise, in the mid-afternoon he received company.

Lady Sansa had asked for a mount and ridden next to her father the whole time. Reasonably well, too, although Tyrion raised his eyebrow at her attire. There still not being proper ladies’ clothes available, she was wearing breeches under her skirt, which rode much too high up her legs and revealed shapely calves.

She appeared suddenly at Tyrion’s side, and for a moment Tyrion was unsure whether that was unintentional or whether she really wanted to converse with him. True, they had had an amicable-enough discussion during the dinner, but that had been a social occasion, unlike this.

“Lady Sansa,” he nonetheless addressed her politely.

“Lord Tyrion,” she replied, equally courteous.

“I trust you will be relieved when you reach Winterfell again? Nothing like being among family and friends after all the unpleasantness that have been going on.”

“Yes, I am sure I will.”

Tyrion glanced at her and saw her biting her lip, seemingly thinking about something.

“You mention family,” she started. “Are you looking forward to spending more time with yours?”

Tyrion shrugged. “I am looking forward to getting my brother back, that is certain. As for the rest of them, not so very much.” He smiled, knowing it would remove some of the barbs from his words. He couldn’t bother to lie about looking forward to seeing more of Cersei, or even his father – except to be finally bestowed some task of importance.
“Your family is not your friend, you know. They don’t want you to succeed, and sooner or later they will turn against you.”

Well, that was certainly more than polite conversation to while the time away! Tyrion harboured no illusions about his popularity among his family members, but that was a bit harsh.

“Bold words, my lady. What makes you say so?”

“Not only that, but your family will go down,” she continued as if he had not spoken. “It may seem like the Lannisters are on top of the world now, but that world is going to crumble under their feet one day.”

Go down – where? Tyrion wondered. The girl spoke earnestly, none of the light-hearted side she had shown the previous evening being present.

“Now I have to insist you tell me why you would say such things. It’s not a very polite thing to say, you know. At my recollection, you were much more courteous before.” Tyrion flashed a smile.

“Who are you and where is Sansa Stark, if I may ask?”

The girl startled as if she had been stung. Tyrion had meant it as a light jest to ease the escalating tension, but if anything, his words only made her more agitated. He continued, hoping they could move away from such unsavoury topic.

“Besides, nothing could be further from the truth. My nephew is the king, and even should harm befall him, he has a brother who can step into his place. My father is the Hand of the King, my sister the queen dowager, my brother the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. Casterly Rock is as strong and rich as ever, and there is hardly a house in the realm without connections or ties to ours.”

Tyrion narrowed his eyes as a thought occurred to him. “Has your father filled your head with all that nonsense about Joffrey’s claim, and Stannis being the rightful heir? If so, I have to disappoint you; first of all, it is not true, and secondly, even should it be, it doesn’t matter.”

Lady Sansa jutted her chin forward, making her look like a stubborn child. A pretty stubborn child.

“Joffrey’s claim is not valid, and you know it as well as I do – but you think you can just ignore it. Yet because that is the truth, there will be claimants with a better right to the throne, and they will not leave the matter alone. And with King Joffrey’s expertise in politics and Queen Cersei’s skills in diplomacy, what other direction is there but down?”

Tyrion let the slight against his kin slide, as he had nothing with which to refute it -- and thought much the same himself. “What claimants? Renly was one, but he got himself killed in some mysterious way, and Stannis is the other. But he will never get the throne. People don’t like him and will not support him. So I wouldn’t worry.”

“Others? You mean Targaryens? They are not a threat. They haven’t been since they left the Red Keep with their tails between their legs,” Tyrion said with a laugh.

Then something stirred in his memory; there had been talk about some of the Targaryen blood living in poverty across the sea, drifting from one hiding place to another. Robert had sworn to put an end to them, and by now they had probably been assassinated or otherwise rendered harmless.

“Maybe so. Regardless, if I were you, I would carefully consider my options and whether my family
is worth the loyalty I bestowed on it. You are a clever man, destined for great things, but I doubt you will get a chance to show that, if you stay with them.”

“Lady Sansa, don’t tell me that you and your house have turned into Targaryen supporters?” Tyrion’s curiosity had been fully roused now. What strange talk from a strange girl!

“Of course not, Lord Tyrion! Where would we have ever even seen a Targaryen, let alone formed any kind of alliance? My father was the most loyal supporter King Robert had until the day he died, and since then, he hasn’t exactly had many chances to hatch any plots. I was merely speaking of hypotheticals, speculating based on my own observations at the court.” Lady Sansa smiled now, all seriousness left behind.

“Hmmm. If you take my advice, you will leave such speculations, and talk of them, behind. No good comes from a maiden interfering in matters they have neither skills nor experience to judge wisely. I mean no disrespect, my lady, of course.” Tyrion made a small bow and smiled, but couldn’t deny his discomfort about the exchange.

Lady Sansa huffed, clearly not taking his word about no disrespect being intended. “I thank you for your advice and will give it some thought. Maybe you could do the same with mine.”

She gathered the reins into her hands. “Now, if you excuse me, I shall go and converse with someone about matters I do have some skills and experience of. Maybe Lady Shae wouldn’t mind sharing her secrets to that lovely shiny hair, or how she keeps that dress on when there seems to be so little to hold it up.” She urged her horse forward and was gone before Tyrion could come back with some clever words of his own.

The rest of the journey, Tyrion spent deep in thought. Sansa Stark’s behaviour was most odd, as were her sharp observations and boldness.

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They reached the last stretch towards the inn well after sundown. Tyrion thought it prudent to scout the situation before bursting in – as far as he knew, the Starks might have planned to double-cross Joffrey by coming early and preparing an ambush for taking the hostages back without giving Jaime away. Unlikely, with all their prickly notions of honour and chivalry, but Tyrion was not going to risk it.

He ordered the rest of the group to stay behind and rode ahead with only Bronn, Pod, and two of the clansmen. The road was quiet, darkness descending on them from all sides, and the thought of a warm bed, roaring fire and a hot meal saw Tyrion pressing his mount forward at a fast pace. The sooner the route was clear, the sooner he could get to enjoy those comforts. If Clegane spoke true, they would have a few days to live leisurely while waiting for the other party to arrive. Yes, Tyrion could imagine spending those days rather enjoying the unexpected break.

Tyrion had been relieved to hear that he was going to be dealing with Robb Stark rather than with his mother. He couldn’t deny a smidgen of grudging respect towards Lady Stark, despite their contrary positions, but for now he had had quite enough of her. Robb might be much more malleable: a young man eager to prove himself, and most likely less attuned to political nuances than his mother.

As they approached the front yard of the inn, Tyrion immediately noticed the impromptu camp behind the building: a cluster of small two-man tents and well-ordered lines of horses. Had the Starks arrived early as well? The number of men was small and their presence displayed quite openly, so it didn’t look like an ambush. Maybe they, too, had just made good time on their journey.
The prospect of a few relaxing days spent waiting in comfort having thus disappeared, Tyrion sighed. He would just have to conclude the matter soon and get on his way – but this time with Jaime, too, keeping him company.

He dismounted and waited for his companions to do the same, before leading their way towards the entrance. He had hardly reached the upper steps leading to the heavy front door when it opened. In the light streaming from within he could see a familiar shape, then hear an equally familiar voice.

“Lord Tyrion? So we meet again.”

Tyrion squinted and looked up, and as his brain fully reconciled the sight in front of him, his shoulders slumped and he mouthed a silent curse.

“Lady Catelyn. I can’t say I expected to see you again quite this soon,” he said out loud.

*The she-wolf – again!*

Chapter End Notes

Will Tyrion find out that the Hound is playing games? Can Sansa hold her tongue and not make Tyrion even more suspicious than he already is? Will Tyrion’s and Cat’s reunion be as heartfelt on both sides? What about Cat’s and Ned’s reunion?? The next chapter is from Ned’s POV and reveals all…

As always, all comments and speculations will be warmly received!
Ned

Ned rubbed his thigh where the wound had started itching again. For the most part, it had started to heal well since he had had a chance to keep it clean, but he still couldn’t use his leg as well as before. However, that was the least of his worries. What was much more pressing was the quandary of their current situation.

He, Clegane and Sansa had ridden together for some part of the journey that day, trying to figure out their options. Ned had deemed it safe, Lord Tyrion riding in the front of the column and only his rough-looking clansmen in front and behind them. They had nonetheless used low voices and been observant about their surroundings and who might hear them. Should Tyrion suspect that Clegane was not what he seemed to be, they would lose their most important advantage.

Even though Ned didn’t like the deceit, he had to give a grudging regard for Clegane: he had come up with the ploy about the exchange swiftly and delivered it convincingly. Ned would have never believed Clegane such a quick thinker, but then again, he had gradually started to see that there was more to the man than met the eye. Clegane’s acceptance of his proposal to join House Stark, offered matter-of-factly and without attempts to justify his desertion – as many would see it, regardless of the circumstances – had been honest and his terms reasonable. Maybe Sansa was right about him, after all?

They had agreed that their best plan was to go ahead with the ruse, and when finding the inn empty, settle down to wait for the supposed day of the exchange. Except that the three of them would escape the first night, with Clegane’s help. They would steal two fast horses in addition to Stranger, leave everything else behind and ride like souls possessed towards Riverrun. They would be chased, for sure, but with any luck they would establish a good head start. If necessary, they could always duck into the woods and travel in stealth. Ned was confident he could find his way in the area, having been through it several times.

That settled, Clegane had moved to ride with the others in order not to raise suspicions, and Ned had stayed with Sansa. That she had insisted on riding had been yet another in the seemingly endless string of surprises, but he didn’t mind. What he did mind, however, was when she left him and rode
ahead to converse with Lord Tyrion. What on earth could she have wanted to talk to him about? It was true that they had been avid conversationalists the previous night, but what else was there to say?

Ned glanced at his daughter, who was leaning against the tree some distance away, talking with the girl, Shae. Ned didn’t particularly like that either, because it was clear that she was a camp follower and a woman of low morals. Yet she was the only woman in the company and it seemed cruel to decline Sansa the company of her gender if she welcomed it, while they waited for Tyrion’s return.

“You know that if anyone at the inn has heard about Joffrey’s proclamation and tells the Imp, this whole thing can turn out quite differently.” Without Ned noticing, Clegane had moved behind him. Damn, that man could surely move quietly when he wanted!

Ned turned slowly. “I know. What can we do about it?”

“If there are not too many visitors, I can have a quiet word with each of them. Convince them that it is in their best interest to leave, immediately, quietly, and without a fuss.” Clegane, too, was looking in Sansa’s direction. As if sensing their eyes on her, she raised her head, said something to Shae, stood up and walked to them.

“What is it?” she said, looking at Ned, then Sandor.

“We need to make sure that nobody can tell Tyrion or his men about Joffrey’s announcement. I am surprised they haven’t heard of it yet – but then again, they are newly arrived from the Vale and don’t exactly look the sort of men who mix easily with the others,” Ned said.

“What about him?” Sansa nodded towards the gangly youth sitting alone on the rock some distance away.

“Doesn’t talk much, that one. If he knows, he would have told the Imp by now, I gather,” Sandor grumbled.

“True. What I don’t understand, though, is why Lord Tywin didn’t share the news with his own son,” Ned remarked. It had been bothering him since he had heard that Tyrion had spent a few days in his father’s camp. Surely Lord Tywin knew – so why keep Tyrion in the dark?

Sandor shrugged. “Lord Tywin never had much time for the Imp. Doesn’t think he amounts to much. All his hopes are with Jaime – he thinks he can yet get him out of the Kingsguard.”

“I warned Lord Tyrion about it; how his family will turn against him,” Sansa added.

Both men stared at her, incredulously.

“Why did you do that?” Ned asked, tilting his head.

“Because… I think he may not be as bad as the others,” Sansa stammered.

“Not as bad, my ass.” Sandor spat on the ground.

“Aren’t our enemy’s enemies our friends? I am just thinking ahead, long-term,” Sansa explained, then shrugged. “He didn’t seem to believe me, though. But maybe when it truly happens to him, he will.”

Ned shook his head. He still didn’t understand how Sansa could have changed so much – but there was not much he could do about it, for now at least.
The sounds of approaching horses alerted them and Clegane slipped back to the main group.

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Ned, too, noticed the neat groups of tents at their approach. No sigils, no standards raised to poles… who could they be?

They walked in: first Tyrion and his sellsword, followed by his squire, his woman and Clegane. After Ned and Sansa followed the leaders of the clansmen: Ulf son of Ulmar, Timett son of Timett, and Shagga. The rest of the group was told to wait outside.

As could be expected by the presence of tents, the common room was busy. Too many occupants for Sandor alone to ensure their silence, Ned cursed inwardly. Most were nursing a tankard, and only a few raised their heads to observe the newcomers.

After seeing Ned, one man’s eyes widened and he elbowed the man next to him – who in turn stared at Ned in shock. A low murmur of whispers started to fill the room when one after another turned to find out what the matter was.

One man stood up and approached Ned, cautiously, as if expecting him to do something unpredictable. His face jogged Ned’s memory. He looked like… no, could it be, one of Jory Cassel’s men, who had been left in Winterfell? Ned had a closer look around the room, and indeed, he now recognised that many of the men were from Winterfell. Were they all Stark men?

“My lord…?” the man approaching him said, nervous. He extended his hand to touch Ned’s arm, and although in normal circumstances that would have been highly unusual, Ned was so occupied with observing the reactions around him that he hardly noticed.

All around him, the men were rising from their benches, expressions on their faces ranging from disbelief to astonishment to joy. He heard exclamations of ‘Lord Stark’, ‘he’s alive’, ‘thank the old gods’, then someone whispering loudly, ‘has she been told?’. One man rushed to the stairs, taking them two at the time in his hurry to get upstairs.

Ned shared a look with Sansa, who by then likewise had a small group of watchers around her, murmuring ‘Lady Sansa!’ and ‘gods be good’.

So, it seemed obvious that they must have heard about Joffrey’s declaration.

Then the referral to ‘she’ came to him. Gods, could Catelyn be here as well?

Before he could ask anyone, he saw someone coming down the stairs - and his breath hitched.

Catelyn looked pale and drawn, her normally immaculate appearance somehow… ragged. Her hair was loose and unkempt around her shoulders and there were dark circles around her eyes – and yet all that disappeared when Ned caught her gaze. If the others had looked shocked at seeing him, the look on Catelyn’s face was pure astonishment.

She faltered, took hold of the rail but her feet gave up and slowly she sank on the steps. Before Ned had time to react, Sansa rushed past him and ran to Catelyn, kneeling in front of her and embracing her fiercely.

“Mother!”

Ned took a step to go to her but was stopped by Clegane, who pressed his hand against his chest. Annoyed, Ned was going to swat it away, but at Clegane’s nod, he took another look at his wife and
daughter. Sansa was still hugging her but also talking to her ear, urgently. Catelyn looked dazed and confused, her eyes flickering between Sansa in her arms and Ned near the door, and Ned’s heart broke to see his proud wife so overwhelmed.

Ned signalled to Clegane that he was fine; he was going to let Sansa tell Catelyn the most urgent news first. It was one thing to allow a mother to converse with her child, another a wife with her husband. Ned saw the way how Tyrion observed the commotion, interrupted from his haggling with the innkeeper. His eyebrows were raised and he remarked something to Bronn, who laughed.

Of course, they thought this was only a meeting of those who had known to expect each other – not someone seeing their loved one rising from the dead.

Sansa pulled away from her mother, who – although still stunned – nodded at her, then looked at Ned, tears streaming down her face.

It was his turn.

Ned closed the distance between them in a few strides and finally held her in his arms, clutching hard, enclosing her whole body into the embrace. Catelyn responded with equal fervour, repeating his name again and again.

“Cat, Cat, I’m here! I am alive and Sansa is unharmed, it was all Joffrey’s lies!” Ned whispered. Catelyn sobbed, having lost the last vestiges of her self-control. She buried her face into Ned’s chest and he could feel her hot tears through the fabric.

“Cat, did Sansa tell you how important it is that nobody tells Tyrion’s party about that lie? He thinks we are here to exchange us for Jaime.”

“She…she did… Oh, Ned, I thought you were dead!” Another squeeze of her arms and Ned lowered his head to kiss her - and how sweet was that kiss.

Yet he couldn’t indulge in it for now; the men had to be told as well. Ned untangled himself from his wife’s arms just in time to hear a booming voice across the room.

“Eddard!”

It was Ser Rodrik, his face betraying the same emotions as those of the others: shock, surprise, relief, joy. He limped towards Ned, who met him halfway and embraced him, genuinely happy to see his old friend.

Ned repeated in a low voice the news about the importance of keeping things hushed, and after some more exclamations and another clasp of his shoulder, Ser Rodrik turned towards the crowd.

“Everyone out, let us make some room for the travellers. Don’t go anywhere, I need to state some rules about how we shall behave with the newcomers. Masha, may I ask you to join us?”

Ser Rodrik led the procession of Masha Heddle and the men out, many still gawking at Ned and Sansa. When the last of them had departed and closed the door, Tyrion moved to sit down in one of the benches thus freed.

“Well, that was a touching reunion. Should I be offended that so many of your people apparently didn’t believe the king keeping to his word?” He held a tankard in his hand and took a big mouthful of it. “Now, I wouldn’t mind a reunion of my own too. Where is Jaime?”
Catelyn, who had gathered her bearings, smoothed her hair and took a deep breath.

“He is not here. You are right in that there were some… doubts, so I deemed it wise not to bring him straight here without knowing what awaited us.”

She stared straight at Tyrion and continued, “He is being held in a safe house some distance from here. Now that I see that Lord Stark and Lady Sansa are here, I can send someone to fetch him.”

Ned admired how quickly she had collected her wits and how confident she was in delivering her lines. His wife, the mother of his children. He wished he could hold her again right then and there.

Tyrion didn’t seem offended, tearing into a chunk of bread.

“I can’t blame you, the same thought having occurred to me as well. So, we’ll wait until he is here, then. In the meantime, I think it only fair that the continuation of your joyful reunion can also be delayed.”

Tyrion gestured at Clegane, standing behind Ned.

“Clegane, see that Lord Eddard and Lady Sansa are escorted to their room. They can stay there until we truly exchange the hostages. The servants can take their food up there.”

Ned and Catelyn exchanged glances. He had hoped to converse with her and Ser Rodrik about their situation, which had once again completely changed. With Catelyn and the Stark forces here, they couldn’t just run.

Clegane took him by the arm and started to steer him away. Sansa followed, but Ned threw one last look behind his shoulder at his wife.

“Would you care to join me, Lady Stark?” Tyrion gestured at the bench opposite him. Catelyn looked at him, coldly.

“No thank you, my lord. I better go and see Ser Rodrik about the arrangements.” She turned and wrapped her shawl tighter around her, walking fast to the door and stepping outside.

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“Dear gods! What are they doing here?” Ned exclaimed when the door closed behind them. The room was small but tidy: two beds on the opposite sides of the room, a washbasin, two chairs and a rickety table, and one window overlooking the front yard.

Sansa sat on the other bed, smoothing her skirts. She was still wearing breeches, her legs sticking out from under her skirts.

“I didn’t have a chance to ask, as I had to first and foremost make sure she understood our situation,” she said. “I was hoping we would have had a chance to talk with her some more.”

“Lord Tyrion is trying to maintain the upper hand. The fact that Jaime is not here must unnerve him.”

“Yes…” Sansa seemed to be somewhere far away – and suddenly it struck Ned that it must have been odd for her to meet a mother she didn’t remember. Putting his own concerns behind, he sat next to Sansa and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“Did you remember her, sweetling? Did anything come to your mind at seeing her?”

Sansa sighed and twisted her hands in her lap. “I… knew her and I didn’t, if that makes any sense.
Her face was familiar to me, but still…”

Ned took a hold of her hand and squeezed it. “It will come to you, one day. Nonetheless, when we see her next, we have to tell her about the accident. I don’t think she noticed anything for now, but she, too, might find you changed.”

“Yes, Father,” Sansa mumbled.

The door to the room opened and they saw Catelyn being practically flung in by Clegane.

“You don’t have much time, so be quick. I stand guard and tap at the door when she needs to leave,” he barked before closing the door again.

“Catelyn!” Ned rushed to embrace her once more.

“Ned!” Catelyn was much calmer now, but her voice trembled still. “Sansa, my sweetling.”

“We have to talk fast, but pray tell me what are you doing here, my love? Clegane told Tyrion that the exchange was planned to take place here – but what are the odds of you actually being here! I assume Ser Jaime is still somewhere in the Riverlands?”

Catelyn turned pale and sat down next to Ned.

“I have lost Ser Jaime.” She shuddered. “He was with us, but we were ambushed some distance from here and he and I were seized. I was able to escape, but he remained.”

Catelyn looked at Ned pleading. “I am sure it was Ser Tywin who planned it. Oh, Ned, I am so sorry!”

Ned stared at her. Catelyn, stolen? Jaime, lost? Then he grasped what Catelyn had sad about herself.

“You were seized? Are you unharmed?”

“I am, I escaped almost as soon as I was caught. I couldn’t have done it on my own, but a very brave knight who was with us, helped me escape.” Catelyn almost whispered the last words. “She almost certainly died for it.”

‘She’? Ned raised his eyebrows but had no time to dwell on it. “I am so glad that you are fine, my love. But what were you doing travelling with the Kingslayer? Where were you going?”

“We were on our way to Lord Stannis. We hoped to make an alliance with him and support him to remove Joffrey from the throne and become the king, so he could release you and Sansa and Arya.”

“I see,” Ned said. “And you wanted to use Ser Jaime as a bargaining tool?”

*It could have worked.*

Catelyn roused. “Where is Arya? Why is she not with you?”

“She escaped when we were first arrested, and she hasn’t been seen since. The Lannisters never had her,” Sansa interjected.

Catelyn stared at her, but before she had time to process this new cause of grief, Ned touched her face.

“My love, what can we do? Lord Tyrion will wait for a day, perhaps two, for you to procure Jaime,
but no longer. We planned to escape this place with Clegane’s help the first night, and ride to
Riverrun, but we can’t do it now.”

“The Hound – he is really with you now? I didn’t believe him at first when he came to me saying he
can arrange us to meet.” Catelyn scrutinised Ned under her brow.

“He is – it is a long story. I escaped first, with Sansa’s help. She came to see me and gave me a
dagger and instructions to a secret tunnel, and when I was out, she escaped too. We met at an inn but
Clegane had followed her and I knocked him unconscious. We couldn’t leave him there to raise the
alarm about our whereabouts, so we had to take him with us.”

Catelyn’s eyes became wider and wider as Ned told his story.

“Then we heard about the reward Joffrey had put on his life, and he saw that there was nothing for
him to go back to. So he is a House Stark man now,” Ned concluded.

“The Hound? One of ours?” Catelyn repeated slowly. “When I heard what he had done – had
supposedly done – to Sansa, I cursed him to the seven hells.”

“Joffrey and everybody else just assumed wrong, he was not guilty.” Realising he might have gone
too far in absolving Clegane’s crimes, Ned continued, “Of that particular thing, at least. And he has
proven his loyalty. Nothing would have prevented him to tell Tyrion about us in order to prove his
innocence, but he didn’t. Instead, it was he who came up with the lie about the exchange.”

Catelyn rubbed her temples. Ned understood her well; too much had happened in such a short time.
He was still troubled by her appearance, which revealed the depths of desperation she must have
sunk.

“How many men do you have here?” Sansa asked.

Of course, what a practical question. Ned felt embarrassed he hadn’t thought to ask it.

“There are twenty of us, five wounded but all well on the mend. How about Lord Tyrion’s?”

“I counted twenty-three fighting men, plus his squire and Shae. With Father and Sandor included, it
makes our side one man short.” Sansa bit her lip. “But Sandor is worth at least two men in a fight,
surely.”

Ned was taken aback by her statement. When had his sheltered daughter developed such trust in
Clegane’s fighting abilities? Yet he couldn’t deny the truth in what she said.

“True, meaning that the odds are more or less even if it comes to a fight. Unfortunately, I can’t see
how else we can solve this situation,” Ned sighed, the thought darkening his mood. He didn’t
particularly want even more violence, causing more bad blood between his house and the Lannisters.

“If we take the initiative, we shall have the advantage of surprise in our favour,” Catelyn said. “I
have to talk with Ser Rodrik, he might have some thoughts about it.”

“I am sure he will. I wish I could talk with him as well.” Ned turned to Sansa. “Do you think we
could ask Clegane to arrange that?”

Catelyn followed the exchange with a furrowed brow. Ned wished he had time to explain her
everything that had happened and why he felt comfortable in including Sansa in these matters, but he
was aware that their meeting might be interrupted at any moment. There were more important things
to say.
“Catelyn, Sansa is hale and hearty now, but she had an accident in the Red Keep, where she hit her head quite badly and lost her memory.”

Sansa rushed to take Catelyn’s hand into hers. “I am well now, I truly am, but I still don’t remember many things, and some are just vague shadows. But Father has told me a lot, and so have other people, so I think I know a lot of what is going on.”

“You may see her somewhat changed. Our little girl has truly grown into a young woman, who is clever, strong and capable. There is absolutely nothing to worry about, and I hope she gets her memories back some day. Yet even if she doesn’t, we still have her, and that is the main thing.”

Ned could see that Catelyn was about to burst into tears so he preempted it by taking her into his arms once again. Gods, how he had missed her! A chaste kiss, meant to comfort, turned into something more when Catelyn responded. Her mouth was so warm and her lips softer than Ned remembered.

Ned hardly noticed Sansa getting up and walking to look out of the window, discreetly. He could have stayed like that forever, had a soft tap at the door not alerted them.

“I have to go, Ned,” Catelyn panted and twisted away from his embrace. Clegane stuck his head in and without further ado, Catelyn slipped past him and out of the door. Sansa followed her and Ned heard her exchanging words with Clegane before she came back.

Ned stayed sitting on the bed for a long time, still tasting her wife on his lips.

*I should have never left her, her and Winterfell. To hells with Robert’s demands and Lannister schemes and all the rot of the court.*

Sitting there, in his small room at the inn at the crossroads, Lord Eddark Stark swore never to play the game of thrones or set foot in King’s Landing again.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is more walking on eggshells amongst dry powder kegs – in other words, things are very much on edge... It is from Sansa’s POV, and somewhat surprisingly includes also some alone-time with Sandor. Hmmm, I wonder how that will turn out?
Sansa

Sansa’s legs hurt, her back hurt, her butt hurt – everything hurt. Maybe it hadn’t been such a good idea, after all, to ride a horse after not having done it for years and years.

She had used to ride, when younger, taking regular lessons at the riding school near her home. She had been quite good at it, too, even winning some local events in dressage. And therein laid the problem. Her mind knew what she should do - how to sit and how to use her core and seat muscles - but her body was woefully unprepared and her muscles determinedly uncooperative with such a short notice. The end result was what she was suffering now: aching muscles, stiff joints.

Not that she would have been able to sleep anyway. Too much had happened, and her head was buzzing in trying to put all the new pieces together.

Lady Catelyn – Cat, as Ned called her – had been exactly what Sansa had expected, albeit paler and gaunter in her appearance. She could understand that – the false news Lady Catelyn had heard had clearly hit her hard. There was a small part of Sansa that found guilty satisfaction in that; it showed that Lady Catelyn cared.

Other than that, just like with Ned, Sansa had felt an immediate closeness to her, warm feelings layered with sensations of security and comfort. Yet there had been an element of strangeness as well. Sansa hoped they would have had more time to get to know each other, but she couldn’t have intruded in the few precious moments Cat had shared with Ned.

They must love each other very much.

Maybe she could seek to talk with her the next day? Maybe Tyrion would allow that? Sansa shifted, then regretted it, a cramp traversing down her leg. Ouch!

Then there was Lord Tyrion.

Meeting him in the flesh – so far only a mystery shadow from the past; the demon monkey or the wise Hand of the Queen, depending whose interpretation from which side of the history one read - had been a shock. Sansa had recognised him at a first glance, it being unlikely for many dwarf lords riding around in a full lion-of-Lannister regalia, although the implications of the meeting had come to
her only belatedly.

Sansa hoped she hadn’t made a mistake by warning him as she had. She had contemplated it for a long time. Should she let things proceed their natural course, where Tyrion ended up accused of murdering his nephew, was condemned to death, and escaped after killing his own father – or had she already changed things too much for that to happen?

Playing with the past was such unpredictable game and she had no rules to follow, no map to show her the way. All she had was a determination to not let things happen as they had – and that she had most definitively already done.

In the end, Sansa had concluded that the best approach might be to judge the current situation as it was and act accordingly, without making too many assumptions about what had happened in the past she knew about. So she had followed the age-old adage of the enemies of one’s enemies being one’s friends. Both Tyrion and her own family hopefully ending up on the winning Targaryen side, establishing some kind of a bridge with Tyrion seemed like a prudent thing to do.

Last, but certainly not the least, of her worries was the topic that had plagued Sansa’s sleep the previous night and a good part of her day as well; the topic that had started from an innocent side comment Tyrion had made during the dinner when regaling them with his adventures at the Wall: a jape about snarks and grumkins.

Hearing that had turned Sansa’s blood cold. Were they… still in existence? She had lost the track of discussion at that point, and it had taken Tyrion’s enquiry if something was amiss before she had shaken away the feeling of dread and joined the conversation again, pretending that nothing had happened.

**Snarks and grumkins.**

**The Others.**

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Everybody in Sansa’s own time knew about the Others – but what people believed was another thing altogether.

Old texts described beings that were tall and gaunt with pale flesh, blue blood and shiny bones. Their eyes were cold and blue and so intense that they had been described burning like ice or being as bright as stars. By their side were creatures that were portrayed as even more horrific: Wights with same azure coloured eyes, but bodies that could be decayed or rotten, and yet they lived.

Nobody had seen those creatures, and neither were there any confirmed known remains or artefacts in existence, which made their true existence a topic of hot debate between natural scientists, historians, theologians and conspiracy theorists. There were rumours that the Westerosi government had some samples in their secret research facility, where they were being studied, but nobody could confirm whether it was true or not.

The scientific side of the debate theorised that they were some ancient branch of the human race, diverged from the evolutionary line at a very early point in time and uniquely adapted to harsh conditions of the far north in the Lands of Always Winter. They had even named them as *Homo glacialis*, although reference books didn’t include that name in the official phylogeny of human species.

Scientific theories also stated that there were no true differences between the Others and Wights, the
different form of the latter being explained by a combination of a rare viral disease and a symbiotic relationship with an even rarer cold-metabolising bacteria. The virus was speculated to affect all tissues of the body, including the brain stem, causing various stages of muscular, bone and cartilage damage and deformation, as well as rendering its targets into a vegetative stage.

The bacteria, in turn, had adapted to produce cellular energy from reduced atomic movements in extremely cold conditions via altered metabolic pathways, thus providing sustained energy to even the most horrifically damaged body, maintaining its carrier in a life-like state. How this symbiotic relationship benefited both parties was another disputed topic, but overall, scientists saw the old stories mostly just as creative embellishments of true natural phenomena.

Historians and theologians tended to take the old texts more seriously, arguing that there had once been a great evil in the world, and these creatures had been its manifestation, and that not everything could be explained by pure science. Conspiracy theorists’ beliefs were many and varied, but what united them all was a deep suspicion that the government knew what the truth really was, but chose not to reveal it to its citizens.

Where everyone agreed, however, was that those creatures had not been seen since Queen Daenerys and King Jon had taken their dragons to the North shortly after the second Targaryen invasion. They had cleansed the areas beyond the Wall and all the way to the Lands of Always Winter of the rising threat – real or imagined – and thus destroyed all traces of the Others and Wights, of viruses and bacteria.

And here was Sansa, before those events, when the Others and the Wights seemed to be still very much in existence.

At first, Sansa had been alarmed. Whatever those creatures were – a matter she had not put too much thought into – was there a possibility that by meddling with things, she might inadvertently change their fate? If so, would that be good or bad? Would that save rare biological life forms from extinction, life forms that someday might be agents for good? Or would it be quite the opposite; would her actions release a great evil onto the world - the evil that Queen Daenerys and Jon had obviously been convinced needed putting down?

She had tossed and turned over the matter that first night, and continued her brooding ever since, interrupted only by the more timely matters she had to attend to. She had found no solution to her dilemma of whether she should try to do something with her knowledge or not; to support the extinction or try to prevent it. Her only solace had been that currently, she was in no position to do either and that she should review the situation once – if – she one day would find herself in such.

It wasn’t much of a consolation, but she just had to settle with that – for now.

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The next morning saw Sansa waking up drained and groggy from too little sleep. Well, it couldn’t be helped – there was too much to be done that day to sleep in.

She had requested an opportunity to bathe the previous evening, and soon enough, one of the girls she had seen serving the patrons came up with two youths carrying a wooden tub and an announcement that hot water would follow.

Sandor arrived soon after, grunting that he would take Ned to bathe in a back room of the inn, leaving Sansa with some privacy.

In no time, Sansa was sitting in shallow water, enjoying the rare luxury of soaping herself up. How
she could have ever taken hot showers and bubble baths for granted? The soap she had been given was hard and barely lathered, but it was better than plain water.

A rap on the door alerted her, but before she could react the door opened and Shae slipped in.

“Do you mind if I come and help you?” she enquired, smiling sweetly. “You have such lovely long hair, I can wash it for you.”

Without waiting for an answer, she dragged the other chair next to the bath and reached for the wooden ladle the servants had left behind.

Sansa was startled but didn’t truly mind. She had found the girl refreshingly straightforward and entertaining during the few interactions she had had with her. She knew exactly what Shae’s position was and that Ned frowned upon their interactions, but if anything, Sansa was curious about how a woman like her viewed the world.

“Well, I don’t mind - but could you please bar the door? I would prefer not to have more people barging into my room while I am in the bath,” Sansa requested.

Shae had the sense to blush and did as she was told.

“I wish my hair was of this shade,” she commented while she poured water over Sansa’s head. “Mine is dull and black, and much too common. Hair like yours would make me even more irresistible in men’s eyes.”

“It seems to me that you are irresistible enough for Lord Tyrion,” Sansa said with a smile. Without realising it, she had missed that kind of ‘girl-talk’. She wondered whether she would have an opportunity to engage in anything like that with her mother. Would it be inappropriate to talk about frivolous things like men and how to attract them with a noble lady like Catelyn Stark?

Shae shrugged. “He has simple tastes, so it’s not hard to please him.” She scrubbed Sansa’s hair and scalp with deft fingers and Sansa leaned back, eyes closed. It felt good.

“That big man of yours, he seems to find this shade especially irresistible,” Shae continued.

Sansa’s eyes flashed open. “My man?”

“Oh, don’t pretend you haven’t noticed! He’s practically drooling after you,” Shae said, laughing. “Why you have allowed him to drag you as his prisoners, when I’m sure you could have turned his head to release you, is something I don’t understand.”

“What do you mean?” Sansa’s curiosity had been roused. Yes, it was true that there was some unresolved tension between her and Sandor, but ‘drooling’?

“You really have no clue, do you? My, what naive creatures you highborn are!”

“He may look at me inappropriately sometimes, but I guess that is no wonder. He is a man, after all,” Sansa replied somewhat stiffly. She reminded herself that she had to maintain her façade of an innocent noble maiden who might find such talk offensive. Yet she couldn’t resist the temptation to engage in such speculations.

“I know men better than you, if you pardon my saying. I know how they look when they just want to rut with someone, or if they think someone is pretty enough but not really worth their while. I have seen it all. And believe me, not only does he look at you as he would like to devour you alive – in a good way, if you get my meaning - but also as if the sun and moon shone out of your arse. Begging
your pardon again, my lady.”

Shae poured another ladleful of water over Sansa’s head, which prevented her replying immediately.

*Does he? Really?*

Emerging from the flow of water, Sansa gasped. “Are you sure?”

“I am, as sure as I am of the fact that Lord Tyrion wants to tup me again tonight – and more than once. You could have charmed the Hound and escaped for sure. Maybe even with just promises – I know how important it is for you highborns that your virtue stay intact.” Shae bit her lip, considering. “To let your father escape – well, for that you might have had to give him something more. Kisses for sure, maybe some petting. There are ways that you can give a man release without losing your maidenhood, though. I could teach you if you want.”

“What!” Sansa wasn’t the least scandalised by the notion, but she had to pretend to be.

“Well, I guess it’s too late by now, anyway. My little lord will see the exchange through and everyone gets what they want – except the big man.” Shae pursed her lips. “If he was not so ugly and Lord Tyrion so possessive, I wouldn’t mind comforting him – for coin, of course. He has a good body and big hands. I like men with big…hands.”

She laughed and splashed a bit of water on Sansa. “You might too if you knew what I am talking about!”

*Oh, I know well enough!* Sansa thought, blushing.

“That is wholly inappropriate talk, and you know it,” she said in a pretend-offended tone.

“Oh, I don’t think you mind. Can’t say I have conversed with many noble ladies before – those kinds usually pretend that I don’t exist if they see me - but you seem different.” Shae was done with her hair and reached for a rag, soaped it, and proceeded to scrub Sansa’s back.

“Hmph,” was all Sansa could offer.

“Do you like him, then? As I said, he might not be half-bad. You could have your dalliance with him – within limits, of course - before you’re married to some old prune. You know, I think that he might have even accepted some limits instead of ploughing through with no heed to your wishes. He looks at you…I don’t know, like he respects you or something.” She laughed again. “Now, that is a look I don’t see often, but I think that’s what it is.”

Sansa was squirming. Was that really how Sandor saw her? Could it be so? He was always so solemn and often seemed more agitated with her than impressed. Then again, Shae probably did know men better than Sansa…

After steering the discussion to safer and more innocent topics, and taking control of the washing rag, Sansa finished her bath. Shae left soon after, promising to alert the servants to take the tub away.

Sansa dried her hair with the rough cloth she had been given, deep in thought. The fates of the realm and mysterious beings beyond the Wall pushed aside, she thought over Shae’s revelations about Sandor. Could it be true, could he really want her? If so, why he had never made a move?

Even asking the question, she knew the answer: It was simply impossible, and Sandor was too much of a pragmatist to realise it. Their worlds were different and nothing could ever happen between them. For a noble maid to have even a dalliance like what Shae had suggested – unthinkable.
Shaking her head, Sansa dressed just in time before there was another knock on the door, this time waiting for her response.

“Sansa, are you decent?”

It was Ned. Sansa opened the door and both Ned and Sandor stepped in, Sandor glancing at the corridor before pushing the door closed behind him.

“I spoke with Ser Rodrik. Clegane told him where to find me. It is going to happen tonight after Lannister men fall asleep.” Ned paced the room, nervous agitation spurring his movements.

“So soon?” Sansa gasped.

“We can’t wait much longer. Once Tyrion sees that you can’t procure Jaime, he will become suspicious and the advantage of surprise will be lost.” Sandor had stayed at the door and seeing him there, so tall and proud and big, made Sansa blush.

“You will wait it out in your mother’s room, where you’ll both be safe. Clegane will let you in there before we start. Once it is all over, we’ll come to collect you and ride to Riverrun as fast as we can. So be prepared for a night-time ride.”

“Oh.” Things were happening fast, but Sansa could see why. The attack would reveal to all and sundry that Ned Stark was alive, and would cause even more bad blood between the Starks and Lannisters. Both sides would have lost their hostages and the playing field would become even once more. What then, remained to be seen.

She deemed the moment had come to ask to see her mother. Whether granted or not, just requesting it should do no harm, and she was genuinely keen to meet Catelyn again.

“Sandor, could you take me to Lord Tyrion? I would like to ask if he would allow me to spend some time with my mother. Surely that is a harmless request?”

Sandor frowned, then nodded. “No harm in asking. Come.”

Touching Ned’s shoulder for a hasty goodbye, Sansa grabbed her shawl and followed Sandor.

Lord Tyrion was in high spirits and magnanimously granted her request with no objections. Sansa thanked Shae in her mind for ensuring Tyrion’s good mood with her unique talents.

Sandor took her to a room at the other end of the inn, and after stating his business behind the door, Lady Catelyn opened it.

“My sweetling!” She embraced Sansa and Sansa hugged her back.

“I’ll wait here and escort you back to your room once you’re done,” Sandor said and took a practised stance next to the door. Sansa felt sorry for him for such a mundane task. Then again, it was what he had been doing for years, so he was probably quite used to it.

“Come in, Sansa, and let me have a look at you!” Cat pulled her in, guided her towards the window and studied her intently. Sansa did the same, her gaze sweeping past brilliant blue eyes so much like her own, rich auburn hair and the refined features of her face. She was not old, and yet there were
crow’s feet around her eyes and lines of worry around her mouth. How many of those had been caused by the recent events, Sansa couldn’t guess, but seeing the woman who had loomed so large in her mind ever since Ned had first told about her was both a strangely intimidating and comforting experience.

“You have grown, as Ned said. You are not a girl anymore,” Cat muttered, not taking her eyes off Sansa’s face.

“I have, Mother. I have changed, too.” Sansa had decided that her best defence against unavoidable questions was to address her new demeanour head-on.

“Why don’t we sit down, and you can tell me all about it?” Cat guided her to the bed, where they made themselves comfortable.

And Sansa did.

She repeated much the same version of the events she had told Ned over the course of their journey, in an abbreviated and somewhat more polished form. She also answered the many questions it raised in Cat. Again, some were the same as what Ned had asked, some were different. Cat’s concerns were more emotionally intimate and extended to how she had felt about the events and how exactly she had been treated.

Cat didn’t neglect the wider political ramifications or updates, either, although it was up to Sansa to bring them up first. Cat’s eyebrows rose when Sansa reiterated her escape plan and its execution, but to Sansa’s relief she expressed no doubts and offered no judgment.

Sansa told her the metaphor about stepping away from a complicated tapestry to see the bigger picture, and Cat understood it immediately. Pressing on that point, Sansa explained how she thought she now truly understood the complications of the current political situation and the issues standing in their way, and how she wanted to be part of the effort to find the solutions. That although she naturally understood her limitations, she could not accept to be left out of deliberations of what they should do next and how.

If Cat was surprised or offended, she didn’t show it, only sighing and nodding her head.

“You have truly grown up.” Her smile was genuine, albeit tinged with sadness. “I can’t say I don’t miss my little girl, but I can see that she exists now only in my memories.”

“I am sorry, Mother,” Sansa whispered.

“Don’t be, my sweetling. Children grow up, that’s just the way of the world. I have gone through this with Robb, who also left his boyhood behind to lead men into war, so I am sure I can survive…”

“Lady Catelyn!” A loud voice and pounding at the door interrupted her. “Lady Catelyn, I am sorry to disturb you, but this is important - I need to see you immediately!”

Both women raised their heads and exchanged a mystified glance. Sansa though she recognised the voice belonging to the older man who had limped to greet her father the previous day: Ser Rodrik.

Cat jumped up and rushed to the door.

“Ser Rodrik, what is it? I am here with my daughter, is it really that important?”

The old soldier was red in the face and panted as if he had run – or limped – in high speed to reach them. He half-bowed in Sansa’s direction, but then turned his attention back to Cat.
"I am afraid it is, my lady, but fret not; it is good news." He offered his hand. "I’ll tell you more on
the way, but if you don’t mind, I would like to show you something. Let us hurry."

Not being able to follow them and find out the cause of such excitement, Sansa had to settle for
remaining where she was. Cat had the freedom of the inn; she didn’t. Cat embraced her quickly one
more time whispering that they could talk more in the evening, and left.

Sandor entered the room in their wake.

"I’ll find out later what the fuss is about and come and tell you when I can”, he said. “For now I’d
better take you back to your rooms.”

On their way, they passed Shae and Bronn coming towards them. The former smiled widely at Sansa
and mouthed something – ‘BIG’, it seemed. Sansa refused to smile back, but once again felt heat
suffusing her cheeks.

The latter stared at them openly, a small smirk on his face. Sansa didn’t particularly have anything
against the man, but she couldn’t help feeling that Bronn was much too observant for his own good,
and it would be best to avoid him as much as possible.

Once they arrived in her and Ned’s door, Sansa noticed another room right opposite it, its door open.
It was small, much smaller than theirs, containing only a bed and a small wash basin at the window
ledge. On a bed laid Sandor’s white Kingsguard cloak.

“Is that your room?” she asked.

Sandor glanced at it. “It is. I am your guard, remember? I have to stay close.”

Before Sandor reached their door, on the spur of the moment, Sansa tugged his sleeve.

“May we talk for a moment? We could go into your room.”

Sandor stared at her hand, which was still holding on to the fabric of his sleeve. Sansa released it.

“Only if you have time,” she added.

Sandor looked at her and said nothing, but then he turned and walked into the small room. Sansa
followed him.

The interior of the room was just as simple and neat as it had seemed. The window was open, the
odorous whiff of the barn at the back of the building drifting in. Voices and sounds of people going
on about their business in the yard could be heard on the background, faintly.

Sandor went to the window and pulled the wooden shutters close. Enough light filtered through the
woodwork for them not to sink into full darkness, but the room became shadowy.

While Sandor was attending the window, Sansa pulled the door closed and sat down on the bed.

Sandor turned and looked at her, and Sansa’s stomach shifted uneasily. Had she just placed herself
behind closed doors and windows in a space hardly bigger than the bed, with a man who by all
intents and purposes was a cold-hearted killer, and who might harbour indecent designs on her
person?

The thought should have scared her, but its effect was quite the opposite; it aroused her.
“Why don’t you sit down?” Sansa patted at the spot next to her.

Another glaring stare, which probably made Sandor’s opponents in the battlefield shake in their boots, but all Sansa felt was a faint fluttering of butterflies in her belly. Yet, he did sit down, the mattress giving in under his bulk and unbalancing Sansa’s seating, which she had to correct.

“What do you want to talk about?” Sandor’s tone was neutral.

“I don’t know exactly,” Sansa confessed. “I just thought this a rare opportunity too good to miss. Who knows when there will be another chance, once we leave tonight?”

Yes, she had thought about it, and realised that with her father, her mother and the Stark host, she wouldn’t have as many opportunities to see Sandor as she had had in their travels. Sandor would be delegated somewhere with the men, among his own kind.

“I guess I could start by thanking you. For agreeing to join our house, and for your quick thinking when we met Lord Tyrion.”

“No need to thank me. It’s now my arse on the line as much as yours. If Tyrion finds out the truth, I’ll be dead as surely as you’ll be taken back to Joffrey.” Sandor shifted. “Besides, I promised your father. I said I’ll be his man – so I am.”

“Well, that may be so, but I am grateful to you, nonetheless.” Sansa was slightly discomfited by his reluctance to accept her gratitude, but then again, he was right. She tried to think what else she could say. Ned and Rodrik having taken Sandor in their confidence, there was not much Sansa could discuss in regards to next actions to be taken. Well, surely there were other things they could talk about? She forged ahead.

“We haven’t exactly had a chance to get to know each other much. I know so little of you; what are your interests, what do you like to do? What would you like to do when you get up North?”

Sandor jumped up on his feet and strode to the other end of the room, then back. He muttered something under his breath, but Sansa couldn’t hear it. She tilted her head in confusion. What had she said to agitate him so?

Sandor stopped in front of her and before Sansa had time to react, pulled her up. His fingers pressed hard into her arms and he spun her around and pressed her back against the wall opposite to bed. Sansa struggled to release herself from his grip, but it was useless.

“What interests me? What do I like to do? I’ll tell you what interests me: to find out what this,” his gaze swept over Sansa’s face and down her body, “is all about!” He snarled the last words and Sansa turned her head aside to avoid seeing his sneer. She had never seen him so enraged, had never seen him lose his composure like this. Fear seized her heart in its tight grip.

“What do you mean?” she gasped. There must have been some misunderstanding. He must be assuming something horrible; that they were going to betray him, or worse. “Please, tell me what you think is going on – I am sure we can clear it.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I am talking about.” Sandor’s grip loosened and he seemed to calm down a bit, but the low menace in his tone was even more terrifying than his earlier anger.

“I don’t have to pretend! I have no idea what you are talking about!” Sansa croaked. Really, why couldn’t he just say what was in his mind? She was getting livid. It was one thing to be suspicious and Sandor’s nature seemed to be well suited for that, but this was getting ridiculous. She squirmed but found his hold tight as a vice, as unmoving and unyielding.
“I have been cast aside from the court, I have joined your house, and I will help you in your battle against the Lannisters – what more do you want from me?” Sandor’s stare was pained and he was clenching his jaw so hard Sansa could hear the grit of his teeth.

“What do I…want?” Sansa didn’t understand. She hadn’t asked him for anything more, she was sure she hadn’t.

“You tell me you care what happens to me. You tell me you think me a better man than what others see. Even more, you come to my room, behind closed doors, and pretend to want to know me better. Why?”

Taking a better look at him, Sansa saw something flashing beneath the surface of his hardened expression. It was there only for a moment, replaced by another hard sneer, but she had seen it. And she thought she understood.

She relaxed, not trying to struggle against his grip anymore, and that caught Sandor off-guard and he readjusted his hold of her higher on her shoulders. That freed some movement to Sansa’s arms.

He thinks his only value is in how he can serve other people.

Thinking so, and seeing someone trying to approach him simply as a fellow human being, must have left him confused about Sansa’s motives.

Oh, Sandor.

She raised her hand as high as she could and traced a lock of his hair hanging in front of his burned visage, tucking it behind his ear.

“If you don’t know it yet, I don’t know what to say to you,” she whispered.

Sandor froze from her touch but didn’t pull away. He narrowed his eyes and they stared at each other, tension filling the space between them. He licked his lips, perhaps unconsciously.

Sansa was just about to ask him to release her when they heard sounds from the corridor: loud steps, heavy boots. Then a knock on the door.

“Hound, are you there? Lord Tyrion wants to see you!” It was Bronn.

Sansa’s heart, which had just begun to settle in its pace, started hammering again. If anyone came in and saw them alone in the room, in such a compromising position… There would be questions. She was not just any slattern wench for Sandor to have his fun with.

Sandor’s eyes widened, but before he had time to move, Sansa slackened her body and slid through his loosened grip on the floor, rolling under the bed. Just in time, judging from the squeaking of the door latch that someone was trying to pull down.

“I think I saw him outside the Lady’s room. Lady Catelyn’s, I mean. Earlier,” Pod stammered out in the hallway.

“You did? Why didn’t you say so?” The latch loosened. “How come he gets all the good jobs? Those Stark women are handsome to look at. Even the mother isn’t too bad. But tough as nails, that one…” Bronn’s voice faded as they walked away.

The floor was dusty, with years of travellers’ dirt sitting undisturbed under the bed, making Sansa’s
nose itch. She felt a bit foolish having reacted so hastily and so unladylike, but there had been no time to think of an alternative action. Sighing, she gathered her skirts alongside with her dignity and crawled out. She only narrowly avoided clashing with Sandor as he sat down heavily, making the bed frame quake.

Trying to brush most of the dirt away from her dress, Sansa wondered what was going to happen next. Was Sandor still angry?

Hovering on her spot, unsure of what she should say, she saw Sandor burying his face into his hands.

“Go.”

She wasn’t sure if she heard him right.

“Excuse me?”

Without lifting his head, Sandor hissed.

“Go. Get the fuck out!”

His shoulders were hunched and strained with tension. Afraid that he would unleash his anger at her again, Sansa judged it wise to heed him.

Peeking out into the corridor to see if it was empty, she threw one last look at Sandor before slipping from the room and crossing over to her and Ned’s door. Pulling it quietly closed behind her, she couldn’t shake the feeling that some kind of line had just been crossed – by both of them.

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After giving Ned a brief summary of her visit to Lady Catelyn, Sansa claimed tiredness and the desire to get some rest before the night’s planned exertions, and settled on her bed for some rest. Ned understood and soon followed suit, stretching out his legs, and falling asleep in no time at all. Sansa envied him the ease of it, the effortless way a seasoned soldier could fall asleep at the drop of the hat when the opportunity offered itself.

She, on one hand, knew that there would be no chance for sleep for her. Sandor’s outburst played in her mind over and over again. Did he really think she was trying to reach out to him only because she wanted something from him? Had he really been so conditioned to expect that his only value was in serving, in giving?

What a horrible life it must be.

Sansa was restless, trying to find a comfortable position on a lumpy mattress when she heard someone humming a sprightly tune outside their window. It was not unusual, the window opening to the side of the building with a little herb garden and a small kennel for the hounds, often populated by people on their various businesses.

The humming continued and Sansa let it lull her into a stage of relaxation. The tune was oddly familiar; had she perhaps heard it sang in the court? She strained her mind to recall the words hiding behind the tune.

‘...my loneliness is killing me and I must confess I still believe - when I'm not with you I lose my mind give me a sign...’
Her eyes snapped wide open.

‘…hit me baby one more time…‘

Sansa’s pulse quickened.

The tune was ‘…Baby One More Time’.

By Brittany Lance.

…who happened to be one of the most popular female artists in Westeros some 10-odd years ago; the singer, dancer and actress whose first two albums had become global successes and made her the best-selling teenage artist of all times. Her private life had caused as much interest as her music, and years of crazy antics and erratic behaviour had kept her steadily in the spotlight. Although Sansa had never been her biggest fan, she had nonetheless been very familiar with her music. And here she was, firmly in the period of the War of the Five Kings, listening to her song.

\textit{The song and the artist which would not exist for several hundred years from now.}

Chapter End Notes

Please tell me you recognised the song! I had an agonising time trying to pick a tune that would be recognisable by the widest possible audience, and yet be ‘adaptable’ to this world of modern Westeros… I also warmly welcome any other thoughts or opinions, should you feel so inclined.

As for the next chapter, our favourite blondes are finally back in the picture!
As If Seeing Her for the First Time

Chapter Notes

I don’t know about the readers, but when I am writing these chapters, I get really invested with the one I am writing, eager to just continue that storyline further straightaway … But even so, when starting a new POV and storyline, I feel the same, really wanting to continue with *that* immediately… Like with the last one, and now with this one. I guess it is kind of good?

So, Jaime and Brienne road trip, just slightly different this time – but things are starting to brew underneath nonetheless…

Thank you Hardlyfatal for betaing!

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Brienne

Four days on the road, and Brienne had hoped they would have been closer to their destination. They had started to see more people once their small, almost overgrown track had merged with a larger road: wary travellers, riding or walking in groups, eyeing all other travellers suspiciously. And where there were people, there had to be inns, surely?

She still wasn’t quite sure where they were, so she approached a family walking next to their wagon being patiently pulled by an ox. Of the usual gamut of reactions her size and looks stirred - disbelief, suspicion, fear, mockery and pity - this group seemed to lean on pity. It was better than open derision, but it hurt her still.

To Brienne’s delight, however, she and Jaime had made better progress than she had anticipated and were only a day or two away from the inn. Having first thanked the family, she used some of the coppers she had found in the sellswords’ purses to buy some fresh food from them. Jaime had continued to refuse to eat, apparently having judged that starvation was as effective as a dagger to end his misery. Nonetheless, maybe real sausages and fresh bread would entice him.

Part of Brienne understood him. He had been so proud, so strong and invincible – it must have been a rude awakening for Jaime to find himself in a crippled body. Yet another part of her had started to itch to smack him in the head and tell him to move beyond his moping. All things said and done, Jaime was still young and sound of mind, and most of all, a Lannister: a member of one of the richest houses in Westeros. Lord Tywin hadn’t discarded his dwarf son, if for no other reason than because he carried his name – surely he wouldn’t cast Jaime aside, either?

Brienne thought of all the victims of the wars: the poor, the landless, those without a family, the men without means to support themselves after being maimed in one battle or another, the women who had to take up the plough after their men were killed, the orphans abandoned into poorhouses… That Jaime would think his life not worth living just because he couldn’t walk was an insult against the
human misery caused by men like him.

She glanced behind her shoulder. Jaime was lying in his usual spot; not even Brienne’s interactions with the family had stirred him from his stupor.

One more day. Or two.

The evening panned out just like all the other evenings; Brienne offered Jaime food, this time soft white bread with greasy sausages straight from the griddle. And just like all the other evenings, Jaime refused, turning his back on the plate.

Something snapped in Brienne at that.

Jaime’s head jerked forward from the force of the slap Brienne directed at the crown of his head.

“Pull yourself together, Kingslayer!”

At first, Jaime bowed his head as if expecting more blows to follow. When none came, he turned his head slowly, staring at Brienne in disbelief.

“You heard me;” Brienne growled. Seeing Jaime’s eyes widen and mouth fall open gave her a twisted satisfaction. She had tried patience, she had tried to give him space, and she had felt guilty over her own role in his misfortune. Nonetheless, there was a limit to her forbearance, and she had reached it.

“If you father disowns you, a pox on him! If Cersei doesn’t want you, a pox on her, too! You are more than your legs, and you don’t have to be able to walk or ride to make your mark. You have brains, you have skills - you know a lot and can learn more, if you wished so.” As she talked, Brienne warmed to the topic. Jaime’s shocked expression fuelled her, and for one blazing moment she felt she had all the answers.

“You don’t need their pity either. You can make your own way. Become a military advisor, a scholar. Become a maester, if it takes your fancy. You can probably still have children, so marry some bannerman’s daughter and give Lord Tywin new heirs of his own bloodline to carry the next generation of Lannisters on their shoulders.”

The last part quelled her fervour somewhat. Brienne was sure it wouldn’t be hard to find a bride for Jaime, some blushing maid who would be pulled aside by some old crone who would advise her how to get Jaime’s seed to quicken her belly despite the obvious obstacles. Would she pity Jaime? Would she be disappointed by her lot in life, to be tied to a man who couldn’t stand by her side or ride for her honour in a tournament?

Brienne felt scorn towards a nameless girl who would have never seen Jaime in his prime, never seen how proudly he could hold himself.

Jaime blinked his eyes and his whole body stiffened as if Brienne’s words were the blows he had expected. Brienne didn’t let him recover before she seized the abandoned plate from the ground and pulled Jaime closer, not paying heed to where she grabbed him.

“Now eat, or I swear I’ll stuff this food down your throat whether you will it or not.” She tore a piece of bread and pushed it between Jaime’s teeth. When he refused to open his mouth, Brienne used a grip that worked with dogs by forcing her thumb into his mouth and gripping his jaw from both sides and pulling it down. Jaime splattered and tried to grit his teeth together, but Brienne refused to give
After bread came a small chunk of sausage, not too big so Jaime wouldn’t choke on it. Maybe it was the imminent threat of death by suffocation and not on his own terms that finally saw Jaime opening his mouth and gingerly chewing down the pieces Brienne kept on pushing in. Some of the food ended up on their lap and on the ground, but a better part of it went where it was intended, in Jaime’s stomach.

Satisfied with her progress Brienne let Jaime go, and he collapsed at her feet, coughing.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, wench?” he spat and cursed. Brienne offered him a skin of water, which Jaime snatched from her fingers and gulped down, water dribbling down his chin and jaw.

“If you are going to die, you aren’t doing it while I am watching over you,” she replied dryly.

“What is it to you?” Colour had returned on his face and a flash of the old fire burned in his eyes. Brienne knew he hated her at that moment, truly hated her – if looks could kill, she would have been a dead woman for sure.

She didn’t care. Better for him to be filled with hate than to remain that empty, hollow shell of a man he had been for the last few days.

The next morning Brienne behaved as if nothing had happened, offering Jaime food to break his fast, as she had done every other morning despite having always been turned down.

This time, however, Jaime glared at her from under his brow – but took the platter. He ate the food, chewing every morsel methodically while staring at Brienne as if to challenge her to say something. She didn’t, but inside she felt a small triumph of joy.

The journey that day was different, too. Instead of sprawling on his back at the bottom of the cart, staring at the sky, Jaime hauled himself into a sitting position. More than once Brienne caught him observing the sellswords’ horses trundling behind the cart, the trees, the road – even the few peasants walking by the roadside. He answered her when she asked him a question, he didn’t lash out as before and he seemed to be gradually rising from the pits of despair he had sunk into.

As the day went on, Brienne tried her best not to shatter the fragile peace she felt growing between them. It was made easier after the midday meal break, when Jaime again accepted what he was given, but turned harder when he resisted with muttered curses the indignities of Brienne helping him to piss. Again, that was something he had not done before, having submitted to it indifferently, not caring one way or another.

Brienne endured it stoically. If her outburst had helped to rouse Jaime from his lethargy, she was glad, even if it meant the return of the snarky side of him.

To be honest, when she thought about it, she missed the snarky Jaime. When had that happened, and how?

The usual routine of the evening transpired as before, with the notable exception that Jaime was actually being present when Brienne set the camp and set up the food. Even if he didn’t do much, there was a shift in him that for the first time since their escape made Brienne feel as if she had actual company, not just an empty shell of a man sharing her space.

“So, how did you become you?”
Jaime’s question startled Brienne. She wiped the crumbs on her fingers against her breeches and turned to look at Jaime. He was sitting propped against a tree, the orange glow of the fire flickering over his face, throwing shadows that made his features shift and change shape even though he didn’t move.

They had just finished their meal. No talking, just silence, but it had been more companionable silence than before.

“What do you mean?” she asked cautiously.

“How did a noble maid like you turn out,” he waved at Brienne’s general direction, “like this? Did you wake up some morning in your bedchamber and decide to become a knight, or did your father push you to it? Or somebody else? Did you have a sweetheart you lost to an army and you decided to follow him?”

Brienne frowned. They had never discussed such personal matters such as reasons and motivations. Yes, she had told him how she had trained in the knightly arts, and how she had found a place in Renly’s Kingsguard, but she had left much out, too.

“Why do you want to know?”

Jaime shrugged. His face was still pale and drawn, but somehow his features were more alive. A fragile flame, in danger of being snuffed out again... but it was there, behind his eyes.

“Why not? You have seen all of me, and you know things that nobody else knows of me. Maybe your story is a secret, maybe not, but I still would like to hear it.”

Brienne tried to gather her thoughts. How could she tell him about growing up always knowing that she was not like she was supposed to be, being always too ungainly, too tall, too ugly? Never caring about things as girls were supposed to: pretty dresses, boys, gossiping, dreaming of getting married and having children. How could he know anything about that, how could he ever relate to any of that?

Yet she tried.

Haltingly at first, but after seeing him listen with genuine interest, her words poured out faster, more readily. She told him about her father, not truly understanding her but accommodating her wishes as much as he could; about her septa, eternally disappointed at her non-existent femininity; about Ser Goodwin, who had been one of the few people who had truly understood her; about the men who had intended to court her and left disappointed and disgusted.

“So for you to accept a marriage proposal, the groom has to beat you in a combat?” Jaime repeated after hearing that particular part of her tale.

Brienne nodded. Not that there would have been anyone else trying after Ser Humfrey, his broken bones enough to dissuade others from seeking her hand. Even the rich lands of Tarth had turned out not to be sufficient inducement, for which she had been glad.

“I have seen you fight. Bet not many men could do that,” Jaime said, his tone thoughtful.

“I bet so, too. So it looks like I’ll stay maid for a long time still.”

Jaime leaned back, an odd expression on his face. “I could have beaten you, I think. Before.”

Silence fell heavily between them, and Brienne regretted bringing up a topic that reminded him of
what he had lost. Then she caught what he had said first. Had he fought for her hand, he would have expected to have won it?

Her hand in marriage?

Brienne shook her head. Jaime had only meant that she had been a challenge he would have been able to conquer, nothing more.

To move away from the topic, she asked a question that had been on her mind for a while.

“Why did you help me? When they were going to…” She couldn’t say the word ‘rape’, as ridiculous as it was. She was very well aware of the brutality of men and how women suffered in their hands. That the same fate had been so close to being hers, only averted by the interference of a man who had no reason to help her… Brienne was grateful, but didn’t understand it.

“You didn’t deserve it,” Jaime said, staring into the fire.

“Does anyone?”

“I suppose not. But you in particular did not.”

Brienne knew it would have been better to leave the matter. No good would come if she kept on picking at it.

But she asked anyway, wanting to know. Needing to know.

“Why me?”

Jaime looked at her. Again he had that odd expression, as if he had seen something for the first time and didn’t know what to make of it. It made Brienne uncomfortable and she rued her foolishness of continuing to pursue the matter.

Jaime glanced away, his attention on the flames dancing in the ring of stones when he responded, softly.

“Because you are special.”

Oh!

Brienne was left speechless. Her face, neck, and ears started to feel impossibly hot. Nobody had ever said anything like that to her, not even her father. Certainly nobody like Jaime.

Special?

It was on the tip of her tongue to demand he explain himself. What did he mean? Why would he say something so confusing? She was so flustered by what had passed that she ended up saying nothing at all, just poking the fire with a stick until it was long past the time when she could have replied.

“Time to get to sleep. We may reach the inn tomorrow if we leave early and travel well,” she muttered eventually. The moment had passed, and she was his jailor once again, responsible for his safe return to Lady Stark.

Jaime didn’t resist, having fallen into deep thought again. Brienne hoped he wasn’t going to retreat back to his earlier depression – but that was all she could do. Snapping at him once might have worked, but the second time might not be quite as effective.
To Brienne’s relief, Jaime didn’t sink back to his dark mood again. He was not his usual self yet – and probably never would be – but he was there, with her.

They made good distance again the next day, and the road became wider and busier as they approached the crossing of the Kingsroad, River Road and High Road. Brienne tried to prepare against every possible option they could encounter once they reached the inn, which the Stark troops might have never reached, or might have already left. Lady Catelyn might have been there – or not. Or the troops could be there with no sign of Lady Catelyn. How would they receive her if she returned with the Kingslayer but without their lady?

Or they could be all there, Lady Catelyn and the remains of the party that had escorted them.

The last option was what she pinned her hopes on. She was getting tired of trying to prove herself, and she didn’t know what she would do with Jaime, should nobody relieve her of her duties regarding him.

Maybe she should just let him go, and so pay her debt to him for causing his current state? Or maybe she should go with him to his father and gain a position with Lord Tywin if Jaime’s earlier offer still stood?

Or maybe she should leave it all and return to Tarth? Let go of her foolish quest of knighthood and life in arms and face her fate as an old maid in her father’s household? The prospect made Brienne’s stomach churn and she urged the horse go faster, to sooner find out what awaited her.

The first sign of the inn was a low wall made of broken white granite, followed by the sight of turrets and chimneys made of the same pale stone rising above the scrubs and small trees.

Brienne didn’t want to take any chances, so she guided the cart to the forest before they could be seen from the inn. Telling Jaime to lay low – as if that was needed, in his condition – she tied the horses to a tree and continued on foot to take a first look at what awaited them there.

Her first glance at the yard revealed rows of tents surrounding it on one side, and a haphazard cluster of others on the other. Brienne recognised the former as the same they had used on their travel from the Riverrun, and she let out a huge breath of relief as the tension that had been building inside her evaporated. At least the Stark troops were there.

The other group she didn’t recognise, but not wanting to attract attention she didn’t linger long in gaping at them. She scanned the small groups of men wearing unadorned Stark attire, spotting a few she had seen before, but hesitating to call out to them. Then she saw a familiar face.

“Walton! “ Brienne called.

The young man turned and looked at her quizzically before recognising her.

“Lady Brienne! You…you’re alive! What - how - what are you doing here?” His astonishment soon gave way to a wide smile that spread over his homely face.

“It’s a long story, but yes, I am alive. How are you – and how is Lady Catelyn? Is she here?” Brienne held her breath.

“Yes, she is here. She told everyone that you saved her life. I knew that it was wrong to keep you a prisoner, I told them so even back in the camp. I told them, ‘she is no murderer, she is a lady’, so I said!” Walton babbled, his excitement palpable.
It warmed Brienne’s heart, it truly did, but when he tugged her sleeve, saying how she should come with him and tell them all about her adventures, Brienne interrupted him.

“I can’t come yet, I have a cart and horses I left behind.” She tried to think. She didn’t want to ask Lady Catelyn to come to her, but there was someone else she could. “Is Ser Rodrik here too? Could you go to him and tell that I need to see him before I come in?”

Walton was puzzled but agreed, promising to return to her with Ser Rodrik as soon as he could. Watching him run away, Brienne wondered whether she was overdoing her cautiousness. Why didn’t she have simply get the cart and drive to the inn openly? She couldn’t help it though; the sight of the other tents, whoever they belonged to, had made her nervous. Better to be safe than sorry.

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Soon enough Walton and Ser Rodrik returned, the latter limping heavily but striding at a fast pace nonetheless.

“Lady Brienne! I am in your debt, and I owe you an apology!” Ser Rodrik exclaimed and bowed his head at her. Brienne watched him in surprise. She didn’t have anything against him personally, the old soldier having always treated her with polite dignity. She wondered what kind of stories Lady Catelyn had woven about her, and the thought made her uncomfortable. She was no hero.

In a few sentences, she summarised her situation and explained about Ser Jaime waiting only a small distance away. She revealed that he had been injured, but didn’t dwell on details. She also asked who the other travellers were.

Ser Rodrik listened to her, his eyes going wider and wider.

“Ser Jaime – is here?” he asked as if he didn’t believe his ears.

“Yes, he is – but he needs a maester or a healer. Is it safe to bring him in?”

An even bigger smile split Ser Rodrik’s craggy features and he reached towards Brienne as if wanting to hug her – but held back at the last minute. Instead, he patted her arm with his big hand.

“Lady Brienne, I owe you more than my apology and my gratitude – and so does my lady and everyone else. You don’t know how big a relief this news is for us!”

Then he turned to look at the inn and the men milling around. Only then did Brienne notice that some of them wore fur and had a wild look about them.

“It might be better to be careful. We are not alone, as you can see. It’s a long story, but these are Tyrion Lannister’s men, and he expected to see his brother on his arrival. And we had nothing – until you showed up. This is fortuitous timing indeed, my lady.”

Tyrion Lannister?

Brienne drew herself into her full height.

“I will fight for you to keep Ser Jaime from being taken. Lady Catelyn needs him still.”

Ser Rodrik glanced at her and grinned.

“No need, because the situation is better than that. Lord Tyrion has brought Lord Eddard and Lady Sansa with him, and we need Ser Jaime for an exchange. All will be well, now that he is here.”
While Brienne ruminated over the surprising news, Ser Rodrik and Walton conversed for a moment before suggesting a plan for Brienne and Walton to return to Jaime and the horses, Brienne hiding in the cart and Walton driving them discreetly to the back of the inn. His face was familiar and hopefully nobody would think too much of seeing him with an ordinary wagon and a few horses. Brienne’s concealment was necessary simply because her appearance alone would be enough to draw some attention, Ser Rodrik explained to Brienne somewhat apologetically. In the meantime, Ser Rodrik would go and fetch Lady Catelyn and they would meet at the back door of the inn, where Ser Jaime would be smuggled in without anybody noticing.

Brienne agreed and soon she and Walton were back to where she had left Jaime.

“Jaime, we are going to the inn, but we want to avoid attention so Walton here will take us there,” Brienne whispered to Jaime. He had been lying in the cart but, hearing them coming, had dragged himself to a sitting position.

“Ser Jaime,” Walton muttered as a way of greeting before going to untie Blaze.


“Lady Catelyn is there, and the Stark host. But there are other people as well. Lady Catelyn will meet us there and she will explain everything.” Brienne wasn’t sure how much she should reveal, and decided to err on the side of caution, even though it made her uncomfortable. It was better if Jaime didn’t get too stirred up when there was apparently much more to the story than what she knew so far.

“Back to my chains, is that it?” Jaime grumbled. “Or maybe those can be disregarded now that I am likely not to run away on my own, would you think?”

Brienne could have never imagined missing Jaime’s grumblings, but she had. It felt good to hear his snide remarks again.

“Shush, Jaime. It will be all good.”

“So it’s Jaime, still?” Jaime raised his eyebrow. “No more Kingslayer, even now that I will be returned to my cage, wench?”

Instead of answering Brienne only shushed him again and pulled them both flush against the boards, covering them with blankets.

As the cart jolted ahead, she tried to figure when she had started to think of Jaime by his name. It had definitely happened before his accident. Maybe somewhere along the road after leaving the Stark camp… or maybe even earlier? She sighed. Whenever that had changed, she couldn’t imagine going back to using his nickname, not after she had heard the truth of why he had killed his king.

Soon the wagon came into a halt and Walton jumped down. Brienne was still climbing down from the back when she heard a stifled cry.

“Lady Brienne!”

Then she was enfolded into a warm embrace, Lady Catelyn’s arms wrapping around her. She was a good deal shorter than Brienne, but she pulled Brienne’s head down and gave her a kiss on both cheeks.

“Lady Brienne, I thought you were dead! I mourned for you! To have you back now…” Lady Catelyn squeezed her tighter.
Brienne was overwhelmed: she would have never imagined someone to be so overjoyed at seeing her. Awkwardly she returned the hug, afraid that her hands were too big and her hold too tight.

“My lady, I am glad to see you well,” she murmured.

“That is thanks to you! You saved my life and liberty and I will never forget it. Even more, now you might be saving my husband and my daughter as well by bringing Ser Jaime back to us!” Lady Catelyn released her hold and stepped to the cart, taking a better look at her. Her eyes gleamed with unshed tears but her smile was radiant.

Brienne tugged free the blankets to reveal Jaime ensconced in the cart.

“Lady Catelyn, we have to stop meeting like this. What would your lord husband think of our frequent encounters?” Jaime tilted his head. “Not my wish to see you again so soon, but when has anyone ever heeded what I want?”

“Why is he not tied up?” Lady Catelyn peered at Jaime, then looked at Brienne.

“He is injured, my lady,” Brienne explained.

“Don’t you worry about me, my lady, I’ll stay exactly where you put me. Not sure how much value I’ll be to anyone, though, but if you think you can still use me as your pawn, go ahead.” Jaime interjected, loud enough for Brienne to give him a glowering look.

“You may be glad to know that your troubles will soon be over, Ser Jaime.” Lady Catelyn said to Jaime. “Now, if you don’t mind, would you care to follow me inside? I am sure you would like to refresh yourself after the journey.”

“Like to? Sure - I would if I could,” Jaime snapped.

“I’ll carry him,” Brienne intervened before the situation escalated further. Without further ado, she went to Jaime and took him into her arms. Lady Catelyn and Ser Rodrik followed her, puzzled by what they saw.

“No need, my lady. I’ll get two of my men to do it,” Ser Rodrik touched her arm.

“No. I’ll carry him, and nobody else.” Brienne brushed past him and walked through the door, leaving both Lady Catelyn and Ser Rodrik in her wake. Somehow the thought of Jaime being jostled by strangers was too much for her.

_She_ would take care of him, no one else.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, do I _really_ have to leave them here? Oh well, the next chapter is Tyrion again, pondering what the heck is going on! And the mystery singer may be touched upon too…
I know I have said this before, but once again: the plot thickens… So many lies and subterfuges – I myself am starting to find it hard to keep track of all of them; who knows what and not… Oh well, my own fault I guess!

Million thanks for Hardlyfatal for continuing to be my supportive beta, especially being so super-fast and covering my inadequacies that way…

Tyrion

Tyrion patted his mouth and chin with a piece of cloth. The stew had been hearty and filling, the bread still warm, and the wine tolerable for a country inn. He called for more of the latter and one of the serving maids soon returned with a flagon.

He could endure waiting for a few days if conditions were this good. A cosy inn, tasty food, good drink, a warm woman in his bed…

His musings were interrupted by the appearance of Lady Catelyn. Sighing, Tyrion placed his goblet on the table and gestured towards the flagon.

“Would you care to join me for a drink, Lady Catelyn?”

Lady Catelyn sat opposite him at the table but shook her head for the offer. She had gained her composure since the day before and was once more the implacable Lady of Winterfell. Once again Tyrion wondered why Robb had sent his mother instead of coming himself. He wished Robb hadn’t – Tyrion would have much preferred to negotiate with anyone else but this stern woman, who was now looking at him with barely concealed disapproval.

“I came to tell you that your brother is here.” No courtesies, no enquiries about his wellbeing. Well, what did he expect?

“Jaime? So soon? Not that I mind, of course,” Tyrion smiled and raised his goblet.

That much about a leisurely few days at the bosom of civilisation. Still, the sooner they left, the sooner they would be in King’s Landing. And if he played his cards right with this exchange, who knew what awaited him there?

Lady Catelyn seemed to hesitate. That was an uncommon occurrence for her, as far as Tyrion had seen, and his curiosity was roused.

“What is it, Lady Catelyn?”

She took a deep breath and met his eyes squarely. “He is injured. Outlaws attacked our troops and he was hurt in the aftermath.”
“Hurt? How badly?” Tyrion forgot all about the pleasures of the inn – Jaime was his strong big brother, he had never been hurt, he could not be hurt!

“We don’t know yet. It appears that he has something wrong with his legs, but the whys and wherefores are a mystery. He needs to be examined by a maester.”

Tyrion was halfway up already. “Where is he? I demand to see him at once!”

“He is upstairs, in the room next to mine. But before you go, there is something else I have to tell you; something I haven’t been totally honest about.” Lady Catelyn pointed at the chair and despite his haste, something in her demeanour slowed Tyrion down. Something else?

In a few sentences, Lady Catelyn outlined the attack on their host when they had still been on the way to the inn, her capture alongside Jaime, and her subsequent escape. Tyrion listened, his resentment growing when he realised that she had deceived him about Jaime’s whereabouts when they had first met.

“So you straight-out lied to my face? You had no notion of where Jaime was and still you pretended to be ready to go ahead with the exchange?”

“Would you have done any differently in my position, my lord? Would you have admitted that your only chance to get your loved one back was slipping through your fingers and there was nothing you could do about it?” She tilted her head and looked at him in the eye. Disturbingly, Tyrion had to admit she had a point.

“Besides, my best knight was with him all along and I trusted she would bring him back – as she did,” Lady Catelyn continued. Cocksure, Tyrion would have described her expression, had she a cock.

The mention of a lady knight surprised him, though. Who had ever heard of such a thing? Then again, the Northern women were known to be uncouth and coarse and maybe one of those unnatural creatures had indeed been Lady Catelyn’s secret weapon.

“Do you know who the attackers were, and why they were after Jaime and you?”

“Not with certainty. There are many who might want their hands on the Kingslayer. Maybe it was your lord father. Or maybe they were just common outlaws after a ransom. Perhaps your brother knows more about it, having spent more time in their company.”

Lady Catelyn pushed her chair back and stood up, smoothing her skirts with her hands.

“You can go and see Ser Jaime now to see for yourself that he is truly here. However, until the official exchange has taken place, I shall follow your example: he remains under my custody and your access to him is limited, as is mine to my lord husband.”

She walked away, head held high, and despite his irritation, Tyrion couldn’t help admiring her cool wit. If only Cersei were more like her, House Lannister would have much less to worry about in the troublesome game of thrones.

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Tyrion had to do a double-take when he saw the pale figure stretched out in the bed. The last time he had seen Jaime, he had been bigger than life, the embodiment of knightly strength and vigour. But now… even his freshly washed hair and clean face couldn’t hide the bags under his eyes, the deep lines etched on his forehead and a haunted look of his eyes.
“Tyrion?”

“Yes, it’s me, Jaime.”

Jaime’s eyes widened and his shoulders tensed, and the grasp he had on the blanket covering him up to his waist tightened. Then he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and when he opened them, he was Tyrion’s strong big brother again. The glimpse into a man who had endured hardship and been weakened by it was gone.

Tyrion looked around for a chair and saw a tall figure standing in the corner of the room. It took him a moment to discern that she was a woman, tall and muscular with straw-coloured hair and a freckled face with broad features and big teeth. The only features that could be described feminine in her were her eyes, deep blue.

“Let me introduce to you Lady Brienne of Tarth. My champion, my jailor and my nursemaid. She feeds me, she bathes me, and she chastises me when I need it.” Jaime grinned at the woman, albeit wearily. “Lady Brienne, my brother, Lord Tyrion.”

Oh, Jaime.

Tyrion knew Jaime had put on a brave face for his benefit, playing the role of his protector as usual. Jaime had always been the one who had looked after Tyrion; defended him against his tormentors, letting it be known in no uncertain terms that anyone having a problem with Tyrion also had a problem with Jaime. He had been a buffer between Tyrion and the cruel world, as much as possible.

Tyrion still didn’t know the extent of Jaime’s injuries, but what little he had heard, and now witnessed in front of his own eyes, did not bode well.

“I want to speak to my brother alone,” Tyrion commanded.

“Lady Catelyn insisted I stay in the room. After the exchange has been done, you can talk as much as you want,” the creature in front of him muttered. From the set of her jaw, Tyrion concluded that she was the stubborn kind, not easily persuaded to go against orders.

Fleetingly he wondered if giving more freedom to Lady Catelyn and Lord Eddard might have seen the same courtesy extended to him. He had given his permission for Lady Sansa to see her mother – but that was different. His main concern had been to prevent Lady Catelyn plotting with her husband – which she, too, obviously wanted to prevent between him and Jaime.

“Fine, so be it.” Tyrion sat down on a stool produced by the lady warrior. “Jaime, as you undoubtedly already know, this exchange will see you traded for Lord Eddard and Lady Sansa. I chanced upon this rather haphazardly arranged plan, with only the Hound sent to escort the prisoners, so I took over. We’ll sort this matter as soon as possible, and I and my men will take you away from here.”

Jaime listened to him, but his attention seemed to be elsewhere. It was odd; Tyrion would have expected him to be more excited at the prospect of returning to his family. Maybe it was because of his injuries? Jaime’s eyes flickered between Tyrion and the woman, who had withdrawn to the back of the room and stood silently back against the wall.

“You were hurt, they tell me. Where, how?” Tyrion couldn’t see anything outwardly wrong with him, but Lady Catelyn had talked about his legs.

“I can’t walk. Or run, climb, step or hop. My legs are useless.” The flippant tone with which Jaime delivered his news chilled Tyrion, and he remembered the broken body of Bran Stark when he had
been carried into the great hall of Winterfell. The memory lifted the hair on the back of his neck and
he shivered.

“May I?” He started to pull the blanket covering Jaime’s lower body, then paused and looked at the
woman.

“Oh, don’t mind Brienne. She has seen everything I’ve got. Not sure if she has been very impressed,
though,” Jaime snorted. Tyrion saw the woman blushing, so it must have been true.

Tyrion’s inspection didn’t reveal anything, not that he had expected it to. In some daydreams of his
youth he had fancied himself to have made a decent maester, had he pursued it. Nonetheless, as years
in dusty chambers reading ancient scrolls hadn’t appealed to him, the notion had ended up being just
one more of his many futile musings of what he could have been. Could have, should have, would
have.

“We’ll get you the best maesters from the Citadel. Not that doddering fool, Pycelle, I’ll make sure of
it,” Tyrion tried to assure Jaime.

“It doesn’t matter. I know I’ll never walk again, just like Bran Stark never will.” Jaime winced as he
spoke.

“Nonsense.”

“You may, Jaime. Even if you don’t, you can still achieve great things.”

Tyrion swivelled his head, surprised to hear the woman – Brienne – talking and addressing Jaime by
his name. He assessed her again, from head to toe. Ugly, by any standards. If she had fallen for
Jaime’s charms, Tyrion could only feel sorry for her.

“We’ll face that once we arrive in King’s Landing. Cersei will make sure that the best of the best will
be sent to your bedside, even if she has to drag them there with her own hands.”

If Tyrion thought that mention of Cersei would have improved Jaime’s spirits, the effect was quite
the opposite. Jaime’s features hardened and he gritted his teeth.

“Not to King’s Landing. I don’t want to see Cersei like this.”

Tyrion hesitated for a moment. “Would you rather return to our Father’s camp?”

“I know he wanted me back to help with his war – that’s probably why he sent those men to take
me. But now I am as useless to him as to Cersei.”

Tyrion was about to assure Jaime that he was anything but useless when he realised what Jaime had
said.

“Father? Did he organise it? Tell me what happened.”

Jaime told him about the journey, the sudden attack, the events at the camp, and his belief that it had
indeed all been Lord Tywin’s doing. Hearing about Brienne’s role in helping Lady Catelyn to
escape, Tyrion cast another assessing look at the lady warrior. So, Lady Catelyn had not exaggerated
in praising her. Too bad she was putting her skills to use on the wrong side; her actions might have
benefited the Starks, but had she not killed one of the captors, Jaime wouldn’t be lying there
motionless.

Tyrion resented her for that and didn’t understand how Jaime could still endure her presence after
what she had cost him. Surely there was someone else in the Stark retinue who could watch over Jaime?

Yet Jaime didn’t seem bothered by her – quite the opposite. When telling his story, he had leaned forward and the pillow supporting him had fallen on the floor. The woman had bolted forward, swooped it up and put it back, at the same time tugging down the tunic that had ridden up Jaime’s back. The whole thing was over in the blink of an eye, but it had been so casual, so natural, up to Jaime leaning back before Lady Brienne had removed her hand, earning him a light smack at his shoulder. However, the oddest part of the exchange was that instead of flinching or saying something mocking, Jaime absorbed it with good grace, the slightest hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

For a while, neither Tyrion nor Jaime spoke. Tyrion absorbed what Jaime had told him, trying to put the pieces of the tale together – before realising what had been nagging at the back of his mind ever since Lady Catelyn had mentioned their father. He cursed silently.

On the day when Lord Tywin had received the mysterious message, Tyrion had thought it to have been about the campaign, and later he had assumed it to have been about the prisoner exchange – but maybe it had been about his scheme to free Jaime all along? What’s more, Lord Tywin might have planned to use the same sellswords to take Lord Eddard and Lady Sansa back from their woefully inadequate escort after Jaime had been secured, maybe even to capture young Robb – thus in one swoop cutting the ground from under the feet of the Northern uprising.

Tyrion started to understand why Lord Tywin had not objected Joffrey’s plan for the exchange when his own plan had been worthy of a great mastermind. Worthy of Lord Tywin, Hand of the King, Warden of the West. And he had chosen to reveal none of it for Tyrion but had allowed him to stumble into it with no notion of what was going on.

It stung.

Tyrion leaned back on his chair and scrubbed his hand over his face. What had Lady Sansa said? *Your family is not your friend. They don’t want you to succeed, and sooner or later they will turn against you.*

He couldn’t reveal that to Jaime, of course, so he pushed his frustration to the back of his mind. What he needed to do now was to try to cheer Jaime up.

“Well, then. We can decide later where we shall go. I am on my way to King’s Landing, but I’ll make sure you get to wherever you want to go. Maybe I could take you directly to the Citadel?”

“Maybe.” Jaime gave him a wan smile.

The big woman went to the door and opened it. The meeting was over.

As he reached the corridor, Tyrion glanced back one more time and saw the woman leaning over Jaime, talking to him. Jaime looked up at her with a strangest expression, his face open and with that slightest hint of a smile. Tyrion shook his head. Maybe Jaime had hit his head, too, in the altercation?

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On his way back from his brother, deep in thought, Tyrion was accosted by Lady Catelyn and Lady Sansa, trailed by Bronn.

“Lord Tyrion, a word if I may?”
Tyrion exhaled noisily and threw an accusing glance at Bronn, who shrugged his shoulders. For a sellsword whose purse depended on the good graces of his master, he had an unnerving habit to act on his own accord whenever he wanted. This time, it seemed, he had agreed to be pressed into the service of Stark ladies.

“What it is, Lady Catelyn?”

“Maybe we could withdraw to the back-room?” The women turned and led the way without waiting for his answer. Tyrion trailed them, gesturing for Bronn to follow.

The few Stark soldiers who had gathered in the room to share a meal stood up without being told, bent their head to Lady Catelyn and left. Tyrion called for some wine, ignoring Lady Catelyn’s disapproving looks. Hells, if he needed wine to mull over the recent revelations, he was going to drink some. Maybe he should send some to Jaime as well; he had looked like he could have some use for it? Tyrion bet the Stark hospitality might not have extended that far.

He called for the innkeeper and gave her instructions to that effect.

Lady Catelyn had waited patiently but as soon as Tyrion sat down, she got straight to the point.

“I hope you are satisfied that we are ready to fulfil our side of the bargain, and that Ser Jaime’s unfortunate accident was not our doing. Which begs the question of when can we proceed with the exchange?”

What followed was an intense discussion about the terms and conditions. Tyrion insisted on a new written confession, Lady Catelyn insisted that Lord Eddard had already done that in King’s Landing, and that Tyrion was free to confirm that with his nephew if he wanted. One thing they both agreed on, however, was that both parties wanted to conclude the matter as soon as possible.

Tyrion knowing what he did – or, rather, suspecting – had concluded that since Lord Tywin’s plan had failed, thanks to Jaime’s hulking nursemaid, the best he could do now was to at least achieve his freedom, even if it meant losing the valuable hostages. Besides, what were the hostages for if not for trading? He and his men were too few to take Jaime by force, and who knew where the sellswords had scattered after failing in their mission so spectacularly?

Eventually they reached an agreement – not good enough in Tyrion’s opinion, but better than nothing. Perhaps buoyed by the satisfactory proceedings, Lady Catelyn accepted a goblet of wine, as did Lady Sansa, who had been mainly observing the proceedings. A few pleasantries were exchanged about the likely weather for their respective journeys to the south and north, when Lady Sansa asked an unexpected question.

“What can you tell me about your squire, Podrick Payne?”

Tyrion raised his brows.

“Pod? What do you want to know about him?”

“He is an interesting young man. I just wonder where does he come from, or who are his parents.”

*Pod, interesting?* Tyrion considered the notion for a moment. The lad was fine, did his duties diligently and didn’t talk back. As a matter of fact, he didn’t talk much at all – so when had Lady Sansa had a chance to discover his interesting qualities?

“I don’t know very much about him, Lady Sansa, to be honest. My father appointed him into my service only a short time ago. He is from a lesser branch of House Payne, but I think both of his
parents have died.”

Lady Sansa digested what he had said for a while. “Do you know how long he had been with Lord Tywin?”

“I can’t say I do,” Tyrion raised his hands apologetically.

“Not that long. Only from the start of the Riverlands campaign.” Bronn, who had been sitting in the next table nursing his tankard of ale, cut in. “He was with some hedge knight, Ser Lorimer, who was hanged for stealing a ham from Lord Tywin’s stores. Didn’t hang the boy when they discovered he was a Payne.”

“And before that?” Lady Sansa turned to Bronn.

“Why such interest? Don’t tell that my squire has attracted your interest, Lady Sansa. That would be scandalous – not to mention how flustered it would make the poor boy,” Tyrion japed. The girl was behaving more and more curiously, not at all how a well-bred noble maid could be expected.

As a matter of fact, there were many things going on at the inn Tyrion thought odd. The elated welcome Lord Eddard had been received with; overly enthusiastic even for men as loyal such as Stark bannermen. Lady Catelyn’s appearance when they had first arrived: unusually ragged for someone who had always seemed to be perfectly appointed with no hair askew, even during their perilous journey through the Vale. The reluctance with which Stark men responded to any approaches by he and his men; who had ever heard of a soldier who refused to share a tankard of ale? Then there had been the glimpse he had had the previous morning of the Hound, Lord Eddard and Ser Rodrik conversing together: almost as if it had been more than a casual encounter.

Tyron tapped his fingers against the beer-stained table.

“Nothing like that, I assure you, my lord. I was just curious, that’s all.”

Lady Catelyn obviously shared Tyrion’s bewilderment about Sansa’s line of questioning, based on her raised eyebrows and tightly-pursed mouth. She rose, gathering her skirts.

“I shall see what I can do about those written assurances, if your man will take me to my lord husband.”

Tyrion bowed his head. “Naturally. Bronn, see the ladies to Lord Eddard’s room – and when you leave, makes sure Lady Sansa stays there. Then come to my room, I have an errand for you.” He smiled at Lady Catelyn. “My example, as you called it, my lady.”

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After Bronn entered his room, where Tyrion had already summoned Shae, he shared his task with both of them.

“I don’t know what is going on with the Starks, but I bet it is something. Things are not quite what they seem to be – and I want you to find out what it is.”

He turned to Shae. “My darling, can you use your womanly wiles to exhort information from the Stark soldiers? Choose one of the younger ones, foolish enough wanting to impress you when you are oh so interested in his manly mission.”

To Bronn he said. “As for you, you know what to do. If they still refuse to share a drink with you, maybe you can find some other ways to… persuade them.”
After Tyrion answered their questions about just how far they were allowed to go – no killing anyone, and a stern warning to Shae that she was not allowed to actually fuck anyone, as she was his and his alone – Bronn and Shae left the room and Tyrion threw himself into the bed.

He, who usually prided himself for being clever with plots and counterplots, for once found himself stumped. And he didn’t like it.

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Bronn and Shae came back within a few hours, grinning as successful conspiracists might.

“What do you have for me?” Tyrion lay down the book he had been reading, about dragons and their breeding. He liked those sorts of books, even though he knew he would never have any practical use for the information he gained. Still, dragons fascinated him, had always had.

“You were right; something is not right. It is big, and tall, and has an ugly mug.” Bronn said with a smirk.

“My Lion of Lannister, you are so clever, knowing something was afoot,” Shae cooed, wrapping her arms around Tyrion’s shoulders.

“Well, out with it, then!” Tyrion urged, his curiosity fully awakened.

“There is no exchange, never was, never will be. It was a ruse.” Bronn helped himself to a flagon of wine resting on Tyrion’s window sill.

“What?”

“The Hound was not sent or this trip with the prisoners; he stole Lady Sansa from under Joffrey’s nose – and apparently picked up Lord Eddard as well. The king has sent heralds all over the kingdoms proclaiming a reward of ten thousand gold dragons for anyone who kills the Hound and brings Lady Sansa and any of their companions back to him,” Shae added.

“A prize I’ll be happy to take. I don’t like the man, too fucking sullen for his own good.” Bronn had proceeded to chew the little cakes accompanying the wine, but Tyrion couldn’t have cared less about his breach of manners.

“So they had escaped – and were on their way to the Starks?” Tyrion repeated slowly.

“There’s one more curious thing. The king also proclaimed that he had executed Lord Stark for his crimes, which explains why everyone here looked as if they had seen a ghost when he appeared, not worse for wear.”

Tyrion stared at Bronn. Executed? When Lord Eddard had actually escaped, and had been well on his way to join his troops? How stupid exactly was his nephew, twice over?

Oh, that’s probably why.

“I got the tale from one of the squires,” Shae purred. “He tried to resist for a while, but when I told him how impressed I am with men who can manage intrigue and secrets, and how I might further express my fascination –“

“Which is where I came in, putting a knife on his throat,” Bronn continued.

“Did you kill him?” Not that Tyrion really cared – but it might be better not to alarm the Starks with
his newly acquired knowledge of their stratagems.

“Nah. Sent one of the Stone Crows to take him far away from here and leave him there to find his own way back, in a few days or so.”

Tyrion asked a few more questions to get the full picture out – as much as the poor boy had known, and after thanking his companions one more time, and admonishing them to hold on to the secret a while longer, he sent them away. He needed to be alone and think what this new twist in the events meant for him.

Tyrion pressed his temples with his thumbs and groaned. Plots, counterplots, subterfuges – he didn’t know, anymore, what was what.

He had some serious thinking to do.

Chapter End Notes

After a long pause, the next chapter sees Arya and Gendry again - not forgetting Nymeria, of course. How their road trip is progressing and whereabouts are they by now?

Any comments are warmly welcomed, should you feel so inclined!
The Pact

Chapter Notes

Arya, Gendry and Nymeria, a happy pack - or are they?

Thank you Hardlyfatal for betaing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya

Although Arya missed some aspects of travelling with the convoy – the company, the friendships she had formed, the freedom from responsibilities to make daily decisions of their journey – travelling with Nymeria and Gendry had its advantages, too.

That Gendry had agreed to join them had been a huge relief – in fact, she didn’t know how she would have coped without him. But he had come, and on his own accord. He had simply picked up his bag from the ground and followed her and Nymeria out of the village square to the woods, not saying a word or demanding to know what their plans were. He had just come.

Their journey was good - mostly. One thing Arya missed was the food: freshly baked bread from the griddle, the sausages dripping of fat, hot soups brimming with meat and grain and vegetables … They still had their traps and could keep up the supply of small game, complemented with onions, potatoes and bread Arya had grabbed from the kitchens. After they ran out of them, they could still rely on opportunities to buy some from the fellow travellers or from small homesteads they passed, with the coin Gendry had earned, so they were not exactly starving.

They still kept to the Kingsroad, as Arya didn’t know how to steer their way through the woods and Gendry was even more clueless, having never been outside Kings Landing. Only for the nights, they ducked deeper into the forest to set a camp, and that’s where Nymeria met them, having set her own pace during the day, mostly out of sight.

And that’s when the biggest problem of their arrangement was manifested.

As Arya had assured Gendry, Nymeria didn’t try to attack him and seemed to accept his company – but just. The tension between the two was unmistakable, both circling each other warily and Gendry refusing to be left alone with the direwolf even for a moment. Once when Arya and Gendry had argued about the plans for the next day’s journey with raised voices, Nymeria had stepped between them and growled at Gendry, the fur at her back rising and her scary fangs gleaming ominously in the firelight.

Gendry had stopped talking, Arya had soothed Nymeria, and the situation had passed, but it had told Arya that something needed to be done. She couldn’t always be there, and should Gendry and Nymeria become at odds when she was not – the notion didn’t bear thinking. So, one evening after the meal, she decided it was time for her to act.
“Gendry,” she called across the fire. Gendry had finished his plate and was collecting their few utensils to be put away. Nymeria was lying by Arya’s side, as she was often wont, her presence warm and safe against Arya’s flank.

“Uh?” Gendry raised his head.

“I think it is time we settle the matters between you and Nymeria. She needs to know that you are part of our pack and that you are not a threat.”

Gendry glanced at the giant wolf, frowning. “How do you suggest doing it? I haven’t gone near her or harassed her in any way, and still she looks at me like she would rather eat me than accept my presence.”

“Maybe that’s the problem. You have to let her get to know you.” Arya pointed at him. “Get your clothes off.”

Gendry’s jaw dropped. “What?”

“At least get your tunic off and let her smell you. If she doesn’t get a full sense of you, you’ll always be an outsider. And you have to do it willingly, let her come near you without fear.”

Arya wasn’t exactly sure how it worked, but she remembered Farlen, the Winterfell kennel master, explaining to her how a new dog had to be introduced to the pack. He had also said that there always had to be a clear pecking order or otherwise the dogs wasted their time fighting with each other rather than following orders. She wished she would have paid more attention to the details and wondered if it worked the same way with direwolves. Nonetheless, at least she could try.

Gendry looked like he wanted to protest, but seemingly thinking better of it, settled for pulling his tunic off and muttering something about crazy Northern ways.

Arya poked at Nymeria, who raised her head, and after another push towards Gendry, seemed to understand her meaning and got lazily up to her feet. She stretched, yawned, and sauntered to Gendry, who was waiting with his tunic still in his hands.

“Throw it away and lift your arms. Maybe get on your knees,” Arya instructed. Her gaze lingered on Gendry’s torso as he settled down. It was so different from hers: a broad back, rounded muscles in his arms making their way from his shoulders to his wrists, his chest flat but with clear lines defining it, curving from the top of his collarbones and from under his arms. His hands were large and fingers short and stout, dirt under his fingernails. When Gendry raised his arms as instructed, Arya could see the straight, dark hair of his armpits, and for some reason, the sight felt almost too raw, too intimate. She forced herself to look at his face instead.

Nymeria’s snout hovered next to Gendry’s cheek and he stood still as stone, only a nervous tick of his mouth revealing his uneasiness. The direwolf took her time, sniffing him all over: his neck, his chest, his arms. Arya closed her eyes, and for a fleeting moment, she smelled Gendry too, more strongly than ever. She was used to his scent, of course, having slept so many nights close to him, but this was something different; deeper, more intense.

Her eyes shot open.

Nymeria, apparently satisfied with her examination, sat back on her haunches and was looking at Gendry with her head tilted.

“I think that is enough,” Arya said, her mouth suddenly dry. “Now can you lie down on your back?”
Gendry shot her a look of exasperation but did as he was told, unfolding his discarded tunic on the ground and settling on top of it. When done, he folded his arms above his head.

“What then? Am I the meal being set for her now - is she going to eat me next?” he grumbled.

“No. It is my turn now.” Arya scooted closer on her knees. “Reveal your throat to me. Just lift your head up.”

“Why?”

“So she can see that you are submitting to me. The dogs – and I suppose wolves too, being close kin to them – expose their throat to the leader of the pack so it knows they are no threat to them. I am the leader of this pack, so if you do it to me, Nymeria sees that you know your place.”

“You? Since when have you been the leader?” Gendry spat, jerking his head back.

“Well, at least in this pack of ours. I fed and protected Nymeria since she was a pup, and she seems to still submit to me. And if not me, who? For you to take that role, you would have to fight her,” Arya explained patiently.

Gendry’s eyes narrowed. “Fight?”

“That’s the only way the pack submits to the new leader. If you think it’s not me, it must be her then – because as sure as hells it isn’t you, at least as far as she is concerned.” Arya jerked her head towards Nymeria, who was following the proceedings with interest.

“Very well then, you’ll be the leader,” Gendry muttered and lifted his chin, baring his strong neck to Arya.

She stared at it, the thick cords on both sides and the prominent apple of his throat, which moved as he swallowed. She wasn’t sure what to do next. Was this enough? She glanced at Nymeria, who gave no clues as to what she expected of her.

Gingerly, she bent down. She placed one hand on Gendry’s bare chest for balance, and already sitting on her knees, it was only a small distance and she had her face hovering over Gendry’s unprotected neck.

She opened her mouth and bit him.

Not hard, just a nibble. Arya’s hand felt the warmth of his flesh and the steady thumping of his heart under her fingers, and the scent of him lingered still in her nose. Gendry gasped but didn’t move.

She tasted salt on his skin and felt the short stubble of his beard under her tongue. She bit her teeth together, with a small fold of Gendry’s skin between them. Gendry jerked but didn’t push her away.

After a fleeting moment that seemed longer than it probably was, Arya released her hold and raised her head. “I think that’s enough.” She got up to her feet and turned away, but not before registering Gendry’s wide eyes as he stared at her.

Since that evening, the tension between Gendry and Nymeria was gone. Nymeria even settled down next to Gendry on some nights, and he didn’t mind, and the three of them snoozed through the nights filled with sounds of the forest and gentle breezes through the trees.

They didn’t talk about it afterwards, except one time, a few days later, when Gendry had been behaving especially moodily and Arya finally asked him what was his problem.
“Nothing. Why would I have any problems? You are our leader and you’ll take care of everything,” he declared.

“Only with Nymeria, you stupid bull. Just in our wolf pack,” Arya huffed. It was not fair for Gendry to take umbrage of such a minor matter. He was older, bigger and stronger – surely he could see that it was he who was actually leading them?

“Are you not a noble, a castle-born? Shall I not be calling you my lady when we get to Winterfell – if I even see you there anymore?” Gendry cocked his head while waiting for Arya’s answer.

Except she had none to give.

“It won’t be like that,” Arya started, but then stopped. It would be like that. She would be scooped inside the family chambers to learn about sewing and singing and all the other stupid things young maids were supposed to learn, while Gendry would spend his time in the smithy, working alongside Mikken, if things went her way.

“You’ll get to eat in the big hall and we would still see each other. Sometime you might even be sitting next to my father in the high table; he likes to get to know people who serve under him,” she tried to soften the reality.

“Who serve under him, and his family? Don’t worry, Arya, I know my place.” Gendry got up, scratched Nymeria behind the ear and walked away. Nymeria followed him and Arya stared after them, exasperated.

Why does life have to be so complicated?

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No more talk about leadership issues ensued, and for a while, things were good. They were making fair progress, had enough food, and encountered no threats from men nor beast.

Arya still ran with Nymeria on some nights, but more often than not, their presence in each other’s daily life was enough. On some of those occasions, however, she saw things. Men riding in groups, banners of lions and stags flying in front of them. Abandoned houses, trampled fields, burned crops. A few times she caught a scent of something familiar, something the direwolf couldn’t articulate and the girl couldn’t recreate in the morning, but something that gave her a sense of comfort, warmth – home.

That was ridiculous, of course, because they were still so far away from the North, so Arya just shook her head and concentrated on what was there and then.

And then everything changed.

When there was bartering to do, it was mostly Gendry who visited the houses or chatted up the groups of travellers they met. After one such occasion, where he had gone to see what the scattering of huts nearby could offer, he returned to Arya and Nymeria with an ashen face. After some prompting from Arya, whose curiosity had been raised to find out what had so upset him, Gendry told her the news about the herald from the capital who had travelled through the region to read royal proclamations.

About Lord Eddard Stark and Lady Sansa of House Stark.

At first, Arya refused to believe him. No, he must have heard it wrong, it must have been some other lord, some other lady, it must not have been an execution but a banishment… After running out of
excuses and seeing Gendry’s sad eyes when he shook his head, something broke inside Arya, and she collapsed into a heap, tears breaking through. None of those graceful silent tears streaking down her cheeks, but an all-out ugly bawl with wailing and blubbering and fists banging the ground, the trunk of a nearby tree, and Gendry’s chest when he engulfed her in his arms and held her steady, ignoring her protestations and cries.

The first night was the worst. Afterwards Arya couldn’t remember how she had gotten through it, or the day that followed. All she remembered was being woken up, handed some food that after she had first refused, Gendry had compelled her to eat, and which she had then chewed without tasting, bleary-eyed and hollow. She remembered being marshalled forward, sometimes steered by her shoulder, and sometimes dragged by the hand.

Gendry was always there, silent but present, taking care of everything and making sure that Arya was looked after even when she didn’t care about her own state. Nymeria never left her side, even when they were walking on the road unless Gendry saw people coming and drove her away. As soon as the people were gone, she slinked to walk with her once more, her warm snout touching Arya’s hand every now and then, as if checking on her.

After a few days clouded in fog, the haze of misery started to lift off and Arya looked around, saw that they were still going ahead, and she started to ask questions in her mind about what they should go. And she concluded that she wanted her mother. Lady Catelyn was the only one who could comfort her now.

She brought it up that evening, suggesting that instead of Winterfell they would head to Riverrun instead. Random pieces of gossip Gendry had picked up on the way suggested that the Young Wolf’s headquarters were still there, and that’s where she would find Lady Catelyn.

Instead of resisting her plan as Arya had thought, Gendry agreed to it with no fuss. They discussed how to best execute it and agreed that following the roads was still going to be the safest option. Arya remembered her geography, and how on their way to the South someone had said that the River Road and Kingsroad intersection was right by the inn at the crossroads. The place where the Lannisters had first shown their true colours.

Gradually, Arya got dragged back from the edge of despair, and with a new goal invigorating her and giving her life a purpose, she and Gendry continued their journey.

She thought a lot about her father, and how he must have felt in his last moments. Alone, betrayed and punished by the crown he had so reluctantly agreed to serve, but in which he had nonetheless so firmly believed in. Had they told her about Sansa and the Hound to burden his load even more before they had killed him? Arya didn’t put that above Joffrey – she had hated that snivelling coward ever since first seeing him in Winterfell, all haughty and arrogant.

And Sansa... Why had the Hound taken her in the first place? He was a horrible man who had killed the only friend Arya had had on their journey, and worse: he had japed about it. Arya had noticed the way he had sometimes looked at Sansa, and that sobered her, and a new gnawing worry started to eat her innards. So far she had been so despairing by the news of her father that she had paid less attention to Sansa’s fate, but now...

Her new ritual, reiterated every night when she lay herself down, was to repeat the names of those who had wronged her. Joffrey, Cersei, the Hound. She added Varys too, just in case, as he had had some evil plans for Gendry. She didn’t tell Gendry but held her hate close to her chest, where it festered and grew.

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It took them another week before Arya saw the familiar sight of the inn with white turrets and chimneys. As they got closer, they saw tents clustered on two sides of it, telling a tale of many guests. Too many, Arya thought and said so to Gendry.

“They have fresh food, and maybe news. We should go and at least have a look – or I could go.” Gendry implored.

“We don’t know who is there. Look at all those tents, it is not a couple of farmers on their way to the markets,” Arya argued back. She didn’t like the look of it. She – Nymeria – had seen too many soldiers in these parts recently to be at ease.

“Even so, what would they care about one traveller? I can sneak in and out with nobody noticing. I could fill our bags with food, ask a few questions from the servants if they seem talkative, and slip away again. You and Nymeria could wait here.”

Arya could see that Gendry was itching to go. She didn’t really care one way or another, her sorrow still too overwhelming.

“Fine then. Go and have your look. But be careful. Don’t talk to anyone who looks suspicious, or a Lannister soldier, or anyone from the capital. They only have to hear you to know that you are from the wrong side of Visenya’s Hill,” Arya relented. They could use some fresh food, and maybe there was news to be had, hopefully better this time.

After establishing their camp and ensuring its security, Gendry left, and Arya settled for another nerve-racking evening of waiting. One could never be sure what awaited when meeting other people, and she couldn’t deny being worried.

She ate, then fixed a tear in her breeches, in the process sticking her thumb with a needle way too many times, largely because of Nymeria. She had been behaving oddly the previous day and night, pacing restlessly and making funny noises, frequently coming to poke Arya in the thigh. Arya shushed her but she was relentless. In the end, Arya had to get firm with her and ban her from the campsite, which resulted in Nymeria slinking off into the woods.

Eventually Gendry came back, his bags brimming with bread, cheese, onion, carrots and potatoes. He had even bought half a dozen apples, and Arya eagerly bit into one, savouring its taste and crispness.

“So, what did you see?” she asked between the mouthfuls.

“Lots of people. Men, mostly. Soldiers, from the look of them, although some looked like wildlings or savages with their furs and hairy looks,” Gendry replied. He didn’t look happy.

“That’s all?”

“I didn’t really get to see or hear much. When I saw a Lannister flag on one the tents on the other side, the ones scattered around like chicken droppings, I knew I had to be careful.” Gendry threw the last parcel to the ground.

_Lannister_. Blood roared in Arya’s ears at the mention of that name. Her first instinct was to rage and rush to the inn to exact her revenge – but even before the thought had taken a full form, she knew how futile it would be. Joffrey and Cersei were not there, and neither was the Hound if he had any sense in his thick head.
“Just as well we are not going there,” she replied coolly instead.

“I had a quick word with the kitchen maid at the back door of the inn, but besides getting this food from her, she wasn’t much help. She didn’t know who the men were, as she had been visiting her relatives and since coming back this morning had worked without a break to serve the guests.” Gendry sat heavily on the ground next to Arya, who offered him a bite of the apple.

“First thing tomorrow we turn to River Road, skirting past the inn. The sooner we get out of here, the better,” Arya said. She had been right in wanting to avoid the inn, then.

Gendry agreed with her, and soon they settled for the night.

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That night neither the girl or the direwolf slept well. Nymeria roamed the forest, her path taking her closer and closer to the inn. The tents stank of humans in closed confinements, and the ground all around the inn of human excrement. The direwolf didn’t like it, but among the bad smells were ones she had sensed before, familiar ones, and she lifted her snout and breathed in the night air.

Arya whimpered in her sleep.

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The morning was cool and crisp, dew-drops glimmering on blades of grass when Arya rolled their bedrolls. Gendry had already collected their other belongings and was waiting for Arya to get ready, tapping his foot and making japes about women and the time it took or them to get ready. There was no sign of Nymeria, but Arya wasn’t worried, as she often made her own way and joined them further along the journey.

Indeed, they had hardly set their feet on the path that would see them bypassing the inn and heading directly to the River Road, when Nymeria arrived, running from the direction of the inn.

“Good morning to you, too,” Arya greeted her, but instead of only brushing past her and galloping forward, Nymeria ran around her in circles, yelping.

“Nymeria, what are you doing?” Arya stopped and waited for the direwolf to move out of her way, but she only came closer, nudged her with her big head and started back, towards the inn.

“Not there, girl,” Gendry shouted. “Wrong direction!”

Nymeria paid no heed but trotted for a while, then stopped and looked over her shoulder, clearly expecting them to join her.

“Not this time, Nymeria. We’re not going to the North, we’re going to Riverrun,” Arya cajoled. “Mother is waiting for us there, so come here.”

Nymeria did turn at that, but instead of following, she again did a few of those curious little rounds around Arya, pushing and prodding her before heading once more back towards where they had come from.

“She’s behaving oddly today,” Gendry remarked as they followed the direwolf’s antics.

“She is. I don’t recall seeing her this agitated before.” Arya wondered whether Nymeria had gotten the scent of the Lannister soldiers and felt the same urge as she had, to attack them. Yet there was no aggression in her behaviour, her tail high in the air and her ears pointing forward.
Still, they had no reason to go back, and as Arya had decided to go to her mother instead of taking the long road to her home, she had no time for Nymeria’s antics. Shouting her to follow them one more time, Arya shrugged her shoulders and started to walk. Gendry followed her.

They reached the River Road without incident and watching the wide road stretching in front of her, full of promises of her mother and brother and the security of his father’s bannermen, Arya felt as she was finally getting somewhere.

Chapter End Notes

Did they just lose their chance to catch up with the Starks as well as with the Lannisters? Will Arya have reason to regret her decision?

The next chapter is from Lady Catelyn's POV and tells what's happening in that seething hotbed of intrigue, at the inn...
Catelyn

After a frustrating meeting with her husband – mostly because there was so much more she wanted to tell Ned, but couldn’t because of Bronn’s presence – Lady Catelyn retired to her room. She gave a silent thanks to the Seven that there had been no need for a fight, after all, now that Jaime had miraculously been delivered back to them. Just in time, as well, to ensure they could fulfil their part of the imaginary bargain Sandor Clegane had conjured out of thin air, and even more miraculously, which Lord Tyrion had believed.

Catelyn felt ashamed of having judged both her saviours so wrongly before: Clegane, for thinking him to be just a brute at the peck and call of the Lannisters; and Brienne, for allowing her to be imprisoned by the word of only one man. She had soon become convinced of Brienne’s innocence, but she should have fought harder to make sure the others believed it too. Then again, had she done so, Brienne wouldn’t have been captured with Jaime and she wouldn’t have been able to free him…

A single candle cast its flickering light into the room, the corners being left in shadows. Catelyn released her hair from its simple Northern styling and brushed it in long, slow strokes. Staring into the darkness, Catelyn decided she had to make proper amends with Brienne the first thing in the morning.

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After breakfast, Catelyn went in search for Brienne. As she had suspected, she found her in the Kingslayer’s room, sitting on a stool next to his bed. Her arrival interrupted whatever they had been discussing.

“May I have a word with you, Lady Brienne?” Catelyn enquired, nodding at the Kingslayer. She felt a smidgen of sympathy for the man – but just a smidgen – having had close experience of the blow losing one’s legs could have on a person.

Bran. Catelyn’s thoughts turned to her son and how much she longed to be back with him. Perhaps after the exchange they could finally turn towards the North?

“Of course, my lady.” Brienne got up and followed Catelyn to her room. She was still dressed in the simple tunic and breeches she had worn during her captivity, although they were now freshly laundered and clean.

“Lady Brienne, I hope I have already expressed my deepest gratitude for the great service you have done for me and my family,” Catelyn started, beckoning Brienne to sit down on the bed, having
taken the only chair in the room for herself.

“You have, my lady, and I thank you for it,” Brienne said, blushing.

“Let me also apologise once again, profoundly, for the horrible miscarriage of justice we subjected you to. I know my son would do the same, so let me extend this apology to you on his behalf, too. We should have never doubted you or placed you under arrest. Can you find it in your heart to forgive us?”

Catelyn was painfully aware of how inadequately those paltry words described the depth of her gratitude, but she had to try.

“Think nothing of it, my lady. I understand that your position was difficult. My story about how King Renly truly died is quite unbelievable, so I understand you had your doubts. Besides, I knew all along that the truth shall set me free,” Brienne said, her blue eyes meeting Catelyn’s, steadily.

“That it has. Knowing you as I do now, I believe you spoke the truth. That obviously means that you are free to come and go as you please. We still have your armour and weapons, and since you were able to secure your horse, you shall have all your possessions back with you later today. In addition, although I know how insufficient any monetary reward is compared to the service you have rendered, you shall receive a fair compensation for your troubles.”

Catelyn knew it would replete their travel coffer considerably, but what good was coin if it couldn’t be used to reward those who had earned it?

Brienne shifted, folding and unfolding her long legs. Catelyn almost felt sorry for placing her in such uncomfortable position. It was clear that the lady warrior was not used to receiving praise and reward.

“You are too kind, but I thank you,” Brienne murmured.

Catelyn leaned back. With formalities concluded, she was free to ask what she really wanted to know.

“What do you plan to do next? You told me once that when you first came to us, you intended to offer your services to House Stark. Would that still be of interest to you? As if it is, I can assure you that you would be warmly welcomed and my husband would be proud to have you wearing our colours. Saying that, if this experience has discouraged you from that notion, I understand completely.”

Brienne seemed to think for a moment. Finally she spoke, slowly.

“If that would be acceptable to you, I would like to serve you – but only you, my lady. I would like to swear my allegiance to Lady Stark, rather than House Stark – although of course, by doing that I’d be serving your house as well.”

Catelyn was taken aback. *Me?*

“Are you sure? My life can be rather boring when we get back home to Winterfell. Not much to keep a warrior like you occupied, I’m sure.”

“It matters not. I’d rather serve one who has a good heart,” Brienne said, then quickly added. “Not that your lord husband doesn’t have a good heart as well, I only mean—“

“Don’t worry. I think I understand what you mean. We women need to support each other.” Catelyn
took a deep breath. “If you are sure you want it, nothing would bring me greater pleasure than to accept you in my service.”

“I am sure, my lady.”

“Well then, I shall speak to Ser Rodrik and he will arrange for your things to be brought to you. He will also arrange the room next to me being assigned to you. Is there anything else you may require? If there is, just say the word.” Catelyn was pleased but wondered if Brienne had been too hasty with her offer. Surely her skills would be better used in the service of someone else than a wife and a mother of five?

“I need nothing more than what I have – but I would feel better if I was dressed in my armour again.”

“As for that – you know that any knight can make a knight. I could ask Ser Rodrik to knight you, and I have no doubt that he would do it willingly, being as grateful to you as I am.”

Brienne blushed again. Catelyn wondered how it was possible for such a gentle and shy maiden to have chosen such a difficult path to follow.

“Thank you again, my lady. I will think about it. We have no sept here, and no time for proper prayers and preparations. But I thank you, truly.”

Catelyn let the matter drop; there would be time for it later. There was another issue she wanted to raise with Brienne, one more boon she wanted to give to this brave young woman.

“As for the Kingslayer, you don’t have to guard him anymore. Ser Rodrik can assign other men to take it over. Servants can take care of other matters related to his condition.” For Brienne to carry Jaime into the inn the previous day had been unnecessary, and her helping him to bathe even more so.

Catelyn had offered the services of servants, but Brienne had declined. It had been improper, of course, for an unmarried maiden to assist a man in such a task. Yet after hearing Brienne’s story Catelyn knew that she had already taken care of Ser Jaime in ways that breached all limits of propriety, so one more breach didn’t seem such a big thing at the time. But now…

Brienne appeared uncomfortable. “If it is acceptable to you – and to Ser Jaime – I don’t mind continuing. At least until he travels on.”

“Why would you do it? I recall you wished nothing more than to be rid of his company. I know his current condition is a cause for pity, but don’t let that cloud what kind of a man he still is, or what he has done.”

Brienne looked as if she wanted to say something, opening her mouth, then closing it. Catelyn felt sorry for her. Had she perhaps found a new object of her affections, as impossible as Renly had been? What the Kingslayer could have done to earn such devotion, she couldn’t understand, but young women were known to fall for good looks and easy charm, and Ser Jaime had plenty of both. And despite her experiences and abilities, Brienne was still just that – a young woman.

“I know of many things he has done, and how unforgivable they are – but there is also some good in him. For that little bit of goodness, I want to do what is right by him, especially as it is my fault that he is this way.”

Oh yes, the struggle with their captors. When Brienne had told Catelyn – hesitantly – how Ser Jaime had rescued her from a sure rape, Catelyn had been surprised, as it hadn’t sounded like the arrogant
Kingslayer she knew. Maybe there was something in what Brienne said, after all, and her guilt over his condition explained the rest.

“As you wish. I trust that they may leave very soon anyway, possibly even today after the official exchange has been concluded.”

While they had been talking, Catelyn had heard steadily increasing commotion from the outside: sounds of many men talking and shouting to each other. She had ignored it, but it had grown too loud to be disregarded any longer – she had to find out what it was about.

“If you excuse me, Lady Brienne, it seems something is happening at the yard. I better go and have a look.”

“I will come with you. Ser Jaime should be settled for now and he is not going anywhere.” Brienne got up and rushed to open the door for Catelyn.

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By the time they got to the yard, a considerable crowd had already gathered. People were talking and gesturing towards the forest, and when Catelyn looked at where they were pointing, she understood their alarm.

A wolf. And not just any wolf.

In one look she could see that it was a direwolf, as big as Grey Wind, standing on a hill and looking down at the inn. For a moment her heart lurched; was Robb here? However, another look told her that it couldn’t be her son’s direwolf. He had a smoke-grey fur and yellow eyes, and although this direwolf, too, had grey fur, the colour was much lighter. Catelyn considered for a moment. Summer was back in Winterfell with Bran, Shaggydog was black, Ghost was white, and Lady was dead. So this could only be… Nymeria?

In the letter Catelyn had received shortly after the unfortunate events on the Kingsroad, Ned had told her that Arya had been forced to drive her wolf away lest Cersei Lannister got her hands on it. Of course! The incident had occurred near this place, and she must have lived on her own ever since…

Catelyn stepped forward. Ser Rodrik had appeared by her side from somewhere, and she relayed her instructions to him in a tense voice.

“Ser Rodrik, please make sure nobody tries to harm that direwolf. It is Nymeria, she is coming home.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Make sure Lord Tyrion and his men are given the same message. Any man who as much as touches the hair on her fur shall answer to me.”

Ser Rodrik left for his task and Catelyn took another step. She had always been friendly with her children’s wolves – but it had been a while ago. If Nymeria had been living in the wild, would she still accept human company?

“My lady, be careful,” Brienne said in a low voice, just a step or two behind her.

“I will. But I have to see why she is here.”

In the meanwhile, Nymeria had settled down and laid her head between her huge paws, staring at
Catelyn. She didn’t appear threatening, her ears pointing forward. If she was not willing to come back to their fold, why would she have shown up here in the first place?

Slowly, step by step, Catelyn walked towards the hill. The men had stopped talking and pulled back, forming a path through which Catelyn approached the direwolf. When she was only ten paces away, Nymeria rolled over, exposing her belly.

Interpreting it as a clear sign of the direwolf’s acceptance, Catelyn walked ahead with more confidence and knelt next to her.

“Nymeria! Good girl! What are you doing here? So wonderful to see you!” Catelyn rubbed the direwolf’s belly, scratched her behind the ears and ruffled her fur, speaking soft terms of endearment. Nymeria responded by wiggling excitedly and rubbing her head against Catelyn.

Catelyn felt a twinge in her heart. Ever since she had heard that neither Ned nor Sansa had any news about Arya, she had been pained by it. Her child, all alone in the unforgiving city, knowing no-one… Part of her wanted to believe that she was fine, that she had been taken in by good people and that they would find her again, another part whispered into her ear about horrible things that could happen to a young girl on her own.

Catelyn had cried, she had prayed – and now seeing this reminder of her little girl, she felt tears in her eyes again.

She stood up. Nymeria had returned, maybe Arya too would return someday. She had to believe it – she simply had to.

“Come, girl, let’s go. You get to meet Ned again, and Sansa, and in time, your siblings.” She tugged the direwolf from the fur of her neck and started to walk back towards the inn. Maybe… Sansa had lost her wolf. Maybe she and Nymeria could bond while waiting for Arya to come back?

Brienne’s jaw had dropped and she was looking at the direwolf in awe. Catelyn smiled at her; this was just one of the things she had to learn to live with if she became a member of the House Stark retinue.

Catelyn hadn’t walked for many steps when Nymeria started making little rounds around her, pushing and prodding her. She made small yelping noises, and it was clear she wanted to convey something to her.

“What is it? What do you want? Don’t you want to come after all, did you just stop by to greet us?” she asked Nymeria, puzzled.

The direwolf panted, her eyes bright yellow and staring right at her. When Catelyn tried to move, she repeated her actions, pushing against her with her snout, then retreating towards the direction she had come from, looking at Catelyn over her shoulder.

“If I’d have to guess, I’d say it wants you to follow it,” Brienne suggested.

“But where?”

“I don’t know, but I am pretty sure it would take you there.”

“Her name is Nymeria – but you may be right.” Catelyn had reached Brienne and they stood watching the direwolf. She returned to them, then ran back again.

“Maybe she has a litter somewhere? I had a cat once, who behaved exactly like this when she
wanted to show me her litter. She had given birth to it without me even knowing she was pregnant,” Brienne said, nodding slowly.

If that was it, how could Catelyn refuse? As a mother of five, she understood Nymeria’s concerns better than many – if that was indeed the reason for her odd behaviour. Catelyn made her decision.

“Lady Brienne, would you mind getting our horses and bringing them here? Take one other man with you; ask Ser Rodrik who is the best shot with a bow. We’ll follow Nymeria and see what she wants.”

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In no time Brienne had done as asked and Catelyn, Brienne and the man Ser Rodrik had recommended, Jarwin, had mounted and were on their way. Ser Rodrik had seen them off, muttering how Lord Tyrion wasn’t happy about the distraction and wanted to move on with the exchange. Catelyn had dismissed it with a wave of her hand; Lord Tyrion simply had to wait.

Ser Rodrik had also wanted to send more men with her, but Catelyn didn’t want to leave their numbers depleted in case of some treachery from the Lannister and had insisted that two mounted warriors were surely enough. Besides, they were not going to follow Nymeria too far: whatever she had to show had better be within an easy distance.

After seeing that they were following her, Nymeria had increased her pace and sprinted ahead in long easy strides, the horses galloping after her at some distance. The presence of the direwolf made them nervous and they snorted, showing the whites of their eyes when their riders urged them on.

Catelyn noticed that Nymeria took them through a shortcut towards River Road, and then along the road. That was odd, as if she had a litter hidden somewhere, surely that would be in the woods? Yet she followed.

Not long after reaching the road, they saw two people walking in the direction of the Riverlands. Nymeria ran straight towards them, and for their sake, Catelyn hoped they were not faint of heart. To see a gigantic direwolf striding past was likely to cause alarm in anyone, not least in what appeared to be two men, or rather, a young man and a boy.

Catelyn leaned closer to the neck of her horse and gave it full rein. The sooner they got to the bottom of the mystery, the better.

Surprisingly, Nymeria ran straight at the pair, stopping by the side of the boy and pushed her snout to his thigh. The boy stopped, as did the young man, and after apparently hearing the horses, they turned to look at them. The boy looked somehow familiar with a lean build, dark hair and long face.

Catelyn almost fainted, having to grab the mane of the horse to stay upright.

Arya!

Her horse reached the pair in a few strides and Catelyn clambered down from the saddle, running the last few steps separating her from her daughter, who stared at her with her mouth open.

“Arya!”

Arya started running towards her, and they met in the middle of the road, clasping each other in a tight hug and calling for each other.

“Mother!”
“Arya, is it really you?”

Catelyn laughed and cried at the same time, squeezing her daughter tight in her arms. *She is alive! She is here!*

They had fallen to their knees, and after another tight embrace, Catelyn pulled back and took Arya’s face between her hands. She had changed: not only was her hair short, but she was gaunter than before, and she looked older.

“Mother, how did you find me?” Arya sniffed, tears in her eyes.

“It was Nymeria, she brought me to you,” Catelyn sobbed. They both turned to look at the direwolf, who was sitting next to the young man. Brienne and Jarwin had also dismounted and were watching the reunion unfolding before their eyes.

“Nymeria? So that’s why she has been so restless!” Arya blurted. “But where did you come from?”

“From the inn at the crossroads. Nymeria came there and made it clear she wanted me to follow her… and I am so glad I did.” Catelyn stroked Arya’s hair, marvelling at yet another miracle that saw her family brought back to her.

Arya’s smile, so bright just a moment ago, wavered, and she seemed to be in the brink of bursting into tears once again.

“Mother, I have heard… about Father, and Sansa.” Arya cried at earnest now and pressed her face against Catelyn’s chest. Her tears soaked into the fabric of Catelyn’s dress, and her heart broke thinking of how her poor innocent daughter had had to carry a pain so great, and so completely unnecessarily. Her hatred for Joffrey burned hotter than ever before.

Catelyn had to use force to detangle Arya from her arms and push her back.

“No, no, no, Arya, it was not true! Your father is not dead, and Sansa is well! They are both with me, at the inn!”

Arya stared at her with wide eyes. “Not… dead?”

“No, not at all, my dearest! It was all just evil lies Joffrey put out. We don’t know why – but, oh, sweetling, everything is well!”

Catelyn embraced her again, clutching her as if wanting to squeeze all painful doubts out of her. She was so skinny… but also taller, more sinewy. What ordeals she must have gone through! Once more Catelyn pulled back, gathering herself. She needed to be strong – for her daughter. She got up, helping Arya to get on her feet.

Looking around, for the first time she paid attention to the young man Arya had been travelling with. He, too, looked familiar: the blue eyes, the set of his jaw, the thick black hair.

“And you are…”

“Gendry, his name is Gendry, mother.” Arya hastened to make introductions, wiping her runny nose with her sleeve. “He helped me escape from King’s Landing. We’re friends.”

“My lady.” The young man made a clumsy bow, visibly uncomfortable about the attention.

“Gendry, I and my family owe you a great debt. Please, let’s return to the inn and we can exchange
stories there."

Catelyn started to feel a bit more in control of her faculties, although she couldn’t help stealing glances at Arya at every few seconds. Just to make sure she was not dreaming, and that her daughter was still there. She turned to her companions.

“Lady Brienne or Jarwin, could one of you take Gendry to ride double? I will ride with Arya. We better return to the inn in haste, as I don’t want to keep any member of this family apart from each other any longer than is absolutely necessary.”

Brienne stared at Gendry, her mouth falling open. Hearing Catelyn, she seemed to pull out from her daze and nodded curtly. After a brief discussion, it was concluded that Jarwin, being lighter than Brienne, would take Gendry, and Brienne would take their bags and parcels.

In a few moments, they had organised themselves and turned to head back. Arya rode behind Catelyn and wrapped her arms tightly around Catelyn’s waist.

“Hold on, my babe,” Catelyn whispered, pressed a kiss on Arya’s knuckles and urged her horse to a canter.

She wanted nothing more than to ride like the wind to get back to her husband, to her daughter, with her daughter – all unharmed and safe.

The gods were good.

Chapter End Notes

Tee-hee – did you really think I would let the opportunity of a happy Stark family reunion pass just like that? Nah!

The next chapter is back to Tyrion again, and to his ponderings after the revelation in his last POV. What shall he do? How will that impact on our big, happy family?

All comments and thoughts all warmly received!
Oh Brother, My Brother

Chapter Notes

Tyrion gets to hear even more secrets than he bargained for...

Many thanks to my beta Hardlyfatal!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Tyrion**

Tyrion stayed awake through half the night in a light of a few candles, watching them burn through and their flame getting almost extinguished before wearily lighting yet another. He nursed the goblet of wine in his hand but even to his own surprise didn’t drink much of it. No, he needed a clear head to go through all the different options open for him and assess them for their merits.

He could march to Lady Catelyn, tell her that she and her deceitful husband had been caught, and leave the inn with Stark and Lady Sansa to go to King’s Landing – and clap the Hound in chains and drag him back as well for a good measure.

That option was his preferred choice; however, it had its disadvantages. The biggest of them was that it was extremely unlikely, if not outright impossible, for it to succeed. Firstly, Lady Catelyn and her retinue would not give up Lord Eddard and Lady Sansa without a fight— a fight that Tyrion was not at all sure he could win. Secondly, he could kiss his chances of getting Jaime back goodbye – and that was simply an unacceptable outcome.

Bronn had appraised the Stark forces and concluded that both sides were at even odds – and that had been when they still counted Clegane as their man. Now, however, the numbers had shifted with Clegane changing sides, and counting the arrival of the lady knight. Tyrion had heard enough from Lady Catelyn and Jaime not to underestimate her despite her sex.

No, if it came to a fight, it could be a close call which side would win. Besides, Tyrion didn’t flatter himself to assume that his mountain clans would fight for his cause with the same fervour as Northmen might for theirs. He had seen the exultation of the Stark troops after their lord’s unexpected arrival and heard their exclamations of joy and assurances of fealty. He had seen their faces light up when they had glimpsed at Stark being escorted through the crowd, and witnessed the smiles and bows and attempts to reach their lord for a word or two. What was it with Lord and Lady Stark that raised such loyalty in their troops?

Passingly Tyrion wondered whether, if Lord Tywin was placed in a similar situation, would the Lannister bannermen be as happy to see him back? Probably not.

Tyrion sighed and rubbed his brow. Moon cast its pale light through the window and he heard the distant howl of a wolf. He shivered.

He couldn’t pretend he didn’t know what was going on, that much was sure. To think how they had
fooled him, probably laughing at him behind his back, made Tyrion cringe. And Clegane… whatever happened, he was going to get his comeuppance.

How much had Stark promised him, he wondered? It must have been a hefty sum to uproot Clegane from his secure position in the court and all the things he had known his whole life. Admittedly, Joffrey was a spoiled brat and looking after him was surely not the most pleasant task – but still, a position in the Kingsguard, and the coin and prestige it brought… Why give all that up for…

…suddenly Tyrion recalled a passing remark Shae had made the first day at the inn, laughing and saying something about hounds forgetting their place and eyeing wolves. He, too, had noticed how the Hound watched Lady Sansa but had thought nothing of it at the time. The girl was a pretty sight for sore eyes, for sure, so which man in his right mind would not look at her?

Then again… maybe it hadn’t been the Stark who had made the offer, but his daughter?

Tyrion found the notion of a noble maid of good upbringing scheming in such a way unsettling. A woman like Shae, for sure, but Lady Sansa? Furthermore, if she had made some promises to the Hound, had the man been really as foolish as to believe them?

In the end, Tyrion decided it being more likely than the Hound had simply been lured by a promise of money, maybe some lands, perhaps even a keep of his own in the North. Being a younger son, he couldn’t inherit Clegane’s Keep and no matter how insignificant a piece of land it might be, abandoning the Kingsguard for a large estate somewhere in the North might hold some attraction for a man like him.

As the night went on, for a brief moment Tyrion considered that maybe his best advantage relied upon swift action. Maybe he could rouse Bronn and a few of the most discreet members of his jolly band to steal Stark, Lady Sansa and Jaime from their rooms and leave the inn that very night? They could be far, far away in the morning.

Then he remembered that the Hound held the only key to the room where Lord Eddard and Lady Sansa slept and was even sleeping in an opposite room to ‘guard’ them, and his momentary excitement deflated.

Also, that Brienne of Tarth held the key to Jaime’s room and from the looks of it, probably slept on his doorstep. Besides, if the Stark troops knew the truth, they were likely on high alert for any unusual activities.

After Tyrion had concluded that violence was not an option in his favour, all he could do was to go ahead with the exchange, as much as it galled him. At least he could insist on getting the Hound too on top of the bargain. Stark would probably be happy to get rid of him, under the circumstances, thus avoiding having to fulfil uncomfortable promises.

What he really needed was to talk with Jaime. He might not know the situation either but might have some suggestions. The old Jaime would have thought nothing of resorting to an attack, to hells with the odds, but the Jaime Tyrion had met that day seemed to have lost some of his old spark along with the use of his legs. Yet Tyrion hoped his mind for strategy could still come up with something useful. If only he could get to spend a moment with Jaime alone, without his hulking nursemaid!

Accepting there was nothing else he could do that night, Tyrion climbed into his bed and buried himself deep into the mattress, surrendering to sleep. Sometimes one just had to adjust and try to get the best out of a bad situation. And try again, another day.
The next morning Tyrion tried his luck in securing a few private moments with Jaime but met only stony resistance from his guardian. Determined to seek permission directly from Lady Catelyn, preparing to grant her the same privilege of seeing her family in private, Tyrion went to seek her out when he heard the commotion outside.

He got to the yard just in time to see Lady Catelyn approaching the biggest wolf he had ever seen in his life.

“What is this about?” he asked Bronn, who stood among the crowd, arms crossed.

“A big bloody wolf snapping the lady’s head off, if we’re lucky. A shame, really, for such a handsome head, but that would solve some of our problems, would it not?”

Lady Catelyn was approaching the wolf carefully, the animal crouching against the ground. It could only be a direwolf, judging from its size. Tyrion remembered the wolves he had seen with the Stark children, and although they had been just puppies, they had already intimidated him with their size. Suddenly he understood better the terror of the stories regaled about the Young Wolf and his beastly companion in the battle.

“That can only be one of the Stark direwolves. Maybe our luck is turning, but for the worse; maybe Robb Stark has arrived with his troops.” Tyrion saw his weak negotiating position getting weaker still, should the balance of fighting forces tip even more to the Stark’s favour. He wondered if even he would get out of there in peace.

Nonetheless, no soldiers were seen, nor more Stark colours, and after a while, they saw Lady Catelyn riding away with the lady knight and one other companion.

Tyrion’s mind worked feverishly; maybe this was his chance? If Bronn were able to pick the lock in Jaime’s room – a skill he anticipated the sellsword might have acquired somewhere during his illustrious career as a thug – he could at least converse with Jaime in peace.

They tried, but Lady Catelyn had been more shrewd than Tyrion had anticipated, posting not one but two guards on Jaime’s door.

Drowning his frustration in a goblet of wine, Tyrion sat brooding and figuring his remaining options when he heard the sounds of returning riders from the outside.

Intrigued, he followed the others back to the yard and saw a curious procession riding in. First came Brienne-fucking-Tarth, his arch nemesis when it came to Jaime, carrying a bunch of haphazard bundles on her saddle. Lady Catelyn followed, riding double with a wild-looking young boy, then the Stark soldier, riding with a burly young man.

Both newcomers looked familiar to Tyrion, and while the group dismounted, he squinted his eyes trying to remember where he might have seen them. That Lady Catelyn had brought them in must mean they were someone special… Then he recognised the younger boy.

Not a boy at all, but Arya Stark – the other daughter!

Tyrion cursed. The Red Keep seemed to leak like a sieve, with not one or two but all three Stark hostages the crown had held roaming the countryside free as birds. How the hells was it possible? Had the whole court become incompetent idiots?

Tyrion had assumed the younger Stark daughter was still being kept by Cersei as the last assurance
of the Starks’ good behaviour. His mind had even lazily drifted over the possibilities of at least something to be salvaged from the disaster of letting Sansa Stark leave, by betrothing Arya Stark to Prince Tommen. The marriage would have to wait for a few years, of course, but eventually, the bonds of kinship between the two opposing families might have a chance to heal at least some of the rift between them.

But no, of course Cersei and Joffrey had let this one, too, slip through their fingers.

However, the situation also offered some small compensations…

“A touching family reunion again, I see,” he quipped at Lady Catelyn, standing firmly in the middle of the doorway when she reached the door. She was clutching the girl’s hand and her face was flushed.

Irritation flashed over Lady Catelyn’s face. “Please, move out of my way. I have to see my daughter in.”

Tyrion didn’t move. “I trust her lord father and her sister would be delighted to see her, too. I wish I could grant you the privilege, but alas, we agreed on restricted access to our respective hostages until the exchange is done.”

The girl glared at him under her brow but Tyrion ignored it. Before Lady Catelyn had a chance to respond, Tyrion continued.

“I would be willing to grant you access to them, however, should you return the favour. I would like to spend some time with Jaime alone. Nothing that concerns you, but we have plans to make and things to discuss in regards to the current situation, and I’m sure you understand that not all things concerning our father’s plans and how things stand in King’s Landing are meant for your ears.”

Lady Catelyn stared at him with open disdain. Visibly fighting two opposing emotions, the motherly side of her eventually won.

“Fine, so be it. Lady Brienne, please see Lord Tyrion to Ser Jaime and wait outside the room. Once I and my daughter return from seeing Lord Eddard and Lady Sansa, their time is up, too.”

“My lady.” Brienne bowed and brushed past Tyrion, glancing around her shoulder. “If you’d follow me, my lord.”

“Brann, escort the ladies Stark to their family. You heard the rest.”

Tyrion’s gaze lingered in the other youth, a tall dark boy, broad and muscled. There was something familiar in him that he couldn’t quite place. Shrugging, he gave up trying to fathom it and followed Brienne.

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“Where’s Brienne?”

Jaime’s first words surprised Tyrion. That the creature might have fallen for Jaime was no big surprise. Probably the only chance of love for a woman like her was to dream of unattainable men, so why not reach high? However, he had seen how Jaime had succumbed to her fussing without a complaint – and now this? The Jaime of old would be making witty japes about his guardian’s monstrous size and big teeth, not asking after her.

The thought disturbed Tyrion. He couldn’t even imagine how it would feel to lose something as vital
for his being as Jaime had, by losing his ability to walk. It must have been deeply depressing, and maybe the woman had wormed her way under his skin when Jaime had been at his most vulnerable state. The sooner they got out of there and back to their family - as spurious support as it could offer - the better.

“She is outside the door. We have been granted some time alone, and I need to talk to you about something important.” Tyrion scooted closer to Jaime. “How much do you know about this ‘exchange’?”

Jaime shrugged. “Not much. First I was told I’d be taken to Stannis, to be bargained with for his support to Starks. Then you came in and told me about the exchange. I suppose they changed their plans.”

“Well, then, would you be surprised to hear that there was no exchange planned at all?”

Tyrion told Jaime all he knew, and once again was taken aback by Jaime’s lack of reaction. Before, Jaime would have cursed and sworn harsh retribution to anyone who dared such grave deceit. This… new Jaime took it all in silence. He didn’t even laugh at it, taking it as a good jape at their expense, which was another reaction Tyrion might have expected.

“So Sandor finally snapped?” was all he said.

“One could say so. I can’t figure out why; whether it was the coin, a promise of lands or titles or something else the Starks might have promised.” Tyrion left out his suspicions about Lady Sansa’s role. Jaime had not yet met the girl, and during their visit in Winterfell, he had made some cutting comments about excitable country girls being dazzled by big city wonders. He wouldn’t be able to link that girl with the one Tyrion had so recently met.

“It seems that the Starks are learning to play the game. Who would have guessed?”

“Maybe so.” Tyrion leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “I have tried to figure out our options, and unfortunately there are not many. We simply don’t have enough men to make our point with swords. Had you been hale and hearty, we might just have had a chance, but – “

“I could always crawl on the ground and slice ankles with my dagger,” Jaime suggested, a hint of his old sarcasm surfacing.

“The main thing is to get you back. Even if the Starks are starting to learn the game, I doubt they have ambitions to truly start playing it. I bet that after this they will happily go back to their cold lands and stay there. That will leave us to deal with Stannis - which is not a thoroughly disastrous outcome if you ask me. We’ll be needed for that, so the sooner we can leave, the faster we can sort Stannis out.”

Jaime didn’t respond. Tyrion followed his gaze and saw that he, too, was studying the ceiling.

“Do you know that I have memorised every shape and curve of that ceiling. I have stared it long enough, although I have been here hardly a day.”

Tyrion didn’t understand the sudden change of topic. Jaime turned his head and looked at him in the eye.

“That’s about all I am good for, now. I can’t fight Stannis, I can’t lead the men to fight him. I can’t even very well travel with the war party, not in my state. Our father has no need for me.”

Tyrion shifted uncomfortably. Jaime was right, of course. Their father had…
Yet another insight hit him. If the exchange had never been real, and Lord Tywin had known about Starks’ escape and Lady Sansa’s disappearance, it had been one more thing he had chosen not to share with Tyrion.

He pinched his lips together. Lies, lies and more lies!

“What is it, Tyrion?” Jaime’s voice startled him.

“Our father. He didn’t inform me about his plans to rescue you. He didn’t share Joffrey’s proclamation with me. He didn’t tell me about Lord Eddard’s escape or Clegane’s betrayal. Had he done so, I would have had them, when I met them on the road. I could have taken them easily and return them to the capital,” Tyrion said, tight-lipped.

Maybe being placed in the vanguard of the battle had not been a dubious but well-meant honour as he had thought, but an attempt to get him killed? Maybe Lord Tywin had finally had enough of his troublesome dwarf son and had decided to eliminate him altogether?

“He thinks you weak.” Jaime clenched his jaw. “I guess I’ll find out soon enough how it feels.”

Tyrion ran his hand across his face and through his hair. His head had started to hurt again.

“Lady Sansa said to me – she is much changed, I tell you – that my family is not my friend, and that sooner or later they will turn against me. I guess I have always known that. Father, Cersei… but at least I have you on my side.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You have never looked down on me or betrayed me. I can’t tell you how much it means to me.” Tyrion looked at Jaime, whose countenance shifted.

“Jaime?” Tyrion hadn’t exactly expected a heartfelt reciprocation, but something in Jaime’s strained expression disturbed him.

After a long silence, during which Tyrion became even more worried, Jaime took a deep breath.

“Since I have started to come clean of my many shameful deeds, I might as well tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

Jaime shifted higher in his bed and squared his shoulders.

“You remember that crofter’s daughter you married?”

Tyrion jerked back. Remember? Of course he remembered!

Tysha. Her name was Tysha.

“You mean the whore who posed as a crofter’s daughter,” he replied, bitterness from many years ago still enough to strain his voice.

“She was not a whore. She truly was what she said she was.” Jaime stared at his hands, playing with the frayed edge of the blanket on his lap.

Tyrion’s mind went completely blank.

“Father made me tell you she was. He wanted the whole thing cleared as soon as possible, and he
wanted to punish the girl for reaching too high.”

“You… you knew this all along, and you let me believe… you let me watch when… “ Tyrion was speechless.

“I did, and I shouldn’t have. But Father was adamant. ‘Better he is angry than love-stricken and stupid’, he told me.”

Tyrion scrambled to his feet. He had to get away. His breakfast of smoked eel and bacon started to make its way up and if he didn’t get away, he would retch it out right then and there.

“Let me out!” he shouted at the door, and as soon as surprised Brienne opened it, he ducked past her and almost ran towards his room.

He heard Jaime calling after him but it didn’t stop him.

She truly was what she said she was, ran in Tyrion’s head over and over again.

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That night Tyrion drank himself senseless. He sent Shae to find lodgings elsewhere; to throw Bronn and Pod out of their room, if necessary - but he simply couldn’t stand anyone’s company in the state of mind he was in.

Tysha.

In all honesty, he hadn’t thought of the girl for a long time after recovering from the embarrassment and humiliation of being duped by a common whore.

Except she had not been a common whore. Just an innocent crofter’s daughter, pulled into the toxic world of powerful and rich to be dazzled with promises of a better life and a kind husband, only to be devoured by the lions afterwards.

Tyrion drank red wine from Dorne, white wine from Dorne, distilled strongwine from the orchards in the Riverlands – whatever the inn had in its cellars, he called for it.

Bronn came to his door once and Pod tried to enter with a platter of food twice, but Tyrion had barred the door and shouted for them to stay away if they valued their hides. Once there was a knock on the door and a call from Jaime’s nursemaid – Brienne the Beauty, as Bronn had chuckled about her nickname earlier – but Tyrion silenced her by throwing an empty jug against the door so it cracked and splintered on the floor. She didn’t come again.

Your family is not your friend, you know. They don’t want you to succeed, and sooner or later they will turn against you.

Sansa’s words came back to haunt him again. Tyrion had known that all his life, of course, but he had thought it to exclude Jaime.

To the hells with Jaime – he can rot in seven hells.

Why should he worry about freeing Jaime when he had not cared to be on his side in one of the most important times of his young life? Tyrion felt dizzy and nauseated, and his stomach hardened so it felt like there was a stone buried deep inside him, cold and hard and unmovable.

After Tyrion had drunk enough – too much – he even cried, ending up with a splotchy nose and
puffy eyes. That he could still experience so much raw emotion surprised him, but he was in no position to analyse it. He only sought the sweet oblivion passing out drunk could grant – and eventually, he reached it.

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The next morning dawned grey and bleary, just like Tyrion felt when he woke up. The hammering inside his head drowned out all other sensations, except nausea that threatened to spill over when he moved.

Clutching at crumpled sheets, he played the previous evening’s events in his mind over and over again. Jaime’s confession, his horrible realisation of what their father had done to the girl he had loved, his own role in it.

It was almost noon when Tyrion eventually got up. Pod had been behind his door several times, as had Bronn and Brienne. Had Jaime sent her? Who else, Tyrion thought, feeling weird that for once it was the other way around, Jaime seeking his company, even if in a roundabout way.

After getting dressed - gingerly and avoiding fast movements - Tyrion made his way to the back room of the inn and called for some breakfast. Soon enough he had a platter of fried eggs and bread in front of him, which he eyed cautiously, eventually venturing to try eating the food in small bites.

What was he going to do? Go to King’s Landing and face Cersei’s wrath for abandoning Jaime? The prospect didn’t have much appeal to him, especially not after what he knew about his father’s machinations. Tyrion was sickened by the lack of trust his own father had shown and couldn’t see anything good coming from going back to him, so that ruled out returning to Tywin’s war camp.

So what was he supposed to do?

Staring vacantly ahead of him while chewing his bread, Tyrion sensed rather than saw movement beside him. A flash of auburn, a rustle of skirts. He looked up and found Sansa Stark standing next to him.

“Lady Sansa.”

“Lord Tyrion.” The girl stared at him. “Would you mind if I sat down?”

“No, of course not. Please,” Tyrion gestured at the seat opposite to him. Lady Sansa walked around the table and sat down. She seemed to be hesitating, but before Tyrion had a chance to ask what she had in her mind, she opened her mouth.

“What do you plan to do now?”

As if Tyrion wasn’t just trying to figure it out himself.

“What do you mean, my lady?”

“Where will you go after the exchange?” Those blue eyes were much too perceptive to Tyrion’s liking. He tried to behave nonchalantly nonetheless.

“To the South. Why would you want to know? Shouldn’t you be more concerned about your own family’s plans?”

“I would like to suggest a place for you to visit if you are not in too much of a hurry to reach your other destination.”
Tyrion raised his eyebrows; another unexpected approach by Lady Sansa. Was she going to suggest some treasonous activity? A side trip to a Targaryen hotbed of conspirators, perhaps? Tyrion wouldn’t put anything past her, after having observed her and her odd behaviour for several days.

“Please, do tell,” he replied politely. After all, it was not as if his plans had been fixed.

“Have you ever heard of The Quiet Isle at the mouth of the Trident?”

The question threw Tyrion off. The Quiet Isle? Yes, he had heard of it. A holy place, a place for penitents seeking to atone for their sins. There was possibly no place more unsuitable for Tyrion. Admitting that he was, indeed, vaguely aware of the existence of such place and what it stood for, Tyrion waited for Lady Sansa to continue her intriguing line of thought. She didn’t disappoint him.

“There is a man on that island, one of the Brothers of Seven. I don’t know what his real name is, but he is called the Elder Brother. He is supposed to be a great healer, a man who knows more about the human body and its ailments than anyone else.” She took a deep breath. “Maybe he could help your brother, Ser Jaime?”

A great healer? Tyrion digested it. A true healer or a religious charlatan?

“If you mean that he would pray for the restoration of my brother’s health, I think I can get enough prayers by going back to King’s Landing and engaging the brothers of the Great Sept of Baelor for that task.”

“No, I didn’t mean like that. He is a real healer. One of the best, if not the best, of this time.”

Tyrion eyed the girl opposite her – damn, she was serious! Her eyes were bright and she was leaning forward as if she would be able to make her case better that way.

“I admire your enthusiasm, I really do, my lady. But how do you know so much about this man and his skills? Have you or your family been treated by him? Why would you suggest this to me?” What is in it for you? he was trying to ask her without so many words.

“I have read about him and heard of his many deeds. He is not only a man of faith but a true artist in his craft. I just think that in the state that Ser Jaime is, it might be prudent to explore all possible options.”

“Hmmm. Maybe so.” Tyrion didn’t want to give her an immediate satisfaction, but what he was hearing, did make sense. If he still cared about what happened to Jaime, that is.

“You will naturally do what you think is best. Maybe return to the warm embrace of your family – if you think it warm, still.” Lady Sansa got up. “Yet, think about this option too. And think about what I said before.”

Tyrion stared at her back as she walked away, head held high. No, he certainly was not going to forget her warning. Or stop wondering why she had seen fit to give it to him.

Chapter End Notes

What do these revelations mean to the Lannister brothers and their cause? Can Tyrion
forgive Jaime? Will the exchange take place?

While Tyrion ponders his next move, in the next chapter it is time to see what Sansa’s next move is, especially in regards to two men who are driving her crazy…
Finally

Chapter Notes

It only took 38 chapters and almost 150,000 words to get us here - or rather, to get Sansa and Sandor here... But finally, it is time!

Thank you Hardlyfatal for betaing so beautifully, as usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

Podrick Payne.

Sandor Clegane.

The two men who were driving Sansa crazy.

And as if that were not enough, there was something else too: the eerie sensation that she was not as she had been before. Or rather, she was, but at the same time, she was also something more.

Sansa had felt it ever since arriving in the inn and meeting Lady Catelyn, and even more so after hearing Ned and Catelyn talking about her supposed siblings. Some faces among the soldiers in the Stark troops felt familiar too, especially the old man with bushy sideburns and eyes that crinkled in the corners when he smiled. It was as if she knew these people, even though of course she couldn’t.

The odd memories that had plagued her many times before became more persistent; glimpses into people and events she couldn’t have real recollections of.

Memories – but not her own. And if they were not hers, whose could they be?

Even as she was forming the question, Sansa knew the answer and it scared her. What was happening to her - was she going to lose herself, was she going to truly become Sansa Stark of the past? In time, would her own existence fade from her mind, would Sansa Tully be no more?

On one hand, the emerging presence of Sansa Stark in her consciousness was not unpleasant. She felt loved and cherished, and the anxiety she had suffered from ever since her arrival in this strange world was replaced with peace and complacency. Sometimes Sansa realised she was smiling at some old jape or event that had suddenly surfaced into her mind, most often to do with her siblings: Robb, Bran, Arya and baby Rickon. It felt good.

At other times, she was filled with a dread of forgetting her true family. What if she succeeded in returning to them, one way or another, would she be trapped between two worlds, between two minds? Or if she would be forced to stay in this world for the rest of her life, would she eventually lose her original self and forget all the things that had shaped her and made her a person she was?
Plagued with these glum thoughts, Sansa was quiet that evening, answering Ned’s concerned queries with vague comments about a headache and tiredness. After Ned finally left her alone, Sansa curled on her bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to organise her jumbled thoughts into some kind of coherence.

Sansa Stark.

Podrick Payne.

Sandor Clegane.

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Pod.

Pod occupied her mind for the mystery he presented – how could a humble squire of these times know a song that existed in many centuries into the future? Was he from the future, just like she was, or had he met someone else who was, and who had taught him the song? It was a catchy tune, after all, easy to remember.

Oh baby, baby, how was I supposed to know, That something wasn't right here, Oh baby, baby, I shouldn't have let you go, And now you're out of sight, yeah.

Sansa tried to remember the words and they came back to her, slowly. She remembered the music video as well; the innocent looking schoolgirl, her singing and dancing anything but innocent.

Who are you, Podrick Payne?

When she had tiptoed to the window and peeked to see who the singer was, she hadn’t at first believed it could be him; the quiet, unassuming and shy boy, who seemed to be following Lord Tyrion around with a worried expression wherever he went. He had been polishing something – pieces of armour or some such, humming and singing as he went. He had looked carefree, even happy. Sansa had debated whether she should try to get his attention then and there to ask him about the song but had decided to make some enquiries first.

Despite having tried to be discreet, Sansa had seen people’s surprise when she had asked about Pod. She had given some lame excuse for her mother about Pod being helpful on their journey: that he had found and returned to her a scarf she had dropped on the ground and thought lost forever, and been so gentlemanly about it that it had raised her curiosity. Luckily, Lady Catelyn had let the matter drop and the topic hadn’t been raised again.

Before, she would have asked Sandor to find out more about the squire – but the events of the previous day had seen that avenue closed.

Sandor.

Sandor had come to see them about the arrival of the Kingslayer, and among the excitement and relief the news brought –meaning no fight with the Lannister troops –Sansa had noticed how uncomfortable Sandor had been, avoiding her eyes and only talking to Ned. What had happened between them had changed things irrevocably, and she couldn’t help wondering what was to follow.

Sansa could still sense Sandor’s tight grip on her skin and see the vulnerability of his expression when he had asked why she wanted to get to know him better. When the only reason he could think of was that she wanted something from him; more service, more sacrifice, more use.
In a way, he was right. Sansa did want something from him – but it was not what he suspected.

What it was hadn’t been clear even for Sansa, not before she spent a long and restless night trying to decipher her emotions. First, she tried to rationalise them as being a natural reaction for an already-romanticised myth she had built in her head, based on a poem and a song. A myth, in which she had flattered herself to be the ‘little bird with hair of auburn, eyes of blue’ the Hound of the song had loved.

Sansa tried to believe that to be it; an idealised version of courtly love, the classic tale of the beauty and the beast, which she had tried to mould to fit Sandor and her.

She might even have left it at that and sworn to let go of such childish fantasies, had it not been her innate honesty that drove her to explore her own emotions further. Finally, in the darkest hour of the night, when no sights or sounds permeated the space around her, Sansa had to admit the truth.

She wanted him.

Sandor Clegane was the most interesting, the most intriguing, the most exciting and the most physically attractive man she had ever met – even despite his scars. He was an enigma: tough on the outside, but some things she knew about him and the glimpses she had seen suggested there was something softer and more sensitive inside that hard core. Something he guarded with great care and revealed to nobody.

Something that was worthwhile pursuing.

It was a revelation and a relief. Suddenly all the pieces fell into their places and everything was clear and simple. Sansa’s earlier considerations about propriety and the strange nature of her presence in this time and place got swept away in the onslaught of emotions she didn’t need to repress anymore.

*I want him.*

*I may even love him.*

Sansa tasted the words on her tongue. ‘Wanting’ was simpler than ‘loving’. She had never been in love, and the thought scared her. Not now, not here.

Yet, admitting her feelings was liberating and immediately her practical mind jumped into the mode of problem-solving. Oh, how could she have been so stupid as to squander away all those precious moments she could have had with him in the court, or on their journey here! Ned had watched over them, that was true, but with a bit of determination on her part, she could have found some time for them.

Now they were among her family and their bannermen, who saw Sandor only as an uncouth man and a turncoat, not suitable company for a noble maiden. Even more – and the thought chilled Sansa to the core – now that she had been returned to her family, they would soon start to plan a new political marriage for her. Sansa was not naïve; she knew how the world worked those days and had even written an undergraduate dissertation about arranged marriages throughout history.

She knew her parents were not cruel and wouldn’t want her to be unhappy, but at the same time, they couldn’t comprehend how it could be any other way. It was the parents’ duty to arrange marriages for their children and both Eddard and Catelyn Stark took their duties seriously.

Nonetheless, the chill was soon forgotten as Sansa tried to wrap her mind around the dilemma of how to convince Sandor Clegane that what they felt for each other – what she hoped he felt for her, too – was real.
As the first rays of the sun crept through the window, Sansa had a plan. Two plans, to be exact, to solve the quandary of the two men who had plagued her night’s sleep so severely.

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Sandor was plan number one.

However, before Sansa had figured out a way to see him alone, Lady Catelyn and the girl dressed as a boy arrived: the girl with a long face and grey eyes Sansa had seen in her visions so often.

Arya.

The joy of reunion overtook everything else in her mind; the thrill of seeing Ned so delighted when he clutched his daughter in his arms, Cat’s tears of happiness, the way Arya broke down and sobbed in her parent’s embrace. At first, Sansa felt like an intruder, but when Arya turned to her and clutched her, Sansa gave in and hugged her back, tears streaming down her own face as well, overcome by emotions that seemed to come out of nowhere.

“I thought something awful had happened to you…” Arya sobbed. “And when we were last together, I was so horrible to you…”

“No, it was I who was horrible; I was a terrible snob and stupid and I should have never…” Sansa had heard enough from Ned to form a picture of high tension between the siblings after the events on the Kingsroad when what she had done had lost both their wolves. She didn’t have all the details, but she had a hazy recollection of heated words and angry accusations and felt awful. How could she – real Sansa – have been so stupid?

Hearing – remembering? – how infatuated she had been with Joffrey and how excited to be travelling to the court hadn’t helped. If anything, it had made her feel even more foolish. Yet she couldn’t truly judge that Sansa too harshly. Who hadn’t been young and stupid and thoughtless at one time or another in their lives? Especially growing up sheltered and protected from the realities of the world. When she had been young and growing up in White Harbour, she had certainly done her share of foolish things and shown dubious judgment, so how could she expect an innocent and naive girl in the past to be smarter than that?

Once again, the main thing for her was to try to right the wrongs of the past.

The sisters embraced for a long time, and then it was time to let Arya go. She told them all briefly about her adventures and how she had ended up on the River Road, and Sansa’s appreciation of her increased at every word. Her little sister was resourceful, brave and clever, and a true survivor – how could she not admire her?

Much too soon Bronn came to break their meeting, announcing Lord Tyrion being done with his own and how there would be time for everything later. Reluctantly Cat and Arya departed, swearing to be together again soon after the exchange.

So much was happening, so many new developments… part of Sansa wanted to lay down on her bed and mull over all that had just happened.

Another part of her longed to see Sandor, to reveal her feelings to him. Honestly, sincerely – just like he wanted to deal with the world. Sansa knew there could be complications. She also knew it to be selfish – if she found her way back to her own time, what would happen to Sandor? What would happen to Sansa – would the real Sansa come back, and if so, would she remember anything that had happened in the intervening time?
She knew all that, just as she knew that there were no guarantees she could ever leave. If wanting to live her life for its fullest and following her own dreams was being too greedy, so'll be it.

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In the afternoon, tired of waiting for the opportunity to see Sandor by chance, Sansa told Ned that she needed some fresh air and wanted to have a walk in the garden. Mulling over an empty scroll of paper, Ned agreed and called for Clegane to escort her.

Sansa was glad of it, as she wasn’t sure if he would have heeded her own request after having practically thrown her out of his room the other day. As it was, Sandor only glanced at her before averting his eyes, but he agreed to Ned’s request, holding the door open for Sansa to go through it.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Sansa turned to him. The time for playing a bashful maiden was over; she couldn't afford for there to be any misunderstandings about the urgency and importance of her need to talk with him.

“I need to talk with you. Now. Follow me.”

She walked to the end of the corridor, where steep stairs built against the wall led to the attic – or so she hoped. She had noticed them earlier, and after the disaster in Sandor’s room, she didn’t want to take chances of being discovered or interrupted again.

She gathered her skirts and climbed up, one step at a time, pushing the low door at the end of the stairs open and, to her relief, ending up in a spacious attic. It was stacked with wooden crates and boxes, sacks and baskets, all covered with a thick blanket of dust. In the middle, a brick chimney broke through the floor and ceiling, and Sansa assessed that to be a place as good as any and made her way to it.

She sat down next to the brick wall and waited. And waited.

For a moment she was afraid that Sandor had simply declined her invitation, but then she saw him coming through the small door. He had to crouch to get in, and when he stood up, Sansa was reminded once again how massive he was.

She tapped the space beside her. “Please, sit down.”

Sandor did, folding his long limbs graciously and arranging his weapons so they didn’t make noise. It seemed that he, too, was aware of the need to avoid interruptions.

It was dim in the attic, a few rays of sun shining through the gaps in the roof and revealing dust particles dancing in the air. Sansa’s heart thrummed loudly in her ears – now that she had her chance, she found herself nervous and unsure how to proceed. It had been so different to imagine the conversation in her head, compared to actually sitting next to this imposing man, who was eyeing her suspiciously.

“So, what is it?” Sandor finally said. His tone was low, but not threatening, which encouraged Sansa. His face was shrouded with shadows, but she could see the outline of his cheek and jaw, strong and angular.

All the words she had practised in her mind disappeared and Sansa was left blank and mute. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out; she took a deep breath and tried again. Nothing.

Sandor sat still, but there was tension in his stillness. Restrained strength, forced calm, the only hint of the undercurrents beneath his façade a slight twitch in the corner of his mouth.
“What did you want to talk about?” he repeated his question. Sansa knew that she still had a way out. She could apologise him for the intrusion of his privacy when she had entered his room. She could thank him again for the help he had given to her and hers. She could stand up and leave this place, and never say the things she wanted to say.

Except she couldn’t.

“I… I know you appreciate candour, so I’ll be honest with you,” she started, nervously. Sandor looked at her, and if he previously had avoided her gaze, now he commanded it. The intensity of his scrutiny was unnerving, but Sansa forced herself to continue.

“I also know that you think I want something from you but lack the courage to ask you directly, and hence play some kind of a game with you.”

Sandor said nothing.

“Wasn’t that what you thought the other day, in your room?” Sansa waited for an answer, wanting him to say something, anything.

Sandor shifted. His hand rested on the hilt of his sword and Sansa stared at it; at strong veins at the back of his hand and dark hair covering it up to his first finger joints.

“So is this the time when you tell me what you really want, rather than try to play me a fool?” Sandor’s words were strained, tense.

“You are right, I do want something. I didn’t know for a long time what it was, but now I do, and it is not the kind of thing that is easy to say out loud.” Sansa swallowed. It was harder than she had thought, to reveal her soul to this man.

Sandor’s grip on the hilt tightened. “Careful, girl.”

She knew he was giving her a chance to back down. Maybe he had guessed what she was going to say and didn’t want it out in the open? His next words seemed to confirm it, taking them back to the familiar territory.

“Out with it, then. Do you want me to kill someone? The Imp? The Kingslayer? That little shit in King’s Landing?”

Killing, serving. What he felt most comfortable with.

Sansa didn’t take the offered way out.

“No, I want no killing. What I want… Sansa almost whispered her next words,” …is you.”

Sandor didn’t react. No flinching, no raised eyebrows, no scowl. He just stared at her. Sansa felt her cheeks getting redder by the moment. Had she read the signals all wrong, after all? If so, gods, what had she done! She wanted the floor to swallow her whole.

“I mean, I don’t want you to *do* anything, no service or such. I just want to *be* with you, to *know* you. As a human being. As a man.”

Sansa felt every word was dragging her deeper into the bog mire she had already sunk herself in.

“I mean, if you would like to. If you feel at all as I do,” she finished weakly. She couldn’t go on – there was nothing else she could say. Maybe she had chosen a wrong tactic, after all, and her
approach was much too direct? Sometimes people said they wanted things in a certain way, but when they did, they realised they didn’t want them after all. Maybe Sandor’s insistence about honesty was just empty talk, and she should have tried to play a different tact.

Sansa stared at her hands on her lap. The silence was deafening.

Sandor shifted again, his sword clanking faintly against the floorboards.

“Are you mad, girl? You don’t know what you are talking about.”

Sansa recognised his tone of ire and bitterness, having heard it so many times – but she detected something else, too. A new note, small and unsure.

Sansa’s trepidation disappeared.

“Mad?” she said softly. “For a man who speaks about the importance of honesty, it seems you won’t recognise it when it is levelled at you.” Sansa looked up. The hint of uncertainty in Sandor’s voice showed up in his face too; in a furrow between his eyebrows and in an increase in the twitch of his mouth.

“What do you think I don’t know? Why would it be such an impossible notion for me wanting to be with you? If you say that you have never felt anything between us, nothing at all, I’ll call you a liar to your face. There is something, and it isn’t going to go away, so you and I had better do something about it.”

Finally, her words seemed to start to sink in. Sandor sucked in a quick breath and held it.

Recognising that he was not a man of many words, Sansa thought her actions might speak louder than her words, and be easier. She moved closer to Sandor and placed her hand on his thigh and held it there.

*Don’t do it again, unless you mean it,* he had told her once. Well, she meant it, now.

Sandor stared down at her hand, his hair falling like a curtain to cover his face so Sansa couldn’t see his expression. But he didn’t pull away, nor remove her hand from where it was resting. She could feel the firm muscle and warmth of his body through the fabric of his breeches.

*If I would try to kiss him, would that scare him away?*

The thought tickled her. The mighty Hound, the unstoppable killing machine, intimidated by a girl trying to kiss him?

Sansa lifted her other hand to Sandor’s jaw and he raised his head. She leaned forward.

His lips were chapped, and at first, firm against her own. Before closing her own eyes, Sansa saw Sandor’s eyes widening.

She was careful, trailing first one, then another kiss, from the centre to the corner of his mouth. She moved her hand behind his ear, curling her fist into his hair.

Sandor’s lips quivered, and suddenly he was responding to her kiss. Slowly, unsurely, as if not truly knowing what to do. Maybe he didn’t, Sansa couldn’t imagine what his past experiences with women might have been.

Two kisses, three kisses, each lasting longer than the previous.
Eventually, they broke apart, both a little breathless. Sansa felt lightheaded; Sandor hadn’t drawn away from her, he wanted it, too! Shyly, she pulled back, watching him.

Sandor’s eyes were hooded and his lips parted. Then he blinked rapidly, cleared his throat and spoke, the words coming out slowly.

“You are fucking mad.” As harsh as the words were, however, there was no heat in his voice. Resignation, if anything.

“Maybe I am. Maybe I’m not. All I know is that this feels right,” Sansa said, smiling. She hadn’t let go her grip on Sandor’s hair and raised her other hand to frame his face.

“Seven hells take me,” Sandor said, took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

This is a slow start, but this IS a start… although of course there will still be obstacles on their way...

The next chapter will see Ned negotiating his way through the exchange. Or...is there an exchange?
The Exchange

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay with this chapter! Then again, I have noticed over the years that people are very busy with other things over the Christmas period, so new chapters seem to be read later – so no harm done, I’m sure.
Once again, I am indebted to Hardlyfatal for betaing this chapter…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ned

The time had come.

As the servants brought platters of bread and pitchers of ale into the back room of the inn, Ned cast an assessing look around those present. Soon he would find out if their gamble had paid off.

The meeting had been delayed already twice at Lord Tyrion’s insistence, and for a moment Ned had been worried that it wouldn’t take place at all. First Tyrion had slept in and emerged from his room around noon, hours after the meeting had been set to occur. Ned heard he had been drinking heavily the previous night, which he found an odd thing to do at a time which called a cool head. Then Tyrion had called for an additional postponement of the meeting without giving a reason. When Catelyn had grudgingly agreed, instead of attending to some important task that had taken precedence, Tyrion had been seen sitting on the front porch staring into the forest for almost an hour, doing nothing.

Finally he had emerged and announced that he was ready, and so here they were.

They were only a small group: besides Catelyn, the Starks were represented by Ned, Sansa and even Arya. Ned had remarked the meeting was not a place for a young girl, but Catelyn had shut him down quickly, insisting that if Sansa were allowed to stay, so should Arya. Ned thought it was more the fact that Catelyn was loathe to let Arya out of her sight even for a moment, but as there was truth in what she said, he didn’t object.

Ned’s gaze lingered on his youngest daughter and, despite the gravity of the situation soon to unfold, he smiled. That she had been so unexpectedly and miraculously returned to them was something he still couldn’t quite believe. She must have been following more or less the same route as he and Sansa had — so close and yet so far. And only by the grace of the gods and the insistence of her direwolf had Arya avoided missing them once more.

A frown knit his brows. There was also the boy, Gendry. He hadn’t seen him yet, having been kept behind locked doors, but from Arya’s telling, it was clear he was the same bastard of Robert’s who Ned had visited in Tobho Mott’s shop a lifetime ago. He recalled a sullen youth, looking so much like his childhood friend at the age when they had squired together. What had been the chances that his daughter had ended up with Robert’s bastard in a city of million people?

Ned owed this boy a debt of gratitude for protecting his daughter — a debt he was determined to pay
in full. As soon as the exchange was over and he was free, Ned decided he was going to talk with Gendry and offer him a fair reward and a secure position in his service. The boy would want for nothing, and if he was as good in smithing as Arya made him sound, he could follow Mikken and become the next master smith of Winterfell.

Ned’s scrutiny settled next on Lord Tyrion, sitting stone-faced at the end of the table, and on Ser Jaime, who was being carried in by the newest addition of Ned’s own household, Lady Brienne.

Ned was no stranger to women in arms, Mormont ladies having been Stark bannermen for as long as he could remember. But this woman – she was something else. Tall, broad of shoulder, strong, and according to what he had heard, a formidable fighter.

Ned had crossed paths with her on one of his rare outings and had expressed to her his deepest gratitude for saving his wife and bringing the Kingslayer back. Lady Brienne had struck him as being shy and quiet, but also genuine and sincere, and when Catelyn had told her just before the gathering that Brienne had sworn herself to her service, Ned had accepted the news with pleasure. That Lady Brienne had not asked him first was somewhat strange, but Ned was not going to scruple about formalities. Despite his hopes that the worst was behind them and they could finally return to the peace and quiet of Winterfell, knowing a capable warrior was guarding over his wife was a consoling thought.

Ned studied Jaime’s gaunt countenance. The last time Ned had seen him, the Kingslayer and his soldiers had attacked him and his men, killing many and causing him to break his leg. Ned couldn’t forgive him for that, not even after seeing him brought low by his injury.

“Ser Jaime.” He nonetheless forced the words out, the situation calling for some decorum.

“Lord Stark,” Jaime replied. At a closer look, he appeared visibly nervous, which was a look Ned had never seen on him; he was rubbing the back of his neck and his gaze kept on returning to Tyrion – as a matter of fact, the brothers hadn’t even exchanged greetings so far. Furthermore, Ser Jaime’s tone bore no resemblance to his previous sarcasm, for which Ned was grateful. He wasn’t sure he could deal with two arrogant Lannisters on the same day.

Once Jaime had been seated in a high-backed chair as comfortably as possible and Lady Brienne had left the room, Ned closed the doors and sat down at the other end of the long table, opposite to Lord Tyrion. He coughed.

“Let us begin.”

As Ned had expected, Tyrion was the first to speak. What he had to say, however, Ned had not anticipated.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find out the truth?” Tyrion leaned back on his chair and watched them all in turn with his mismatched eyes, mouth pursed in distaste.

Ned and Catelyn exchanged glances.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find out the truth?” Tyrion leaned back on his chair and watched them all in turn with his mismatched eyes, mouth pursed in distaste.

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“What truth?” Catelyn asked.

“That this whole thing is a charade and a lie. That there was never an exchange planned and that the honourable Lord Stark is an escaped prisoner and Lady Sansa a fugitive from the court. That the Hound is a turncloak and a traitor and all of you have lied, cheated and deceived your way into this meeting.” Tyrion’s words dropped heavy, seething, and sarcastic.

Nobody else spoke, but a quick glance at Arya told Ned that she didn’t seem surprised. So, Catelyn
had told her what was happening – as he had expected.

Catelyn raised her head and stared at Tyrion defiantly.

“Tyrion, you know what’s happening, and I have told you.”

Ned’s mind worked furiously. This was what they had been afraid of and what they had more or less expected, and taken precautions against. He knew that Ser Rodrik had maintained his men on high alert for any irregularities, and that not a man in Lord Tyrion’s entourage had as much as sneezed without Ser Rodrik knowing about it. Clegane was outside the door right now with Lady Brienne and two of the most experienced soldiers under Ser Rodrik keeping an eye on the proceedings. All leaders in Lannister troops, including the sellsword Bronn, Ulf son of Ulmar, Timett son of Timett, and Shagga, were under scrutiny and closely followed by Stark men.

Nothing had happened so far as Ned knew, with an exception of one of the younger bowmen reported as missing, but Ser Rodrik had put it down to possibly a misguided youthful adventure to chase a girl.

If Tyrion had known what was going on, why hadn’t he done anything?

The man himself answered the question as soon as Ned had thought of it.

“Not that it matters in the current situation, as it happens. I am not a fool, I can count and know when numbers are not on my side.”

“Numbers are not in your favour, Lord Tyrion, that is true. I am sorry we had to resort to deception, but sometimes in a war, all means must be used. And make no mistake, the aggression between our houses is nothing less than a war,” Ned said.

In truth, Ned was relieved now that the secret was out. He had never felt truly comfortable about the subterfuge he had had to play. To speak of it freely, as a man to man, was much better.

“I am perfectly aware of that, Lord Stark,” Tyrion said dryly. “Also, recognising realities, I am going to save a lot of time and effort for all of us by not resorting to hand-wringing, complaints about foul play, accusations and whatnot. So shall we get into the matter at hand: how to salvage the best from this situation?”

“By all means, tell us what you would like to propose.” Catelyn’s tone was hard as steel, but knowing his wife, Ned knew that she, too, was relieved that the lying was over.

“Firstly, my brother and I leave the inn together.” Tyrion caught Ser Jaime’s eye for the first time since the meeting had started. They stared at each other for a long moment, and if any sort of silent communication occurred between them, Ned couldn’t decipher what it was about.

“Lord Stark and Lady Sansa are free to stay or go, as you wish,” Tyrion continued. “As much as I would like to take them with me to King’s Landing, where they rightly belong, I realise I don’t have enough strength to make it happen.”

“They rightly belong at Winterfell,” Catelyn responded, before being hushed by Lord Tyrion raising his hand.

“However, I will take the Hound with me. He is worth ten thousand gold dragons, and his betrayal of my house needs to be addressed.”

“No!”
All heads turned in Sansa’s direction. Ned frowned.

“He is not yours to take. He has sworn his service to House Stark and is protected under our banner.” Sansa spoke fast - too fast.

“It is true. He is a Stark bannerman now, and I can’t allow you to take him,” Ned said slowly. The man had saved their skins; it was now Ned’s turn to do the same.

“He betrayed his liege lord. He helped you escape, the prisoners he was supposed to guard. You know as well as I that such behaviour can’t go unpunished.”

From the corner of his eye, Ned saw that Sansa was about to speak again, but he cut her short.

“That is not true. We escaped on our own and he followed us. He would have captured and taken us back to Red Keep, but we were able to overcome him.” Ned saw Ser Jaime, who had so far stayed silent, raising his eyebrow, and felt compelled to explain. “He was alone and I caught him from behind. After rendering him unconscious I couldn’t leave him to raise alarm so I had to take him along.”

“Why didn’t you just kill him?” Jaime’s tone was neutral, curious.

“Because to kill an unconscious man is not honourable, and his body would have raised the alarm in any case,” Ned replied stiffly. He didn’t feel a need to dwell on details of how Sansa had prevented him from doing just that.

“When your king announced a reward of his head and declared him an outlaw, he had no way or reason to go back,” Sansa added. “He joined our house then, on his own volition.”

Both Tyrion and Jaime looked sceptical.

“If that is what happened, then you have no real obligations towards him. Whatever you promised him in return of his allegiance, you can keep if you let me take him. Besides, if what you say is really true, he may plead his case in front of the king, and maybe even gain his old position back.” Tyrion smirked. “Who knows, I might even say a word on his behalf if you provide me with a written testimony of these events. It is not ten thousand gold dragons, but I’d say he might see fit to recompense my and my men’s costs to some degree from his own pockets.”

Ned winced. He didn’t know what Tyrion was playing, but he didn’t like it. And yet… if there was a chance for Clegane to go back to where he had been taken from against his will, he deserved to make his own mind about it.

“He is not a chattel for me to bargain over one way or another. I can offer him a choice, but it is up to him what he wants to do.” Ned got up and walked to the door, opening it.

Clegane and Lady Brienne were right behind it and turned to look at him, surprised.

“Clegane, can you join us for a moment?” Ned waited until the man had entered the room, then turned to him.

“I have told Lord Tyrion about the circumstances under which you came into the service of House Stark. He thinks he might be able to explain it to King Joffrey so you might have a chance to get your old position back, if you wish.”

“First he wanted to drag you to King’s Landing as a prisoner, to get the reward that has been promised!” Sansa interjected. Ned looked at her, doing his best to hide his irritation. Did she really
think he would have left out that part?

“It is true, so you may consider that as well. However, it is your decision and your decision alone. I realise the circumstances of you giving us your allegiance were unusual, so you deserve this chance to reconsider.”

Clegane stared at him, then at Tyrion, who spread his hands and smiled. Then his gaze flickered to Sansa, to Ned’s annoyance. He didn’t like the connection her daughter seemed to have formed with the Hound. It was…not right. He couldn’t read Clegane’s thoughts from his face, stony and hard, as usual.

“Well, what shall it be? Would you like to return back to your old life of privileges? I bet Joffrey has missed you, although he may huff and bluster for a bit, at first.” Tyrion spoke.

“My answer is no.” Clegane didn’t even seem to stop and think about his answer. Part of Ned was relieved; he had learned to appreciate the man and his qualities, his cynical outlook of life notwithstanding.

“No? Really? I am disappointed at you, Hound. I thought you smarter than that,” Tyrion chided. “Any message you might want me to deliver to the king, or Cersei?”

“Fuck the king. Fuck the queen.” Clegane turned and headed to the door, pulled it open and walked out without looking back. The loud bang of the door hitting its frame reverberated through the room.

“Well, with that out of the way…” Ned returned to his seat.

“There is still the matter of a written confession and swearing of never again taking arms against the king,” Tyrion reminded, tapping his fingers against the table.

The letters. Ned had pondered over them long and hard, unable to find it in him to write false confessions or give false promises. In the end, though, he had found a way: he had confessed of having disputed King Joffrey’s rightful succession, but forming his words in the most obscure way he could think of, which didn’t make it clear whether he regretted having done it, or having been accused and caught of doing it, and leaving it somewhat unclear whether he actually retracted such comments or not. His time in the Small Council finally turned out to provide some benefits, Ned had thought with amusement, while polishing his words and flourishing his sentences.

As for his promises, he had made sure that he had used “I” in every sentence, promising only that he personally would never raise arms against King Joffrey or House Lannister. If things deteriorated and it came to the war, he could then step aside and let Robb lead the Stark troops in good conscience. Robb had done it successfully once already and was surely able to do it again, should a need arise.

Ned was immensely proud of his eldest son after having heard of his many victories, but at the same time, it had saddened him that Robb had had to take up the mantle in such a young age. Pride had won, though, and Ned hadn’t got tired yet of hearing his men’s stories of the battles and skirmishes Robb had led.

Ned procured the documents to Tyrion, who studied them, nodding at some passages and frowning at others. When Tyrion commented that some parts could do rewriting, Catelyn cut his argument and informed him in no uncertain terms that it was all that he was going to get and that he should settle for it, unless he wanted things to escalate.

The awareness of the strength of each other’s troops and the knowledge that should it come to blows, both sides would be inflicted with heavy damages with no guarantees of which side would win,
weighed heavily in everybody’s mind in the room. It was that probably more than anything else that eventually saw Tyrion accepting the situation – and with his nod, the proceedings were concluded.

As none of the prisoners wore chains and all were already sitting among their own, there was no further official ceremony needed, Tyrion only rolling Ned’s parchments into a tight roll and tucking them into a satchel he carried.

It was over. He was free. Finally.

“What shall you do next?” Ned asked Tyrion as they finished the remains of their drinks.

“I shall – if my brother agrees – pay a visit at the Quiet Isle,” Tyrion replied. Jaime’s surprised expression suggested he was as astounded about the plan as Ned, but Tyrion appeased Jaime by promising to tell him all about it later.

Ned had heard about the Quiet Isle before, but hearing the Lannisters brothers heading there was rather unusual. He would have thought them be more likely to rush straight to King’s Landing, or maybe even to Lord Tywin’s camp. Well, it was of no consequence to him.

Ned heard Tyrion calling for his men to come and carry Jaime back to his room.

“Where is Brienne?” Jaime craned his neck to see behind the two Lannister men approaching him.

“She is not at your beck and call anymore. You will be looked after by your own men,” Catelyn said. “The exchange is over.”

Ned noticed a flash of concern in Jaime’s face. He had wondered why Lady Brienne had still been assisting him, but had assumed it only to be part of the arrangement of her guarding him. From what he had heard from Catelyn, the poor maid had been greatly vexed by having to share lodgings with the Kingslayer.

The feeling might not have been mutual though, based on Ser Jaime’s disappointment of having lost Lady Brienne’s company, which Ned found passing odd. The lady in question did not appear to be the Kingslayer’s type - even presuming he had a type, besides blond, beautiful and arrogant. Well, Ser Jaime’s concerns were naught for House Stark anymore - and better that way.

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In no time the Lannisters had departed, and only Ned’s own family was still left sitting in the room. They looked at each other as if not exactly knowing what to do next, which was actually not that far from the truth. Ned and Catelyn’s all efforts had been focussed to ensure that they passed this critical juncture, so they hadn’t had much time to think about their immediate next steps.

“So what shall we do? We haven’t really planned it,” Catelyn asked him.

Ned had some ideas. “First, we go to the Riverlands to meet with Robb, who doesn’t even know about the latest events. I hope he is still there.”

“He will be. Ser Rodrik and I both sent him messages just before you showed up. He is waiting to hear from us and has hopefully sent some troops here to assist us in finding the Kingslayer. If we start towards the Riverrun tomorrow, we might meet them on the road,” Catelyn assured.

“Then we gather our forces and march back to the North, to Winterfell. Back home.” Ned smiled. It felt good to say it. Home.
Sansa coughed. “Father and Mother, I have plans as well. I won’t be coming with you to the Riverlands. I, too, shall go to the Quiet Isle.” Ned’s face fell and seeing that, and Catelyn’s equally stunned expression, Sansa hastened to continue. “Only for a visit, mind you. I’ll come back to the inn soon enough – and as I assume that you, too, will return this way on your way to the North, we can meet here.”

“What are you talking about, Sansa? Of course you are coming with us. What on earth is there in the Quiet Isle to make you even consider such ill-conceived notion?” Catelyn was the first to speak, while Ned was still speechless in the face of Sansa’s bold plan. Their daughter, travelling without them?

Sansa took a deep breath. She squared her shoulders in a way Ned had noticed her doing whenever she had to gather her courage, be it to meet strangers on the road or known enemies.

Are we the threat she feels she has to brace herself against? The thought hurt.

“Tell us more, child. You must admit that this is unexpected news. Do share with us why,” Ned spoke softly. If anything, he had learned to appreciate his eldest daughter: her wit, her courage, her maturity and resourcefulness. Maybe Catelyn still saw her as an innocent child, but she was not that anymore.

Sansa swallowed. She was visibly uncomfortable, which alarmed Ned even more.

“I…have to tell you something. It has to do with my time in King’s Landing, and my… accident. It is a long story, and you may not believe it at first, but I pray, do give me the benefit of a doubt.”

“Sansa?” Catelyn’s hand flew to her chest. “What do you mean?”

Arya followed the exchange with eager eyes, looking from one speaker to another.

“As I said, it is a long story. We may want to go to one of our rooms and leave this room for other people. It is almost a mealtime.” Sansa looked at Ned. “Besides, it is not only my story. Father has something to tell too.”

_I do?_ Ned was confused. What did _he_ have to tell?

“Shall we go, please?” Sansa gathered her skirts and stood up, looking at Catelyn, then at Ned.

“Me too!” Arya called.

“Yes, you too.” Sansa smiled at her little sister.

Ned stood up, his mind distracted. A story to tell? Then he remembered the oddest thing Sansa had said when she had come to see him in the black cells; the thing about Jon… He had deliberately not wanted to think about it afterwards, and Sansa hadn’t brought it up either.

Ned’s scalp prickled when he followed the others out of the room.

Was _that_ the story she wanted her to tell? If so, how did she know? _What_ did she know?
Pheewww! All seems to have gone well…or what next? Did Ned just find himself jumping from the frying pan into the fire? What story Sansa is going to tell and what does she expect from poor Ned? However, before we get there, let’s visit our favourite blondes and find out what Brienne thinks of all that has happened…

For those aware of the recent upsets in Tumblr, I am still there, as ladytp, although it may not look so as my blog is still completely unexplainably marked as ‘explicit’ and NSFW, and thus semi-invisible. I have appealed it already weeks ago but no joy as yet… In the meantime, and in anticipation of the Tumblrcalypse / Tumblrgeddon on the 17th December, I also set-up a back-up blog as lady-tp in case if my ‘scandalous’ original blog got somehow decimated or restricted even further, but it doesn’t seem to have happened. So now I am with two blogs and it all is getting very complicated…¯\_(ツ)_/¯
Happy New Year everybody!!! I hope 2019 treats everyone better than that dastardly 2018 did…

Thank you dearly to my beta Hardlyfatal, for sticking with me and this story!

Brienne

Brienne was restless. She kicked at a small pebble on the ground and watched as it rolled into the herb bushes before continuing her strolling.

In truth, she didn’t have anything to complain about. After a period of uncertainty, her life was once again settled and going well. She had been exonerated of the crime she had been unjustly accused of, she had found service with a good lady, and she had been accepted among the Stark soldiers as one of them.

The latter was what she probably enjoyed the most. Rather than being seen as a grotesque woman posing as a soldier, Northerners accepted her as she was. More than once she had been asked if she was from the Bear Island or if she knew the ladies Mormont, and when she cordially replied that no, she didn’t have the honour, more often than not she was rewarded with a string of tales quoting the history and deeds of those formidable warriors. The further away from the islands the teller lived, the taller the stories got.

Her old guards, Walton and Gerrick, seemed to take special pride in boasting of her deeds as if they had accomplished them themselves, of which saving Lady Catelyn and snatching Ser Jaime from the sellswords were still the talk of the troops. Brienne didn’t mind, as it was all good-natured and she counted both men as her amiable new companions.

If Walton sometimes got a bit tedious telling everyone and sundry how he personally never believed in Brienne’s guilt, repeating his “I told them, ‘she is no murderer, she is a lady’, so I said!” , Brienne didn’t mind that, either. If anything, it embarrassed her to be complimented for something anyone in her position would have done, but she was also sensible enough to know that there not being much else to do while the troops waited for the exchange to take place, talking was the only way to pass the time.

Well, not the only way. She had taken up training again, enjoying the clash of steel against steel and accepting challenges from anyone who wanted to spar with her. In just a few days, she had already become part of a group of men especially dedicated to improving their skills, and sessions with them exhilarated her more than any award or praise could have.

There were also guard duties; when she was not looking after Jaime, she had joined the others who were on high alert for any attempts by the Lannister troops or the clansmen, should something ignite the tinderbox on top of which they all were perched. Brienne knew about the game of deception
Lady Catelyn approved of it. She was a little bit at awe of the Hound, whose reputation had preceded him, but knowing that he, too, was secretly a Stark man delighted her. Maybe someday she could train with him and learn something of his famed skills?

Brienne stopped and brushed a bed of herbs with her fingers. It released pleasant aromas of lavender and sage and she breathed them in. She was not in a hurry, the completion of the exchange having released her of her duties in regards to Jaime, and Lady Catelyn and her family having disappeared to their rooms for a family meeting. It was too late for a sparring session and Ser Rodrik hadn’t listed her for any guard duties since she had sworn herself officially in Lady Catelyn’s service.

She noticed at the edge of her vision someone coming from the direction of the forest and turned to look. It was the travelling companion of Lady Arya, the blacksmith Gendry. Brienne followed his progress from under her brow. He had been visiting the direwolf, she knew.

Nymeria had refused to settle at the inn and still roamed the woods, but both Lady Arya and Gendry went often to see her, together or separately. Brienne had offered to escort them at such occasions, but Lady Arya had politely turned her down, informing that Nymeria wouldn’t let anything bad happen to them.

When Brienne had first seen the boy, his appearance had struck her with its familiarity, but it had taken her a while to understand why. His uncanny resemblance to her late king had puzzled her until she had remembered the gossip about King Robert’s roving ways with women and the rumoured many bastards he had left in his wake all over Westeros.

A Baratheon bastard. That was the only explanation why Brienne’s heart still started to hammer in her chest harder when she was faced with his startlingly blue eyes and jet black hair.

Renly. Brienne felt a sting in her conscience; it had been a while since she had last thought of him, the one who had been the first and foremost presence in her thoughts for such a long time before. It felt somehow as she had already started to betray Renly’s memory – which was another added weight on her mind.

All in all, things being so well, she really shouldn’t be so troubled, but she was – and she also knew the reason why. The same reason why she had forgotten her king.

Jaime.

It was all because of Ser Jaime. The most annoying, unbearable and obnoxious man Brienne had ever met. He was also the most complex and interesting person she knew, and it shamed Brienne to think how very wrong she had judged him at first. Yet he was certainly no hero, either. And she couldn’t dismiss his unsavoury deeds even in the light of his finest hour, least of all that thing with his sister…

Brienne frowned. It shouldn’t bother her anymore. It didn’t. Ser Jaime played by his own rules and they didn’t concern her.

She sat down on a run-down bench covered with moss. The vegetable garden was mostly deserted at that time of the day, for which Brienne was grateful. As content as she was in the company of her new brothers-in-arms, this particular day she wanted to be alone.

She closed her eyes. And remembered.

On the day of their arrival in the inn, Brienne had assisted Jaime when he had bathed, and despite having seen him in various stages of dishevelment, nothing had prepared her for the sight of his fully
bared body. Long limbs, golden hair covering his arms, legs and chest, the contoured lines of his muscled torso… Brienne knew she shouldn’t have watched, but she hadn’t been able to help herself.

Jaime had washed without help, needing Brienne only to lift him in and out of the bathtub, but she had stayed in the room and handed him soap and towels, feeling stupid and ugly and useless. Yet Jaime had endured her presence and hadn’t even teased her, as he had done before. As a matter of fact, since their confrontation, when Brienne had slapped some sense into him, Jaime had been remarkably patient with her. No more provoking or sarcasm, no more japes at her expense.

It felt strange.

Sighing, Brienne got up. The Lannisters would soon leave and she was unlikely to meet Ser Jaime ever again, her path taking her to the north, his to the south.

So… what did she have to lose, if she went to see him one more time?

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There was nobody at Jaime’s door so Brienne rapped at it softly, and hearing a faint voice from the inside, stepped in.

Jaime was laying in his bed – where else? – looking strained when he saw her.

“Did Tyrion decide to hand me back to the Starks after all, is that why you are here?”

Brienne was taken aback. “You? Back? No, not that I know of. The exchange has been completed.”

“Then why are you here?”

Brienne felt her ears turning hot – she had been foolish to come.

“My apologies for disturbing you, Ser Jaime. I’ll take my leave then.” She took a step back but before she had even turned around, Jaime spoke.

“No, don’t go. Please.”

Please? Had Ser Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer, just said ‘please’? Brienne regarded him suspiciously.

“I didn’t mean it that way. I was only surprised to see you here when it is not your duty anymore.”

Jaime looked sheepish and gestured her to come closer.

Brienne sat on the stool next to his bed.

“Why did you think he would give you back? What did you do?” she asked for lack of better topics of discussion. It was somehow different to be there on her own behest rather than because she was just doing her duty. Before, she hadn’t needed to justify her presence and the purpose of their conversations had been mostly to fill the time by sharing observations, stories and memories, without the pressure of any of it having to mean something. Now Brienne had to think of meaningful things to say and she found it exceedingly difficult.

Brienne was aware, of course, of the argument between the brothers. Not only had she been almost knocked over by Lord Tyrion rushing out of Jaime’s room, but she had also heard about Tyrion’s heavy drinking that night, and the jug thrown against the door when she had gone to ask Tyrion to come to Jaime – at Jaime’s request – had expressed Tyrion’s displeasure clearly enough.
Jaime had been quiet and unusually subdued that evening— even as per his new standards of behaviour— so whatever it had been, it had been serious. So in honesty, Brienne didn’t truly expect Jaime to answer such a personal question, and was surprised when he did.

“What did I do? Why do you assume it was something that I did?”

“Well…” To Brienne’s relief, Jaime didn’t seem to expect her answer.

“As a matter of fact, it was something I did. A long time ago. I just hadn’t told him about it before.” Jaime drew his mouth into a straight line and bit his lip.

“Why did you tell him now, then?”

Jaime looked up, surprised. “Why did I, indeed? It was foolish of me and didn’t lead to anything good.” He huffed. “What the hells is wrong with me?”

Brienne had no answer so she sat quiet, picking at the scab in her palm, caused by too much sword practice after a long period of none.

Jaime poked at her arm, not ungently. “I could blame you. I guess something of your righteousness is starting to rub on me, wench. It just felt like the right thing to do.”

Brienne wanted to protest at that, but on second thought, didn’t. It hadn’t sounded exactly like an insult, but rather almost like… praise?

They were silent for a while before Jaime spoke again.

“I heard you have sworn your services to Lady Catelyn.”

“I have.”

“It must feel odd. Just a short time ago she threw you into jail and accused you of kingslaying— and now you are in her service.”

“Adversaries at one time doesn’t mean adversaries for all time,” Brienne replied stiffly. “She was always kind to me.”

“I guess so,” Jaime sighed. He looked thoughtful, speaking into thin air rather than making eye contact with Brienne. “Does it apply to us too, do you think?”

“We?” The concept was strange— us, meaning Brienne and Jaime.

“Yes. We are adversaries now, but does it have to be like that forever? I mean, when we meet the next time? As I suppose this is it, this is goodbye for us.”

Brienne hesitated. “…I don’t know. I mean, you are a Lannister and the Starks are your enemies. Maybe not, if the king leaves the North alone. But if he doesn’t, we may yet meet in a battle— in which case I shall have no choice but to obey my liege lady.”

The thought of facing Jaime across a battlefield upset Brienne more than she wanted to admit, and she hoped it would never come to that, even if it meant that they would never see each other again. Which was another upsetting thought on its own right.

After another moment of laden silence, Jaime leaned forward in his bed and lifted his quilt, tossing it aside.
“This place is stifling me to death. I haven’t been outside for days and I would love to breathe some fresh air for a change. Would you take me out?”

Brienne knew she didn’t need to do what he asked. She could go and find one of the Lannister men, or one of the man-servants of the inn.

She stood up and leaned to scoop Jaime in her arms. It was easy, both having learned to anticipate each other’s movements, Jaime bowing his head to allow Brienne’s arms to slip behind his neck. With one hand, he lifted his unresponsive thighs to let Brienne’s fingers to slide under them to support him from the crook of his knees.

When Brienne had carried him into the meeting earlier, Jaime had kept his arms in front of his body, but now he lifted his right hand behind Brienne’s head, where it settled comfortably, familiarly, at the nape of her neck. The act carried an air of intimacy but had been from the start considered by both of them as a necessity, something not to be spoken of.

Now it felt different.

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The corridors were abandoned at that time, only one maid scurrying past them with downcast eyes. Just before reaching the front room, Brienne took a turn to the left towards the door she knew to be leading to the servants’ entrance. Again, they were lucky, seeing nobody. Not that it would have probably mattered, both Jaime and Brienne being free to do as they pleased.

Jaime was heavy in Brienne’s arms and they started to ache from the strain – she had never carried Jaime for such a length of time before. She started to look around for a place to place him for a moment to gather her strength, but Jaime seemed to recognise her predicament as he tugged at the collar of her tunic.

“Lay me here. This place is as good as any.”

Relieved, Brienne lowered him at the long wooden bench propped against the wall. It was not the most glorious site for a nobleman to enjoy the outdoors, but Jaime didn’t seem to mind the stack of brooms and rakes next to the bench or a swill bucket next to the door. The bucket was likely meant for the pigs, but at this time, it was empty and only a faint odour of past delicacies lingered in the air.

Brienne settled Jaime against the wall, tucked his legs gently under the bench and finally, sat down next to him. Jaime breathed in deeply, his chest heaving. Dusk had arrived and they could hardly see the line of the buildings anymore. The first stars appeared, becoming brighter as the sky darkened.

“So I guess this is goodbye, then. I leave with the Starks and you with your brother: perhaps tomorrow.” Brienne knew she didn’t want to say her goodbyes in front of everyone, so this time was as good as any to do it face to face. “Do you know where you shall go? To King’s Landing?” she continued.

“No, Tyrion will take me to the Quiet Isle first. There is apparently a famous healer who may be able to help me, he thinks. Besides, I am not in a hurry to go to King’s Landing.”

“Don’t you have anyone waiting for you there?” Brienne didn’t know why she said that it being such a stupid thing to do. She had sworn not to be bothered by his sister or bring her up – and she had just broken that rule. Brienne held her breath waiting for Jaime’s reply, but he took his time.

“Did you know that Cersei never came for me, during these last few years in the court? I always went to her. She didn’t even send me messages, which would have been easy for her – but she didn’t
need to.” Jaime sighed. “I always went to her.”

Brienne didn’t know what to say. She desperately wanted to say something clever or witty, but her mind was blank. She felt mulish and unsophisticated and totally unworthy of confidences such a worldly man as Ser Jaime.

“I think I need some time on my own,” Jaime murmured.

Brienne stared at her hands and tried to think something to say. Her thoughts went back to the odd compliment – if that had been that? – Jaime had said earlier.

“You said you thought what you told Tyrion felt like the right thing to do... and was because of me. Did you mean it? Because if you did it because of something that I have done or said, and that has caused a rift between you two, I am terribly sorry and I want to apol–”

“Hush, no need for any of that.” Jaime raised his hand. Then he smirked, a hint of his old mischief back in the curve of his lips. “But I say this much; you are the most stubborn and righteous and honourable knight I have ever met – and you are not even a knight. I have never seen anyone take right and wrong so seriously before.”

Brienne blushed. She couldn’t detect a hint of mocking in Jaime’s words and they made her heart soar. Suddenly she felt confident and witty.

“You’d better be careful, then. You may even succeed in growing a heart if you continue along that path,” she japed, smiling.

“Do you really think I have no heart now?” Jaime’s smile disappeared and he looked serious again. Before Brienne had time to react, he reached for her hand that was resting against the edge of the seat and raised it, placing it over his chest. Fingers splayed, Jaime pressed Brienne’s palm flat and through the thin shift, she could feel the heat of his skin.

Brienne’s first reaction was to pull away, but Jaime had none of it. His grip was firm, and after one futile attempt Brienne gave in and let her hand stay where it was. She started to sense the rhythm of Jaime’s heartbeats under her: a steady and slow thump-thump-thump. It was soothing and hypnotic and so very real.

Brienne closed her eyes. She knew how Jaime looked under that shift and to imagine almost touching his skin… she blushed again, but not out of embarrassment, this time.

“Do I have a heart, Brienne?” Jaime asked softly.

“Yes… yes, you do,” she stammered, and feeling Jaime’s grip loosening, reluctantly pulled her hand away. The evening air felt cold in her palm where seconds before it had felt so warm.

Brienne looked down, trying to gather herself from that unexpected encounter when the door opened and the cook’s assistant appeared. She was carrying a bowl of scraps which she emptied to the bucket before noticing them, so silently they had been sitting in the shadows. Startled, she muttered her apologies before hastily retreating back inside.

The interruption had shattered the peace of the moment and Brienne knew she shouldn’t stay for much longer. She needed to check if Lady Catelyn needed her, and she had yet to discuss with Ser Rodrik about the upcoming travel arrangements. There was no reason for her to stay with Jaime; all she needed to do was to take him back to his room… She got up and turned to face Jaime, and doing so, the sword at her hip swept the stack of garden utensils causing it to fall apart.
A heavy rake with an iron-studded wooden shaft fell on Jaime’s foot. He cried out in pain, then hissed.

Brienne’s first reaction was to kneel and whip aside the offending tool – and then she froze.

As did Jaime.

Carefully, very carefully, Brienne took Jaime’s foot in her hand. It was his left, and from her many previous attempts Brienne knew that he felt nothing in it; not in his toes, his foot, his ankle or his leg. Except something had just made him wince in pain.

“What is it, did you feel something?” Brienne whispered to Jaime, who stared at his foot as if he had never seen it before.

“I…I think so. A sudden pain, there.” Jaime prodded at his big toe. Brienne pushed his fingers aside and pinched the toe between her own thumb and forefinger.

“Do you feel this? How about this? This?” Brienne pinched each toe in turn, one by one, then moved to the other foot. Jaime nodded and hummed his responses, some with stronger, some with weaker emphasis. Not all toes had sensation, but both big toes and some of the other toes in the left foot had.

“What does this mean?” Jaime said in a strangled voice, clenching his fists. He sweated visibly and his eyes were as wide as they had been when he had first told Brienne not feeling his legs, in that field in the sellswords’ camp.

“I don’t know,” Brienne whispered back, staring at him. She could have drowned in those dark green pools – but they were not hers to claim. Her mind swirled. What could it mean? Was Jaime going to be able to walk again? Was this the start of his healing process?

Would he become the famed Kingslayer again – in the eyes of the word – and ride back to King’s Landing to stand by his sister’s side?

“I don’t know,” she repeated, louder this time. “But we better take you to your room and alert Lord Tyrion about this.”

Brienne got up, sighed and scooped Jaime into her arms again. Somehow he felt heavier now than on their way there.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, Tumblr drama with my NSFW flagged blog seems to have been resolved (fingers crossed), so I am fully active in my original blog once again (ladytp) – although keeping the other one just in case too (lady-tp). One never knows what happens next, and usually this kind of issues on social network platforms are a harbinger of the end… So come and say hi should you feel so!

The next chapter is Sansa telling her story – but what story exactly is that going to
be?????
Greendreams

Chapter Notes

Here we are – in one kind of a turning point for this story. Not as drastic as it could be, but still… At least writing this required lots of thinking and pondering and effort for me!

A special thank you for my lovely beta Hardlyfatal, who was a wonderful sounding board to help me to hash this out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

Sansa had never considered revealing her real story to anyone, not even to her family. Firstly, she didn’t see any good reason for it, the ‘accident’ having quite successfully explained away most of her odd behaviour and poor memory. Secondly, she knew her story to be utterly unbelievable and likely to see her branded a lunatic, and she was wary of her future prospects if she failed to convince her parents of its veracity.

Her plan had been to try to find her way back to her own world through the wormhole she hoped to find in Winterfell. She was convinced – perhaps hope against hope - that the eerie sensation she had experienced in Sansa Stark’s room there was an indicator of it, the same sensation in the Red Keep having whisked her here.

This stratagem required her to play the role of Sansa Stark and play it convincingly – the notion that had become increasingly easier as she had started to acquire real Sansa’s memories from the past in this time. It was odd, somewhat disconcerting, but also comforting. Sansa didn’t know what to make of it, but she accepted it as just one more oddity in the sequence of unbelievable events she had already gone through.

Her strategy had been good enough in the Red Keep and on the road with Ned and Sandor. In both cases, her circumstances had been exceptional in a way Sansa was only now starting to realise were highly unusual for a young lady in her position.

But now, everything was about to change.

She was with her family and would be expected to do her duty. Lady Brax had told her what was required of a noble lady, and although at the time Sansa had only cared about the immediate skills she had needed to survive in the court, she hadn’t forgotten her words.

A noble lady has to be a perfect daughter, sister, wife, and mother, and obedient to her father and her husband, and respect her brothers and her sons.

In other words, she would be expected to live her life in the shadows of the men in her life.

The worst thing was that she wouldn’t have a say in big decisions about her own life. What had
made it disturbingly clear to her was when just before the exchange, Cat had apologised to her for the poor decision she and Ned had made in accepting King Robert’s offer of marriage.

‘Next time your father and I shall find you a better match,’ Cat had declared, and cold chills had travelled down Sansa’s spine.

And then there was Sandor.

To hear her mother talking about a match with a man not her own choosing, when Sansa could still feel Sandor’s lips on her own, when her heart was still fluttering from the aftermath of their tryst… no, she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t be the obedient daughter, pretending as if nothing had happened. It was simply not her.

Their encounter in the attic had been sweet but short, the risk of their absence being noted too high. Only a few kisses, only one stolen moment, fragile and tender, both still unsure of their footing in the world that had just shifted irrevocably around them. There was no going back, that Sansa was sure of, but what was the road forward, remained yet to be seen.

Sandor had accompanied Sansa to the garden and back mostly in silence, both still awkward and self-conscious about the turn of events, but it had been companionable silence, their steps in tune with each other. Later, when Sandor had escorted her and Ned to the exchange, they had exchanged many secret glances and Sansa had felt his presence as a warmth enveloping her and she had felt safe, happy and giddy with excitement, all at the same time.

When Tyrion had wanted to take Sandor to King’s Landing and Ned had offered him the choice – the choice Sansa had known he would turn down - she had made up her mind. She had to do something to gain more independence and make her parents realise that she couldn’t be shoved back to the role of an obedient daughter anymore.

She also wanted to make sure that the changes in future events and in history she had already initiated – Ned’s escape, sowing the seeds for Tyrion’s distrust of his family – would not be in vain. She had learned to respect and deeply care about Ned and Catelyn and wanted nothing more than to avoid the tragedy of their house disappearing, not to mention the calamity of Westeros falling into one of the most destructive wars it had ever experienced, as it had done the first time.

That left only one option: she had to tell her family something and take her life into her own hands, one way or another.

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They settled into Sansa’s room, where the servants had already replaced Ned’s possessions with Arya’s meagre belongings. Sansa’s palms were sweaty and she wiped them in her skirts as she sat down on her bed. Ned settled into the only chair and Arya and Cat sat side by side in the other bed.

The atmosphere was relieved, the tension of the last several days lifted, although Sansa knew Ned was still on high alert and not ready to drop his guard before they would see the tail end of Tyrion’s band leaving the inn. If even then – he struck Sansa as a person who was always worried about one thing or another.

For the moment though, things were calm and assured, Arya smiling and Ned and Cat exchanging glances full of promises for their private reunion. Sansa felt a pang in her conscience; what she was going to say was sure to upset them. Didn’t they deserve at least a small break of happiness before these new worries?
Yet she knew that if she wanted to assert herself, she had to do it sooner rather than later – before Tyrion and Jaime left, as her plan involved them, too.

“What is it then, sweetling?” Ned asked her in a reassuring tone. “You wanted to tell us about the accident. Are you finally remembering how it happened?”

“Well.” Sansa took a deep breath. She hoped she would have had time to plan exactly what she would say. She had decided on the outlines of her story during the meeting, still knowing that the whole truth would be too much to handle. Nonetheless, based on what she knew from before and had heard recently, she thought she had something passable to offer.

“Before I tell about that, I want to remind you that we all know that there is more in this world than what meets the eye. We all know the stories of wargs and skinchangers, of old magic and new magic. The old gods and the new are a mystery and they rule over domains we mortal people never see – or hardly ever see - even glimpses of.”

Her audience was intrigued, Ned and Cat frowning and Arya tilting her head, confused.

“We know the stories, of course, but what do they have to do with you?” Cat asked, studying her.

“I only say this because I want you to keep an open mind about what I am going to say next,” Sansa explained.

“Are you one of those?” Arya peeped. “How could you be, when you lost La-“ She snapped her mouth shut then, swallowing whatever she was going to say. Sansa looked at her. What had Arya wanted to say? What had she lost?

“Are you, Sansa?” It was Ned’s turn to talk.

“No, I am not any of those things,” Sansa assured them. Arya looked worried but Sansa had no time to pay attention to her now. “But I am something else, something you have heard of too; I have the greensight. Or, I didn’t have it before, but I think my accident changed me, it somehow brought me these new skills and visions. And they are very, very real.”

Gods, she was not explaining this very well, based on the puzzled expressions she saw.

“What do you mean? The greensight? How could you have that?” Cat asked urgently. She was getting restless, squeezing Arya’s hand so tight that Arya yelped and pulled it away.

“I don’t know – I truly don’t know. All I can say for sure is that when I woke up after my accident, besides having lost my memory, I had acquired new ones. Or if not memories, visions of some kind, greendreams. Glimpses into the future, and some to the past as well.”

There. She had said it.

Ned’s mouth fell open, Cat started shaking her head, and Arya only stared at her. None of them spoke.

“Do you understand?” Sansa said after a while, the stretching silence getting on her nerves. “I can explain it again –”

“We did,” interrupted Cat, “but, how can it be – what do you mean – when, where?” Her usual poise had deserted her.

“Sansa, are you telling us you know what will happen in the future?” Ned’s words were careful and
he spoke slowly.

Sansa raised her hand. “I don’t know how or why, Mother. I have no idea why that would have happened to me – I certainly didn’t call for it or want it. And yes, Father, I can see into the future.”

Once again everyone fell silent. Ned and Cat exchanged glances, but where before they had been warm and even playful, now they were concerned.

“How far ahead?” Arya broke the silence. “Do you know how this war turns out?”

“I can see much further than that, I believe hundreds of years from now. It is a bit hard to tell. And yes, I do know what happened.”

“Hundreds of years?” Cat whispered.

“Please do note that me seeing that and reacting to what I saw is already changing things. I know what happened in one version of this world, but as it didn’t go well, I decided to do something about it. I hope that this time, we’ll do better.”

Sansa’s words were jumbled, as for the first time she was faced with the prospect of someone else possibly criticising her decision to interfere with the events. The gods knew she had thought about it long and hard before deciding to do it – what if Ned and Cat thought she was playing with things she shouldn’t have?

“What do you mean, ‘didn’t go well’?” Ned didn’t sound upset, and as always, his words were careful and measured.

“Are you sure you want to know? I am afraid I can’t tell you all the little details, as my visions are sometimes clouded, sometimes clearer – but I know that they are the truth, not only dreams. I can’t exactly say how I know this, but believe me, I do.”

“I am sure I want to know,” Ned said firmly – and that settled it.

Sansa braced herself. She knew what she was going to say next would upset them, hurt them, even – but she had started this, and now she had to go all the way.

“Father, in that version – in the world hundreds of years from now – there will be no House Stark anymore. It disappears from Westeros during these exact times, never to rise again.” Sansa heard a gasp from Cat but Ned held himself in check.

“Continue,” he just said.

“You… you never escaped the Red Keep. You were executed at the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor. As a matter of fact, you were already dead by the time that has now passed from our escape.”

To Ned’s credit, he didn’t flinch, but Cat let out a stifled sob.

“Why?”

“Joffrey ordered it. He was probably manipulated to do it, as it didn’t make any sense and escalated the war, leading into even more chaos in the realm. I saw Robb being declared the King in the North, and he continuing his war, with you, Mother, by his side. Until…”

“Until what?”

Sansa looked at Ned, then at Cat. “Until Robb and you will be killed at your brother Edmure’s
wedding, at the Twins. By treachery, instigated by Lord Tywin and Lord Frey. I am so sorry, Mother!”

“At the Twins…? But why? The Freys are our bannermen, and Robb is betrothed to a daughter of that house!” Cat had gathered her composure but was now deadly pale.

“Robb will break that engagement and marry a Westerlands girl instead. Edmure is promised as his replacement, but Walder Frey won’t forgive the slight and exacts his revenge. Lord Tywin will help him in that – he and Lord Bolton.”

“Roose Bolton?” Ned grimaced. “Why would he? He’s a Northman!”

“Yes, he is,” Sansa agreed. “That’s why he will be given Winterfell and made Warden of the North.”

“What about the others? Bran and Rickon?” Cat looked at Arya. “What about Arya and you?”

“Bran and Rickon disappear from Winterfell when the Ironborn invade it.”

“Ironborn?”

“One particularly, Theon Greyjoy.” Sansa had memories of a strapping youth, easy with a smile, bow always slung at his back. What Layla had told her about his future fate haunted her, even though she had been spared from details.

“I always told Robb not to trust him!” Cat’s lips were pursed.

“He hasn’t betrayed you yet,” Sansa said softly. “And he will regret it for the rest of his life and suffer greatly because of it.”


“They disappear – at first it looks like Theon killed them, but instead he kills some other boys of the same age, so everyone believes the last Stark sons to be dead. Nonetheless, I never saw visions of Bran and Rickon after that. As for Arya and me… Arya disappeared after Father’s arrest as we know, and although I saw visions of her crossing the Narrow Sea and joining a cult of assassins, I lost a sight of her, too, after that.”

Sansa knew it was a poor consolation, but she had to say it. “It doesn’t necessarily mean that something bad will happen to them. My visions might be flawed in some cases, when the events are not big or significant enough. They might live a happy, long life - but they shall just live it without ever claiming their birthright as Starks of Winterfell.”

It seemed to be cold comfort to Cat, who was wringing her hands together in anguish.

“What happens to you?”

Sansa smiled at Arya. “As odd as it may seem, after Joffrey breaks his engagement with me and marries Margaery Tyrell – it is a different vision and I am happy to tell you all about it later - I was still kept as a prisoner of the crown and married to Tyrion Lannister instead. Something that obviously can’t happen anymore”

“This Lord Tyrion?” Arya’s flabbergasted expression would have amused Sansa at another time. Now she only nodded. “Yes, this very same. My visions showed me, however, that we didn’t stay together for long, as I escaped the court after Joffrey was murdered, and ended up in the Vale.”
“So Joffrey was murdered? Good.”

“You went to my sister Lysa?”

“Yes, but then she is murdered, and I was married to a new heir of the Vale, a man of House Hardyng. I gave birth to a boy, but then I, too, disappeared from my visions. I don’t know whether it was because I had already changed things or for some other reason,” Sansa finished, hoping to uplift the otherwise gloomy story or deaths and disappearances by reminding her audience that things could be changed.

For a while there were no more questions. Sansa knew her family had to digest what she had told them and were probably having a hard time with it, so she bided her time and left them in peace.

Finally Ned spoke. It seemed as if he had aged several years during those few short moments, deep grooves lining his forehead.

“You said your gift already changing things. Can you elaborate?”

“Well, you aren’t dead, for one, and I won’t be married to Lord Tyrion. These events alone can change many things – and the fact that knowing about these matters, we can avoid them ever happening.”

Ned rubbed his face, wearily. “What then? How do we know that things won’t go horribly wrong by some other means?”

“We don’t. We can’t. We are living this now completely anew and anything can happen. Maybe all of this is for nothing, and our house still ends up lost. Or maybe we can make a difference. Maybe none of this matters, and instead of looking into the future and focussing on what may happen, we should concentrate on living this life, here and now. And try to make it the best life we can.”

That had been the conclusion Sansa had ended up with when she had decided that it made no sense to worry about what could or could have been. It had given her consolation and she hoped she would be able to instil that same comfort in her family.

“Do none of us survive in your greendreams?” Arya’s voice was small and unsure. Her question reminded Sansa about the other big secret she had to reveal – except that this one was not hers, but Ned’s. She hoped there was a way to avoid it, as Ned must have had good reasons for keeping it so long. He wasn’t the kind of man who lied because it made his life easier. Besides, from what Sansa understood, the lie about Jon had been quite the opposite, making his life harder, at least with his wife.

“One of us does. One of us becomes the King of the Seven Kingdoms, as a matter of fact. Not by conquest, but by birthright.”

Everyone raised their head at the same time.

“Who?” Arya asked.

“Jon.”

Arya cocked her head and Cat gasped. Ned’s expression didn’t change, however; he only looked at the floor and sighed.

"This is the part where I have to ask Father to fill us in about the details, as some things in the past do not show up fully in my visions. You see, they come and go," Sansa added as a way of explanation of her lack of knowledge in some topics. "I am sorry, Father, but his becoming the king has a big impact on everything in the future. He and Daenerys Targaryen, they ruled together."

"Daenerys? Not Viserys?" Ned couldn’t hide a spark of interest despite his obvious discomfort.

"No, not him. He will be killed, but Daenerys is the one who will gather her armies and come across the water."

"Never mind about this Daenerys; what about Jon?" Arya fidgeted on her seat, barely contained excitement almost bubbling over.

"Yes, what about Jon?" Cat echoed her daughter, casting a hard look at Ned. "Who was his mother?"

Ned heaved a deep sigh and stood up, walking to the window and staring out of it for a moment. Sansa felt sorry for him, she truly did – but he needed to come clean. Truth to be told, she was curious about what had happened and why Ned had hidden Jon’s origins so carefully for all those years.

Ned’s shoulders heaved from another deep sigh, and then he turned to face his family.

"The question is not only about who Jon’s mother was, but who his real father was."

"Real father?" Cat repeated Ned’s words.

"I am not his father. I only said so in order to protect him."

"I have heard the story a hundred times, how we met with Rhaegar’s Kingsguard and fought them, and found Lyanna on her deathbed." Ned stopped. His faraway gaze told them that at that moment he was not in that room anymore but in a high tower at the edge of a mountain. Yet he recovered himself soon, continuing his story.

"What I always left out, though, was that it was her birthing bed, and she had just delivered a son. A strong, healthy son, the last of the Targaryens. Before she died, she told me that she and Rhaegar had married and that the babe was not bastard-born, but a true heir to the Iron Throne."

Sansa watched the reactions of Cat and Arya as Ned’s story progressed. Arya was growing increasingly excited, as Sansa had guessed she would be, Jon being Arya’s favourite brother. Cat, instead, was stony-faced and tight-lipped.

"Lyanna asked me to take the babe with me and swear I would never reveal his true origins to
anyone. ‘Promise me’, she pleaded, knowing as well as I did that Robert wouldn’t have hesitated to put that innocent babe to death if he knew he was Rhaegar’s. ‘Dragon-spawn’, Robert called little Rhaenys and infant Aegon when their broken bodies lay at his feet."

Ned looked at them all one by one, challenging them. “I couldn’t let him do that to my flesh and blood. I promised Lyanna.”

“So Jon is the rightful king? Not a bastard at all?” Arya asked, practically bouncing on her seat.

“Why didn’t you tell me this?” Cat asked. Sansa had never heard her voice so strained. “I am your wife. I think I deserved to hear the truth.”

“I… couldn’t. I promised.” Ned sat down heavily and looked at Cat, his shoulders hunched. Everything in his demeanour told that he was a man dejected, feeling the weight of years of deception finally catching up with him.

“So there never was another woman?”

“No, Cat. I was always faithful to you. I am so sorry that I had to—”

Cat stood up and approached; then her hand flashed out and she slapped his face with so much force that it unbalanced her and she almost lost her footing. She seized the edge of the table to stay upright and, to Sansa’s shock, began shouting.

“You lied to me! All these years! You led me to think…”

Ned stared at his wife, his face pale except for the bright red print of a hand on his cheek.

“Cat…”

Cat had already turned away and made her way to the door. She opened it and paused. While Sansa watched, amazed, she saw the woman’s frame both relax and straighten, the furious tension draining away and many years of practice being a lady taking over once more. Composure regained, without looking back, she spoke.

“Arya, gather your things. You can come with me. I’ll get servants to bring your father’s things back here.”

Without waiting for an answer she stepped out and slammed the door shut.

Sansa had a lump in her throat. She had never meant for this! Ned stared at the door as if not believing what had just happened.

Arya got up, collected the few things she had already spread across the room and pushed them into her bag. “I’d better go with her.” She gave one last apologetic look to Ned and Sansa. “I’m sorry, Father.”

“Don’t worry, sweetling. Go with your mother.” Ned’s voice almost broke and Sansa felt a renewed pang of regret.

Yes, she had wanted to tell them a made-up story to gain her freedom and make them believe they had to do something about the future – but she had never intended for the family to break apart in this way.

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After Arya left, Ned got to his feet. “I think I need a bit of fresh air. I am sure I’ll find lodgings with my men, so you can keep this room to yourself. Or you can call Arya back, if you want.”

“I am so sorry, Father! I know I forced you to tell your secret and I didn’t have the right – I never realised it would cause this reaction. I just knew it would have come out eventually anyway, when I told you more about the future.” Sansa swallowed. “That is, if you believe me.”

Ned reached out and touched her shoulder.

“I… I am not sure what to think. I need some time to go through what you said – and I will have more questions, many more. But, yes, I think I believe you.” He squeezed her shoulder gently. “What you tell would surely explain some things.”

“I am here, and I will answer all your questions, and theirs, as well as I can. I will tell the truth, no matter how hard.”

Ned looked at her and his pained expression made Sansa’s heart ache.

“I should have done the same, I see it now.”

Then he left, and Sansa was alone in the empty room. She was full of regrets and misgivings; had she just done something horribly wrong?

Was there a way forward still?

She stared at the intricate patterns of the wooden floorboards, but they failed to provide any answers.

Chapter End Notes

Do let me know what you think if you feel like it – I am quite curious… Also, I do welcome concrit as well, should you feel it warranted!

The next chapter sees Arya negotiating her way now that she is back with her family. How has Gendry adapted? What do Sansa’s revelations mean to Arya? And what about the Hound – will there be fireworks when the two of them meet again, after the events on the Kingsroad? We’ll see all that soon…
Not a Lady

Chapter Notes

The last chapter ignited some interesting discussions about Catelyn, with some commenters applauding her reaction, some thinking she over-reacted, and the usual gamut of opinions that such a dividing character as Catelyn always rouses. I understand all viewpoints (except blind Cat-hate) and have much understanding towards her, having been lied to by Ned for so long – her concerns being not only the thought of the other woman but also the threat to their trueborn children's heritance arising from Ned raising 'his bastard' among them. Thank you for all the comments and opinions!

Also thank you to Hardlyfatal for being a great beta once again!

EDIT: Just a kindly reminder that in this fic both Sansa and Arya have been aged up to some degree, so they are not children anymore. Sansa is at the age she is ready to enter university, and Arya is in her early to mid-teens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arya

“I’ll be right with you, m’lady,” a familiar voice called from the back of the shed.

Arya huffed in annoyance.

“I have told you not to call me that!” she shouted.

Gendry came out from the shadows, sweaty and dishevelled, having just worked at the kiln of his temporary smithy. Soot and ash were smeared along his arms and chest, bare except for the old and stiff leather blacksmith apron.

“I can’t help it if you are one,” he replied, wiping his hands to a rag.

“I’m not!”

Arya was fast losing her patience. Ever since they had arrived in the inn, Gendry had behaved oddly. He had refused the offered room, saying he was happy to stay in one of the tents. He ate and slept and spent his time with the Stark men, when not going into the woods to keep Nymeria company.

In any other situation Arya would have been thrilled to see the bond between the members of her pack flourishing, but now she was just annoyed that even with that one thing they had in common, Gendry didn’t seem to want share with her anymore.

They had gone together a few times, but Gendry had been sullen and quiet and so damned polite all the time, calling her m’lady and staying a few steps back when they were walking. When Arya had challenged him on his behaviour, he had only muttered something about knowing his place and
having seen enough nobles in King’s Landing to know how to behave.

After that Arya had let him go by himself and visited Nymeria on her own. She had spent many long moments sitting next to her direwolf, one arm slung round the beast’s thick neck, lamenting the contradictions of her current situation. Nymeria never offered counsel but didn’t argue back either, only listened to her patiently, sometimes cocking her head or licking her cheek.

Gendry had been even more reserved since seeing Arya in a dress for the first time. It hadn’t even been a particularly fancy dress, and Arya didn’t know from where her mother had conjured it so swiftly. Maybe it was one of her own, that her and Sansa’s nimble fingers had altered to fit the considerably leaner Arya. It was fine, though, as far as dresses went: simply cut and sensibly ankle-length with a waist-hugging fit, pale grey with only simple forest leaves and flowers embroidery around the collar and at the hem.

When Arya had stepped out to the yard wearing it, Gendry’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped, and only after Arya’s long tirade about how frustrating it was to wear a dress again after getting used to the freedom breeches and tunic offered, had he found his tongue again to tell Arya that she was a lady now and ladies wore dresses.

Yes, Gendry had certainly been difficult lately.

After Ned had confirmed that Gendry had almost finished his training and was practically a made blacksmith already, he made enquiries and found out that there had been a smithy at the inn sometime in the past, and most of the tools belonging to it were still there. Gendry had jumped at the opportunity to do something useful and had since then spent practically all his time in the shed where he had built his new abode, offering his services to the Stark and Lannister troops alike. For Starks, his services were free, but from the Lannister men he charged a good coin.

“I am still the same Arya, you’re just making it all so hard,” Arya now said to Gendry, who was organising his tools in a neat row, lined up so that everything was in an easy reach.

“I am not making anything difficult. You just sometimes forget who you are,” he replied, annoyingly calm.

“I do not,” Arya argued. “Would you like to go and see Nymeria? I have some treats for her.”

“Maybe later. I need to fix these horseshoes first, as I promised Ser Rodrik. Since we’re leaving soon, everything had better be ready.”

“So you are at least still coming with us?”

Gendry raised his head. “Of course I am. Your lord father has promised me a position – or should I say, honoured your promise of a position in Winterfell.” He picked a horseshoe and started to remove twisted nails from it with pliers. “I think he was hesitant at first, but he told me I will always have a place in Winterfell nonetheless, for what I did to help you. But then he saw the work I did with Lady Brienne’s sword and I think it convinced him I could do it.”

“I told you as much, didn’t I?” Arya picked another horseshoe from the pile and handed it to Gendry. “The oddest thing is that everyone thinks that I saved you – when we both know it was as much the other way around.” Gendry didn’t sound unhappy about it, only stating that as a fact.

“Even more reason for you to sometimes do as I say and come with me to the woods.”

Gendry stopped and sighed. “It wouldn’t be proper. You may not know about these things, but I do.
It doesn’t matter if you like it or not, but you are a lady and you can’t be seen to consort with the likes of me. Now, scoot away. I have work to do.” He picked up his tools again and turned so that his back was towards Arya.

Arya almost opened her mouth to rebuke him, but remembering how many times they had argued along the same lines and how futile it had been, she closed it again.

It hurt.

She loved being back with her family and had cried tears of happiness after being united with her mother, father and sister, and seeing all the familiar faces from home – but if it meant that she was losing her closest friend… it was not fair!

“Fine, then. Stay here and bang your rusty iron and see if I care,” she declared loudly and stormed out. Tears stung her eyes but she blinked hard to force them away.

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Arya could have gone to her mother, but Lady Catelyn had been quiet and distant ever since Sansa’s revelations the previous night. It almost certainly had more to do with their father’s confession about Jon, though. She probably needed more time on her own to think things over.

Arya hadn’t truly gotten her head around it all, but she believed both Sansa and her father. Even from the very first moment Sansa had been… not quite right. For one, she had been so nice to her. Secondly, she had been much bolder than ever before, not the perfect obedient little lady anymore. Arya guessed acquiring a greensight and seeing into the future did that to a person.

And Jon – he wasn’t a bastard after all, and he was to become a king! Arya smiled from ear to ear just thinking about it. All the japes at his expense and all the times when he had been overlooked just because he was a bastard – it must change now! Even the realisation that Jon was not truly her brother didn’t faze Arya. They were still cousins and that was almost as good.

For Sansa she had many questions about what was going to happen and how much she knew. The possibility of knowing about things past and future was too intriguing to pass, especially as Sansa’s visions seemed so precise. Arya had heard of greendreams and greensight, but they were often said to be hard to interpret and full of symbols and metaphors – whereas what Sansa had told had been very unambiguous and clear.

Walking from the smithy to the inn, Arya fell deep into thought about what she would like to ask her sister. To give herself more time, she decided to eat something first in the common room, enjoying the luxury of being able to pick and choose when and what she wanted. The days of catching rats and pigeons in the alleyways of Flea Bottom were surely behind her!

The room was almost empty when she entered, bar one solitary figure huddled at a table. One look and Arya’s mood soured.

The Hound!

Arya still found it hard to believe that he was a Stark man now, even after hearing about his exploits from her family. The memory of the gruesome fate of her friend Mycah was still too fresh in her mind, as was the Hound’s blind obedience to the Lannisters before. Could such a man truly change?

Yet she was hungry and after finding a seat as far away from that detestable man as possible, Arya asked for some bread and eggs. Waiting for them, she kept on glancing at the Hound, seeing that he was finishing his own meal of sausages. Good – that meant he was going to leave soon.
“If looks could kill, I would have been dead for days. If not before, now for sure. Why the hells are you glaring daggers at me?” Arya was startled to hear the Hound speak, his voice grating and loud enough to reach across the tables.

Her first instinct was to ignore him. Arya knew that irrespective of her own feelings, the Hound had earned his place among them and her father would not put him aside just to please her. She had reconciled with the fact – but it didn’t mean she had to converse with the man.

Nonetheless, the temptation to confront him was too much.

“You know very well, why.”

The Hound wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and pushed his empty plate away. “I can’t say I do. Have I done something to you? Am I not in your family’s service now? Do you still blame me for once being a Lannister man?”

“You have, and you know what!” Arya almost shouted. “You killed my friend Mycah, near this very place. He was just a child and you rode him down and hacked him to death with your sword! And I hate you for it!”

It felt good to finally say her piece and tell this man what she thought of him.

The Hound stopped and looked at her oddly. Arya observed him, satisfied that there could be no argument he could present in his defence. He had done exactly what she had said; he had killed an unarmed and defenceless young boy, who had been innocent of all wrongdoings.

Then he stood up and walked to Arya’s table, and despite all her courage, Arya shrank in her bench. He was so big and fully armed, his dagger and sword clanging on his hip when he walked. Surely he wouldn’t do anything to her? Arya’s gaze flitted around the room to seek for a quick getaway.

The Hound sat opposite her, plonked his unfinished tankard of ale at the table and stared at her, saying nothing. After a while, and in the light of his non-threatening behaviour, Arya’s courage returned. She lifted her head and met his eyes squarely. His hideous scars didn’t faze her as she had seen them do other people – they were just on the surface. What Arya hated was what was on the inside.

“Do you deny it?”

“No, I don’t. I killed the boy. Yet you may do well to think for a moment, why.” The Hound leaned forward. “The prince of the realm had been attacked and was bleeding. Who attacked him was unclear, every one of you saying one thing or another. The Queen was seeing red and wanted blood, and if it wasn’t going to be the blood of your friend’s, it might have been yours, or your sister’s. Had that happened, what do you think Lord Eddard Stark would have done? He would have thrown the position of the Hand of the King back at King Robert’s face. Then the king would have seen red: that man was quick to anger and didn’t hold back when his ire was raised. And who knows what would have happened then?”

Arya listened, and although she had known all those things, somehow it sounded different when he said it.

The Hound leaned back, not breaking his gaze. He spoke in a low voice, emphasising every word. “So the next time when you decide to play your games with a lowborn, you might want to stop and think what can happen. If what happens is the worst, remember who will bear the brunt of it. I’ll give you a clue: it is not going to be you or any of you highborns.”
Arya blinked. There was some truth in what he said. She had always regretted pulling poor Mycah into the situation leading to his fate, but it had been easier to blame Joffrey and Cersei and the Hound for it. She forced back a surge of guilt and looked away.

But the Hound hadn’t finished yet. “If you show up with your face or wrists bruised, and you say it was that blacksmith of yours who did it and Lord Eddard tells me to go and kill him, do you think I am in a position to start arguing with him? Would you expect me to be the judge of the case, determining who is right and who is wrong? Especially if the only other possible culprit is someone of high status, your pretty sister, perhaps?”

Arya had no answer to that so she stayed silent. The Hound stood up. Arya wanted to say something smart back, but she couldn’t think of a response.

“You may think of this when dealing with that boy, Gendry. He seems like a good lad and I’d hate to kill him if one of your games goes sour.” Then he walked away, the sound of his heavy steps reverberating against the floorboards.

Arya stared at his back all the way until the door closed behind him.

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Arya was still thinking about the Hound’s words when she reached Sansa’s room. Could she someday be the cause of harm to Gendry as she had been to Mycah? Was Gendry right in avoiding her, after all?

Sansa opened the door at her first knock. Her face was drawn and she looked tired.

“Arya,” she said. “I’m glad you came.”

“Of course I came. Why wouldn’t I?” Arya was surprised.

“I’m not sure, to be honest. After what I told you all, I thought you might think me mad and avoid me at all costs,” Sansa confessed, then sat down on the bed and patted the space beside her. “Please, sit down.”

Arya did, then pulled her legs up to sit cross-legged in the bed, trying to decide which one of the many questions in her mind she would ask first. She was self-conscious; her own interests were surely insignificant against the backdrop of all the big events.

Sitting next to her sister was awkward as well; for the first time they were alone with neither of their parents present. They hadn’t been particularly close over the last few years, although Arya remembered fondly the earlier times when they had slept in the same room, played with their dolls and shared their secrets, just the two of them. Then Sansa had grown up and acquired new interests that had held no appeal to Arya, and they had started their training in feminine skills – in which Sansa had excelled and Arya had failed dismally. That had set a wedge between them that Arya was still conscious of.

Sansa’s thoughts seemed to follow the same pattern.

“Arya, I know this must feel very strange to you. I know it does for me. But, please… whatever there has been in our past, let it stay in the past and let’s start anew. I know I am different – but I hope we can still be friends.”

Sansa twisted her hands in her lap and Arya realised that she was probably even more nervous than Arya was. The notion of Sansa for once being the insecure one gave Arya confidence, as did the
potential of an improved relationship with her only sister.

She took Sansa’s hands into her own. “We will, I promise. I won’t look into the past and neither
should you!” Then she bit her lip. “I mean, if you remember it. If you want to remember something
specific and can’t, just ask and I will tell what I know. Or how I saw it, at least.”

Sansa nodded. “That sounds fair enough. I’m sure we all would benefit sometimes hearing things
from the perspective of others.”

The sisters stared at each other for a while, holding hands and smiling. Then Arya released her hold
and took a deep breath. There was one very specific question she had to get out of the way first.

“Sansa, did you see Gendry in your visions? I mean, do you know what happens to him?”

Sansa frowned. “Gendry? I can’t say I did. He is a Baratheon, isn’t he?”

“No, not really. He would bear that name only if the head of House Baratheon acknowledges him as
the old king’s true son – but I don’t think that’ll happen. I hear Lord Stannis is awfully stern and
proper.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Nonetheless, not seeing him, doesn’t mean that anything bad will happen.
He might live a long and happy life.”

“Hmmm.” Arya was not convinced. The soldiers sent to get him, as well as Lord Varys’s interest,
didn’t bode well for that option. Then she remembered what Sansa had said.

‘We are living this now completely anew and anything can happen.’

“Maybe it doesn’t matter anyway. As you said, things have already changed; had you not escaped
with Father, Gendry wouldn’t be here now with us. So who knows, maybe even if you had seen him
before, it wouldn’t become true now anyway,” Arya announced, revitalised. Everything was
possible!

Sansa looked thoughtful. “He means a lot to you, doesn’t he?”

“Well…we used to be friends, but since we came here, he has been stupid, not wanting to spend any
time with me. He says it is because it is not ‘proper’, but if it didn’t matter that he is lowborn and I’m
a noble, then it wouldn’t be so.” Arya sighed. “The Hound told me that if I persist, it may mean
trouble for him, like it did for Mycah when we played together.”

“Your friend on the Kingsroad? Father told me what happened, and I am so sorry for my part in it. I
was so stupid,” Sansa muttered, looking down.

“It’s in the past,” Arya reminded her. “I wonder though if the Hound is right.”

“He has a name, you know. Sandor, or Clegane.”

“I don’t care, I still don’t like him, even if he might be right about this.” Arya crossed her arms
stubbornly.

“Please, don’t judge him too harshly. He is a much better man than most people give him credit for.”
Something in Sansa’s voice drew Arya’s attention and, glancing at her, she noticed her sister’s
expression had gone soft. Because of the Hound?

“Do you actually like him? He joins our house and helps us a little, and you think he is a wonderful
“I don’t think he’s a wonderful person because he ‘helped us a little’, as you say. Which was not so little, by the way. Father and I would be on our way back to King’s Landing as Lord Tyrion’s hostages had Sandor not come up with the ruse.” Sansa’s hackles were up and Arya eyed her with concern.

“Fine, he helped us a lot, then.”

“His life hasn’t been easy, but he is not quite the brute you and everyone else seems to think. So yes, I like him, and I think you should give him a chance too.” Sansa lifted her chin and stared defiantly at Arya.

Arya raised her hands in supplication. “Fine, fine, I’ll give him a chance. Maybe he is being so angry all the time because he is so ugly.”

Instead of angering Sansa, her words surprisingly seemed to have an opposite reaction. Sansa smiled.

“Well, that is something your smith doesn’t have to worry about. He is quite pleasing to the eye, isn’t he?”

“He is not my smith,” Arya groaned. “And I don’t care how he looks, he’s just… nice. When not being stupid and stubborn, that is. Still, if you are such great friends with the Hound – Clegane – maybe you can ask him not to kill Gendry, even if our Father asks him to.”

Prompted by Sansa’s raised eyebrow, Arya gave her a summary of her discussion with the Hound – Clegane. Sansa nodded as if she understood what Clegane had talked about. Maybe she did.

After Arya finished, they sat for a while in companionable silence. Then Sansa tapped Arya on the knee, playfully. “Now, tell me, little sister, is there anything else you would like to know?”

Arya thought for a moment. This was her chance to find out more about Sansa’s visions of the future – what should she ask? Then she knew.

“In your greendreams… do women still have to do sewing and needlework and sit inside while men have all the fun?”

Sansa laughed. “I should have guessed that would interest you! Well, as it happens, I saw it and they didn’t.”

“Really?”

“Truly. I saw women doing the same things as men; being maesters, having a trade, running their own businesses, farming their own lands and much, much more.”

“Lowborn and hightborn alike?”

“I saw no lowborn and hightborn in the same sense as now, but rather all people were equal. Some were still richer than others or belonged to old houses with a long history, but in general, people interacted with each other without the same boundaries as here now.”

Arya thought about it for a moment. “Did women still have to get married?”

“They didn’t so much have to, but rather it was up to them whether they wanted to. And to whom. Or whether deciding to simply live together, for a while or for their whole life.”
Arya’s mind was brimming with all the strange things Sansa was talking about. Not marrying if one didn’t want to, choosing one’s own husband?

“To be so free...” she muttered to herself, but Sansa heard her.

“I know. It’s what inspires me the most, too, and is one of the reasons why I knew I had to share my story with you all,” she said softly. “The thought of Mother and Father packing me off to Winterfell and marrying me to a man of their choosing, when I have seen how different it could be – I simply couldn’t accept it.”

Arya looked up. “Are you going to rebel, then? But we are not in your visions now, are we? Aren’t we still bound by what is considered appropriate for now?”

“Arya Stark, are you lecturing me about propriety? I never thought I’d live the day!” Sansa squinted her eyes, her amusement clear on her face.

“No! I mean… I don’t know what I mean! Could we?”

“What would you like to do if you had such freedom?”

Arya thought for a moment. A society without lowborn and highborn would mean that she could be friends with whomever she wanted without bringing harm on them. Gendry wouldn’t be at risk because of her.

“I would like to be friends with Gendry again,” she confessed.

Sansa tilted her head. “Why don’t you, then?”

“Because he is just so... he doesn’t even want to eat with us. I have asked him to join us for a meal many times but he always refuses, saying that what soldiers eat is good enough for him.”

“Maybe you have to take it slowly then. I haven’t exchanged many words with him, but he seems nice. Maybe a bit shy, or unsure of himself. Maybe he needs self-confidence that an established position might give. So let him become part of our household first and show his value to us. It might also help if he learned more about his background, about the Baratheons. Maybe you could ask Father to tell him stories of his father - I am sure he wouldn’t mind. He knew King Robert better than anyone and might want to talk about his old friend to his son.”

Arya thought it over. Maybe there was some sense in what Sansa suggested. When they had been travelling with the merchant’s group, everyone had learned to like Gendry after he had gotten over his initial wariness and gained some confidence.

“I might do it,” she said slowly. On their journey to the Riverrun there were bound to be opportunities for that. Yes, that’s what she was going to do! Right now!

However, before Arya got up to her feet, they heard their mother’s voice from behind the door.

“Sansa, are you there?”

“Mother – please come in!” Sansa replied, hurrying to the door.

Arya settled down again, deciding that she couldn’t miss this discussion. Their mother probably had some question to Sansa as well, and she was curious to hear what they were.

She would go to see Nymeria later – oh, she had so much to tell her!
In the next chapter, we shall see Cat’s next actions – as well a glimpse of an old friend… Any guesses?

Comments and feedback are welcome, including constructive criticism should you feel it needed... Plot speculations are also always interesting, but not necessarily fulfilled as so much of the story going forward is already planned. Or come and say hi or ask anything at Tumblr, where I am ladytp.

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Contemplations

Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter (Arya):

Arya is baffled by Gendry’s attempts to distance himself from her. Frustrated with him once again, she is on her way to hear more about Sansa’s greendreams when she stops at the dining room. To her dismay, the Hound is there and questions her about her angry glares, and Arya lashes out to him about Mycah. Sandor tells her some choice truths about how lowborn suffer in the games of highborns, hinting that Arya should be careful with Gendry.

Sansa and Arya share a sisterly moment and when Arya mentions her interaction with Gendry and the Hound, Sansa asks her to give Sandor a chance – which she grudgingly agrees to. Sansa tells her about the freedoms women enjoy in the future, and Arya gets encouraged by the notion. The sisters get interrupted by Catelyn’s arrival.

Chapter Notes

I don’t know about you guys, but before starting a new chapter of a WIP I’m following, I often desperately try to recall where the previous chapter left the story – and regularly have to go back to that chapter to check… So in case if you are anything like that, I want to try something new: A small summary of the last chapter at the beginning of the new one. You know, as they do in TV shows; “In the previous episode…”

I am doing this partially also because my updates may be a bit slower to come for a while, due to real life taking time from writing.

Thank you once again, Hardlyfatal, for betaing this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Varys

Varys stared at the note and read it thoroughly one more time. He understood the words, but the meaning behind them was somewhat more elusive.

Tyrion Lannister had been seen openly associating with Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn of House Stark at the inn at the crossroads.

Why? What does it mean?

Seeing Ned Stark emerging into the open was no surprise and had been only a matter of time. Soon the official news of it would travel to the capital and Joffrey would launch into one of his famous rages, ranting and raving and blaming everyone else but himself for the handling of the matter.

However, the prospect of being at the receiving end of the king’s wrath didn’t faze Varys, who knew
his position as the Master of Whisperers to be much too valuable for the crown to see it risked because of Joffrey’s displeasure.

All the search parties sent after the fugitives had returned empty-handed, and it was hard to tell what galled Joffrey the most; the loss of Lord Stark, Lady Sansa or his unfaithful dog, the Hound. Varys had to admire them for the feat of remaining undetected for so long. By the time the news reached Joffrey, it was too late for him to do anything. If Ned Stark was so close to the Riverlands, he was also close to his son’s army and as such, lost to them.

Varys folded the note carefully and hid it in his secret desk compartment along with the others, then fetched a goblet of wine from the side table and settled on his most comfortable chair, overlooking the gardens.

*Ned Stark and Tyrion Lannister.*

Varys was aware, naturally, of Tyrion’s return to his father’s camp and his subsequent dismissal to the capital. Truth to be told, Varys had been looking forward to seeing him again. The Imp was clever, but his talents were too often overlooked by those who knew him, even by his own father. Of course, Tyrion had chosen not to do much with his wits, preferring to spend his time drinking and whoring, but he had potential…

Varys rotated the goblet in his hand, his thumb tracing the intricate patterns carved into it, as he mused.

The reports he had received had not been able to reveal the whole story, consisting of several different messages from his little birds, relayed by word of mouth or a hastily-written scroll. Each account provided only one angle as seen by a servant at the inn, a soldier in the Lannister troops, or a merchant passing by the inn.

Yet Varys had been able to piece together some immutable facts: that Tyrion had stayed at the inn with his crew of mountain clansmen and soldiers from his father’s army; that Jaime Lannister had been in his brother’s company, although the reports suggested he was either gravely ill or injured as had stayed mostly in his room; that Ned, Catelyn and Sansa Stark had stayed at the same inn at the same time; that a vagabond girl with a huge direwolf in tow had been seen joining the company; that the parties had been seen eating together and sitting behind closed doors in what must have been a series of meetings; that the Hound was there too, as well as another huge warrior, whose presence had been mentioned in all the reports alike by the virtue of her being a woman.

From the descriptions, Varys had a good inclination who the vagabond girl and the lady warrior could be, and thinking of it deepened the grooves in his forehead. That Arya Stark had survived against all the odds was a miracle by itself, and for her to have found her family again was another. As for the warrior, it could only be one of King Renly’s companions, Brienne of Tarth, who had been rumoured to have killed her king. What was *she* doing in that company? Was she with the Lannisters or with the Starks?

How Varys wished to be a fly on the wall in those meetings! Lannisters and Starks, sworn enemies… what by the Seven could be going on?

*And how can I exploit it?*

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By the next evening, Varys had made up his mind. If sowing discord between great houses of the realm was one way to boost instability, which he needed to improve the chances of Targaryen
reconquest, instigating conflict within one such family might do even better.

The Lannisters were strong and currently in power, but if he succeeded in alienating Tyrion and Jaime from their father, House Lannister would become significantly weakened. Tywin would lose not only his most capable commander but also his most astute thinker, even if he didn’t know or care about Tyrion’s talents. With only Joffrey and Cersei left to rely on… yes, the crown couldn’t last long, even with Lord Tywin’s considerable intelligence and cunning.

And so Varys settled into his chair, procured a slip of paper specifically cut to be carried by ravens, and started writing.

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Catelyn

‘No, Cat. I was always faithful to you.’

Ned’s words tormented Catelyn – the same words that would have raised her to the seventh heaven had she heard them when she had finally admitted having fallen in love with her serious Northern husband.

‘Dammit, Ned,’ Catelyn whispered against her pillow. Had he really thought that his nephew needed protection from her – his wife?

She understood Ned’s reasons for taking Jon, for raising him in Winterfell, and even telling everyone that he was Ned’s own bastard. She could have forgiven him all that, no matter how hurtful it would have been for her to swallow the insult in the eyes of the world. What she couldn’t forgive was that Ned never told her about it.

With a pang in her conscience, Catelyn remembered how she had felt it necessary to harden her heart to Jon, who represented a threat to her own children’s inheritance and whom she had thought, with his coal-grey eyes and dark hair, to be a continuous reminder to Ned of his lost love. Catelyn was not proud of it; on the contrary, she hated herself for being so cold and hard – but she hadn’t been able to help it.

And all for no reason at all.

Catelyn got up. She knew she shouldn’t dwell on that when there were so many other, bigger things to consider. Sansa’s astonishing story, for one. It had been so… unbelievable.

Nonetheless, after long and hard consideration Catelyn had concluded that it must be true. There were so many strange things in the world, and she had certainly learned more about them since moving to the North. Many crannogmen of the Neck were rumoured to have greensight, and the Children of the Forest, creatures who had inhabited the North even before the First Men, had had powerful greenseers amidst them. Besides, she had learned to trust this new, self-assured Sansa, probably emboldened by her newly acquired gift.

If so, there were practicalities to consider. Firstly, what had Sansa meant about wanting to visit the Quiet Isle? And even more importantly, how were they to avoid the fate Sansa had described the previous evening? It was a fate so chilling, she couldn’t bear to even think of in too much detail.

They had agreed on another discussion between the family that evening to allow Sansa to tell more about her visions, after which they would have to decide how to best proceed to reach the best
outcome for them – and for the realm. Despite Catelyn’s hurt feelings, she was pragmatic enough to know that she needed to push them aside and work together with her husband.

But first Catelyn wanted to talk to Sansa.

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Catelyn found Sansa in her room, along with Arya.

“Mother, I am so sorry about opening old wounds yesterday – I didn’t know it would be like that!” Sansa hurried to her, her words rushed and voice breaking.

“No need to apologise, sweetling. It was important to know that detail, and it’s not your fault that your father decided to lie about it all these years.” Catelyn hugged Sansa, then leaned back and studied her. She looked the same as before, sky-blue eyes looking at her pleadingly. And yet something had changed; Sansa most certainly wasn’t a child anymore.

“Good morrow to you, too,” Catelyn said to Arya. Her younger daughter had already left the room by the time Catelyn had woken up, probably to amble around the Stark camp, to visit her travelling companion in his smithy, or to run into the woods to see Nymeria.

Catelyn still didn’t quite know what to make of this Arya, even more boisterous and unladylike than before. Nonetheless, she was comforted by the thought that whatever her manners, at least Arya was with them, safe and sound, and that there were, after all, more important things than being a lady. Being alive and united with one’s family, for one thing. There would be time later to restart her education in the duties of a noble maiden.

“I know this must be terrible for you. Not only about Jon but also about me…” Sansa didn’t finish her sentence and rare uncertainty crept into her face. Catelyn could see she itched to ask for some kind of assurance that Catelyn believed her and that didn’t shun her daughter because of her revelation. It was so much like Sansa from a few years ago when she had misbehaved and fretted whether her parents would forgive her that Catelyn’s heart filled with tenderness.

Then, Sansa’s misbehaving might have been stealing lemon cakes from the kitchen or ripping her dress while playing, not announcing that she had greensight and could see the future – but her worry was the same.

Catelyn clasped her tighter. “Don’t be troubled, dearest. I believe you, and you have done nothing wrong.”

Relieved, Sansa returned her embrace. Catelyn pulled her down to the bed and sat alongside. Arya had moved to the chair, possibly sensing that Sansa needed her mother now more than her sister. That, too, was new in Arya, that awakening understanding of subtleties and how to read people.

Arya had told Catelyn her story, and although Catelyn could have cried – had cried – for the harshness of her daughter’s experiences, she had also marvelled at Arya’s ability to adapt and overcome those hardships. Catelyn had also wondered how much of Arya’s resilience and strength was due to all those times she had spent outside on the grounds of Winterfell instead of sitting inside doing needlework.

Yes, there were indeed more important things in life than being a perfect lady.

Catelyn focussed on Sansa again. “Now, there are many things yet to sort out, but maybe we can start by you telling me a bit more about your immediate plans.”
“Ask me anything you want to know,” Sansa said, folding her hands in her lap.

“You said yesterday that you would like to visit the Quiet Isle. Why? Does it have anything to do with this?”

A knock interrupted them and after Sansa’s invitation, Ned peeked through the door. Catelyn froze – it was one thing to accept she needed to work with him in principle, but quite another to see him face-to-face so soon after the blow he had delivered.

Sansa looked at her – for confirmation, Catelyn guessed, and sighed. She would have preferred more time to digest Ned’s news, but in the current situation it was not as if she could avoid his presence for long, so she might as well face him now. She nodded at Sansa, who rushed to her father.

“Father, I am so sorry – I never imagined the story about Jon was such a sore spot between you two. Please, is there anything I can do to fix this?” she said, her chin quivering. Ned looked at her, his own face contorted with a mix of emotions.

“It is I who need to apologise you – and your mother.” Ned stood in the middle of the room looking like he was not sure where he should settle. Catelyn felt a wicked satisfaction to see him so forlorn, as unkind as it was.

“I lied to you all,” Ned continued. “I did what I thought was right, not wanting to saddle anyone else with a dangerous secret, knowing how Robert felt about anything to do with the Targaryens. It was my burden and mine alone, I thought. But I was wrong.” He looked straight at Catelyn, but she ignored him. They were not here to wash their dirty laundry in front of their daughters.

“What do you want, Ned?” she asked instead.

Ned cleared his throat. “I… I wanted to ask Sansa more about her desire to travel to the Quiet Isle. We didn’t get to that last evening.”

“Mother already asked me about it,” Sansa said, gesturing Ned to sit down on the other bed. He did, awkwardly, on a spot closest to the door, as if he wanted to be ready to bolt out with a moment’s notice if need be.

“Maybe you can tell us all your reasons. Does it have anything to do with your new gift?” Catelyn asked again.

Sansa seemed to think of her answer for a while before slowly starting. “Yes… and no. There are a few reasons, relying on the premise that you will come back this same way, and hence it won’t be a particular inconvenience or trouble for me to make this small side trip.”

“True,” Catelyn nodded. For an army, the Kingsroad made the most sense.

“Firstly, I know it could be a small chance… but I would like to talk with Lord Tyrion a bit more. To make him see that he should turn his back to his family sooner rather than later.”

Catelyn couldn’t help an incredulous laugh. “To turn a Lannister against his own house – where ever did you get the notion it might work?”

“But my visions show it! Mother, they show him killing Lord Tywin and escaping to Essos, where he meets Daenerys Targaryen and returns to Westeros as her Hand of the Queen.”

Catelyn’s jaw dropped. Lord Tyrion – killing his own father? Probably anticipating her disapproval, Sansa hastened to continue.
“Lord Tywin imprisoned him under the suspicion of murdering King Joffrey and sentenced him to death – so I guess it makes it kind of self-defence, doesn’t it?”

Catelyn felt her head spinning. So much treachery, so much betrayal… how were they ever going to negotiate their way through all that intrigue?

“So you think you may be able to prevent that future by convincing Lord Tyrion to change sides now, rather than later?” Ned said with a grim twist to his mouth.

“I don’t know – at least I hope I can plant a seed. Or cultivate the seed I have already planted,” Sansa confessed.

Catelyn found it odd to imagine that the Imp might one day be their ally rather than their enemy. Yet, if it saved her family from destruction, she was ready to ally with the Stranger himself.

“I see,” she sighed. “Is that it, then? Or did you have some other reason?”

“I have, and it is personal. You see, my visions have told me about a healer there called the Elder Brother, who becomes very important for the whole of Westeros because of his skills, and who practically establishes a new, advanced branch of medicine. And since that is something that I would like to do someday, I would really, **really**, like to meet him.” Sansa let her words set in, gauging the reactions of her audience under her brow.

“You are interested in healing?” Arya blurted, her eyes widening. Catelyn couldn’t blame her, being equally surprised. She had never heard Sansa expressing anything like that before.

“I am. I started to become fascinated by it in the Red Keep, where I heard more about maesters and what they do. I regret I never paid enough attention to Maester Luwin’s teachings – I think I would have learned a lot by sending more time with him.”

“But why? What good would it do to you to learn such things? Women can’t be maesters, and besides, you will marry soon and become a lady of a large keep somewhere.” Catelyn asked, being genuinely perplexed.

“Mother, I also saw that in the future women can have many different occupations, and becoming a maester specialised in healing is just one of many. Maybe I would like to do that – would that be so terrible?” Sansa asked, cocking her head.

“He must not be very famous at this time, though,” Ned remarked. “I know the place, but it is considered mostly a quiet place for meditation and contemplation for the devout, nothing more.”

Sansa turned her attention to her father. “No, he is not, but he is still there, laying foundations of better medicine in obscurity, and now that I have a chance to actually see him with my own eyes, I so very much would like to. I told Tyrion Lannister about him and that’s why he, too, is going there, to see if the Elder Brother could help Ser Jaime.”

“I heard he is already getting better,” Catelyn said. Brienne had brought her the news that morning, surprising Catelyn with her excitement. It had been possibly due to relief of the guilt Brienne had felt for contributing to his condition, Catelyn had thought, stabbed by jealousy of why her Bran had not been granted the same mercy as Jaime.

“So it seems, but there is still a long way to go for him to recover fully – if he ever will. And a good healer can be of great help in that,” Sansa explained.

“How could we make sure you’d be safe? If the Lannisters are going there too, what would prevent
them from abducting you? That is a risk we simply can’t take.” Catelyn decided to ignore the issue of Sansa’s personal aspirations for now. That could wait for later.

“I have considered it. I believe Lord Tyrion plans to travel only with a small retinue and leave his men here or send them ahead – either to King’s Landing or to Lord Tywin, perhaps. If I could also take only a few, selected men with me, making sure we were equally matched, I am sure that would protect me enough. The key thing would be to take the right men.”

“Or women,” Catelyn said slowly. If Lady Brienne would travel with Sansa, she would feel much better. Brienne had already proven herself and sworn loyalty to her and hers.

“You mean Lady Brienne? She is a good fighter, isn’t she? She could make sure Sansa is safe.” Arya interjected. She had been in awe of Brienne since she had been first introduced to her. Catelyn could already see trouble ahead if Arya decided to emulate Brienne’s choice of lifestyle.

“We don’t necessarily need her with us, as we have enough men as it is and expect to meet the men Robb has sent in no time,” Ned said, then added, “If your mother doesn’t require her service, of course.”

“As for the others, I think Sandor Clegane might also be well suited for the task,” Sansa said, staring demurely at her hands.

Ned flinched, although Catelyn couldn’t see why, Clegane already having demonstrated his loyalty many times over. It was true that it was unusual for a young maid to travel on her own, and Catelyn’s natural reaction was to forbid it – but what was natural anymore? Sansa had already proven to be quite capable and mature, and if what she had told about Lord Tyrion was true, getting him on their side against his family would be very useful.

She considered for a moment. With Brienne and Clegane, the latter being an especially renowned warrior and his skills already well-known to the Lannisters – and maybe with a few other men hand-picked by Ned and Ser Rodrik by Sansa’s side… If Ned would allow it, she would not object.

“I think it could work, if your father agrees with it. But only for the time until we are back – you would have to make sure you are back here before us,” she told Sansa. Normally she would have discussed the matter through with Ned first, but now, she was ready to act without him.

“Yes, Mother, I give you my word that I will,” Sansa promised, smiling broadly.

Ned seemed to require a bit more convincing.

“Sansa, I don’t like it. Couldn’t you wait until later, maybe when we are on our way to the North?”

“Then we are in a hurry to get back to Winterfell, and you couldn’t afford to wait here for my visit. And if you would continue without me, my journey on my own would be even longer. Besides, I wouldn’t be able to talk with Lord Tyrion.”

“Are you going to tell him about your visions?” Ned asked. "Is it not unwise to reveal such a secret to a Lannister?"

“Probably not. Or if I do, I will not reveal all I am telling you. Besides, he may not believe me in any case, but at least I would have put doubt in his mind. Or I could just appeal to his rational mind. He must be quite clever if my dreams about him rising to such a high position from a lowly fugitive are any proof. He also played Aunt Lysa quite well, didn’t he? He might see that one way or another, King Joffrey and Queen Cersei will bring the Lannisters down.”
“Are there any other men you could take with you instead of Clegane?” Ned tried again. Catelyn raised her eyebrows. Was there something wrong with the man after all?

“Why do you ask? Is he not to be trusted?” she asked.

“I don’t mean that, not at all. Once he gives his word, I have confidence in him keeping it. It is only that…” Ned didn’t finish his sentence.

“Just what?”

“I am not sure if he is an appropriate company for a young lady like Sansa. A man like him…” Ned stared at his hands. Whatever he thought, it made him uncomfortable.

“For the Seven’s sake, Ned. Is he trustworthy or not? As for anything else – I’d think he would be ideal company for a young maiden exactly because he is who he is. I am not sure I would trust Sansa in the care of some of the younger and comelier men. You know how young girls can be,” Catelyn hissed, staring meaningfully at Ned, trying not to draw Arya’s attention to the matter. Gods, Clegane with his horrible burns and sulky demeanour would be the best protection against any romantic notions a maid on her own might develop!

“Mother! Father! As if I had time for any such foolish notions when bigger things are at stake!” Sansa frowned. “I trust Sandor Clegane to look after my safety better than anyone else – and Lady Brienne would be by my side at all times. What else could you need?”

Ned raised his hands sheepishly. “You are right. I just still don’t like this trip much – but I can see why it could be useful.” He turned to Sansa. “You may go with our blessings. But first, I need to share some words with Lord Tyrion about this arrangement. If he is willing, of course.”

“Thank you, Father and Mother!” Sansa rushed to embrace Ned, then Catelyn.

The matter having been concluded, Catelyn gathered her skirts and stood up, regally.

“I will leave you now. I need to speak with Lady Brienne; this trip means she will have to endure the company of the Kingslayer longer than intended and I have to make sure she is willing. I shall see you all after the dinner, as agreed.”

She nodded at Ned when passing him, and even his despondent expression couldn’t soften her resolve.

Only after reaching her room, Catelyn’s shoulders sagged and the weight of her misery descended on her once more.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter sees Sansa and Sandor meeting again – has it really been only one day since their first intimate encounter???

(P.S. If you have any specific views about the introduction of a summary of the previous chapter, do let me know...)
A Fellow Traveller

Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter (Varys & Catelyn): Varys ponders over strange tidings from the Riverlands about Tyrion and the Starks seen together. What could it mean and how could he exploit it to advance his cause?

Catelyn is still hurt by Ned’s revelations, but realises she has to push past her own pain and regrets in the face of more important things. In an impromptu family meeting Sansa explains her reasons to visit the Quiet Isle, and although sceptical, Cat – and Ned – finally give in. Ned seems worried about appointing Sandor to go with Sansa, which baffles Catelyn. What better protection against possible foolish notions of a young girl on her own than a man of his looks and disposition?

Chapter Notes

It seems the notion of posting summaries was well received – so I’ll continue it then! Especially as this chapter, too, is a bit late, sorry...

Many thanks, Hardlyfatal, for being a wonderful beta once again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

Sansa almost collided with Sandor as she rushed out of her room – ‘almost’ only because Sandor seized her from the shoulders and stopped her just before she crashed head-first against his chest.

“Oh!”

So stopped on her tracks, Sansa eyed him curiously. He was dressed in his full mail and carried a sword and a dagger – and from his expression, he was not in a good mood.

“I need to talk to you,” he grunted. Then, after a brief pause, he added reluctantly, “If you have time.”

Sansa very nearly smiled, so endearing it was to see him trying to act politely. Sandor was clearly not used to it, being more accustomed to telling than asking, but she loved him for trying. Sansa held her smile back, though, not wanting to embarrass him by drawing his attention to the fact that she had noticed.

“Now?”
She had been on her way to see Brienne about the travel arrangements. Cat had come to her earlier to inform that Lady Brienne had accepted the task with good grace and awaited Sansa’s instructions.

Yet… Sansa scanned the corridor quickly and saw nobody. She hadn’t had a chance to talk to Sandor in private as she had hoped ever since their previous meeting, and the opportunity was too good to pass. Brienne just had to wait.

“Now,” Sandor echoed and glanced meaningfully at the stairs to the attic.

Again, Sansa climbed up first. As she reached the attic, old-fashioned comical sketches about men looking up at women’s skirts flashed in her mind. Was Sandor doing that while waiting at the bottom of the stairs for his turn? Such scenes were usually played for laughs, but laughing was the last thing in Sansa’s mind. Instead, the notion sobered her and a warm sensation started to pool in her belly.

\textit{Don’t be stupid}, Sansa admonished herself. Even if he looked, he was unlikely to see anything inappropriate with the number of skirts and underskirts and chemises she was wearing. Yet just the thought had woken in her something that had been dormant for a long time.

\textit{Wanting}.

Shaking her head Sansa cleared the last steps and made her way next to the chimney, sitting down. This time it didn’t take long for Sandor to follow, dropping heavily on his knees in front of her. While he positioned his sword carefully against the floorboards so it wouldn’t make a sound, Sansa studied him, still amazed of what had transpired between them.

How was it possible that it had been only a day since they had been in this very same place and opened the door of possibilities between them? A door leading to… what? Love? Lust? Compassion? Whatever it was going to be, she was determined not to let it shut again.

In an odd way, Sansa thought she and Sandor had more in common than seemed possible for two outwardly-so-different people. From the snippets he had told her, she had concluded that Sandor, too, had grown up expecting a different life. He had played with toy knights and held ideals of knighthood high in his esteem… until his brother had crushed them, and his father had killed the rest of his spirit by showing that truth and honour were just a lie. That had forced Sandor to adapt to the world and its expectations of him, and doing that, he had adopted the role of a killer and brute: that of The Hound.

It was not so different from her own struggles to adapt to her new circumstances and learn to smile and be docile and ladylike when all she wanted to do was to run and be free, cuss and laugh and \textit{live…} With a notable difference that she had done her pretending for only a few short months, whereas Sandor had done it for years.

Sansa hoped it was not too late for him to learn that there was a different way.

If Sandor was thinking of what had happened in this same place just a day ago, it didn’t seem to be at the forefront of his mind.

“What the hells is going on? Your father came to me and told that you are going to the Quiet Isle – on your own, and with the \textit{Lannisters}? And that it’s your own wish to do it. Tell me he was japing!”

He almost growled the last words, his nostrils flaring.

Sansa was taken aback. She hadn’t expected Sandor – or anyone, for that matter – to be happy with her plan, but she had assumed her worst obstacle to be her parents, not him.
“As a matter of fact, I am, and yes, it was my idea. My father promised to ask you to escort me on this trip. Did you refuse him?” Her words had more sting than she had intended, so vexed she was finding herself at the receiving end of his wrath.

“But why? Haven’t you learned anything? You are finally with your family, safe and sound, and the first thing you do is to put yourself in the harm’s way again. Lannisters are not to be trusted, I thought you knew that by now!”

Sandor’s face transformed, flaring nostrils and cold eyes changing into downcast expression and shaking head – and Sansa’s irritation disappeared in an instant.

He is worried about me.

She leaned forward and touched Sandor’s arm.

“I am sorry you had to hear it from him. I wished I could have told it myself so you’d see my reasons. Rest assured that I am aware of the risk this poses – and hence I asked for a strong guard to come with me, and specifically you.”

Sandor lifted his head. “Why in the seven hells, then? What’s on that forsaken island that you have to see? Don’t tell me it is for the Seven, as I don’t believe it.”

Sansa bit her lip. She hadn’t had time to consider what she was going to tell Sandor – but she had to tell him something. If their relationship was going in the direction she hoped it was, it would have to be the truth – but not here, not now.

And yet… this also offered an opportunity to learn more about him. If she told him her reasons, his reaction would offer her one more piece of the puzzle of the man he was.

“I will tell you all about it, I promise. But for now, as I’m soon expected elsewhere, I can only give you a brief outline.”

Sandor nodded, so she continued.

“I have two reasons. Firstly, I want to speak more with Lord Tyrion. I think he might be persuaded to go against his family in this ridiculous struggle for power. Bad things are coming to Westeros and in order to avoid them, the reign of King Joffrey and the Lannisters behind it have to be ended, sooner rather than later.”

Sansa stopped to gauge Sandor’s reaction. There was none, however, his expression remaining closed. He must have learned to guard it over the years, Sansa thought, and refused to be discouraged by it.

“Secondly, there is a famous healer, the Elder Brother, whom I’d very much like to meet. You see, I dream of becoming a healer myself one day,” Sansa finished with a defiant lift of her chin. It was quite possible that Sandor would laugh at her dreams and tell her that she was destined to be a wife and a mother and nothing more, like most men in his position might.

Nevertheless, if he did so, Sansa couldn’t blame him too harshly. All people were the product of their circumstances and it would be ridiculous to judge anyone from one society according to the standards of another. Hearing a dismissive retort from a man of her own time – that would be different and Sansa would want nothing to do with such a relic from the past. To receive it from Sandor? Yes, it would sting, but she would understand it nonetheless.

Sandor seemed to consider her words carefully – which was a good sign. And then, of all reactions
Sansa might have imagined, he did something quite unexpected.

He laughed. Not a mocking, derisive laughter, but a genuine, open chuckle. The corners of his eyes crinkled and he leaned back on his haunches.

“What?” Sansa asked, shocked, and suspicious of what it might indicate.

“By the Stranger, you are certainly not like other noble maidens I have seen!”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“That whereas other maids might think of how to find husbands, you think of politics. And trade.” He shook his head again. “For anyone else, I’d think the news of pretty boy Lannister might have inspired them to ingratiate themselves to him – but you, you want to talk politics with the Imp!”

The news that Jaime Lannister seemed to be regaining some sensation in his feet had been the talk of the inn the previous evening.

“Is that a bad thing, then? I know I was like that before, but I hope I have grown out of it,” Sansa couldn’t help asking. Somewhere at the back of her mind, a niggling doubt that Sandor cared more about the old Sansa than herself still resided. Maybe he indulged her new behaviour only because of the memory of her?

Sandor looked at her thoughtfully and Sansa had never felt so bare before anyone in her life. It was as if he was not only seeing her face, but his eyes bored deep into her soul, studying, assessing.

She couldn’t take his scrutiny any longer and broke their eye contact, looking down.

“No, it’s not,” Sandor finally said. “You have started to see the world as it is, and that can be only a good thing.”

Sansa was relieved. It seemed she had assessed him correctly and he truly wasn’t like other men.

“They breed us resilient in the North, you know,” she said in order to lighten up the mood.

“I have noticed. That little sister of yours…” Sandor didn’t finish his sentence, but his tone was not disapproving.

“Besides, this trip gives us an opportunity to spend more time together. If we continue with my parents, you’ll be allocated somewhere with the troops and I’ll be staying with Mother and Arya and we would hardly see each other.”

“Why?”

“Why what? To spend more time together? I want to get to know you better, that’s why.”

“Then you’ll be disappointed. There’s nothing much to know about me – what you see is what you get.” Sandor moved, settling to sit by Sansa’s side, his back leaning against the bricks. His joints cracked as he stretched his legs and an air of resignation was embedded in his every move.

It stung Sansa to see him so sceptical. She knew he didn’t lack self-confidence, but perhaps the novelty of the situation – being pursued by a woman, probably for the first time in his life – had thrown him off guard.

Rather than trying to justify herself to him, Sansa lifted her hand to his face.
“I like what I see,” she said, tracing the outline of his profile with her forefinger, following the contour of his brow, his nose, his lips. “Did you know that you have the longest eyelashes I have seen in a man? And your nose: I like the shape of your nose.”

Sandor winced, then turned to look at her.

“I am yet not sure whether you are genuinely mad or still cracked in the head.”

Sansa smiled. He had learned that the Hound’s bark was worse than his bite. And maybe she wouldn’t even mind if he bit her... a little.

Something of her thoughts might have shown in her face as Sandor shifted and took hold of her head, his large hands enveloping her face on both sides. Sansa didn’t look away.

Then he kissed her.

He bent her head back and like the last time, his inexperience showed at first – but then he gained confidence and the intensity of his kiss grew. Sansa clung to him, her hands grasping for a hold on his shoulders, gaining a sense of great strength in check for now, but ready to erupt at any moment. This was not a man who was unsure of himself, but a man who knew what he was capable of. It both scared and excited Sansa, and she responded to his unspoken challenge in kind.

She was no stranger to kissing, but she had never before experienced a reaction to it as strongly as that moment. A pleasant way to awaken dormant desires had transformed to a whirlwind of emotions and bodily sensations. Sandor lowered his other hand, sliding it from her shoulder to her arm, from there to her waist, and from there to the curve of her hip, leaving as if it left a smouldering trail in its wake.

Sansa pressed herself against him, wanting... what, she couldn’t articulate. Only that she wanted.

The sensible part of her brain was screaming at her to stop it and move away, that they had no time, that this was not the place, that she couldn’t give in to Sandor so easily, that this was too soon.

Eventually, against her wild impulse to continue, she heeded it.

“Sandor, please, we can’t…” she whispered, turning her head aside.

He stopped, and Sansa could feel his whole body tensing under her hands – then relaxing again as he released her.

“Of course not. I’m not that fool.” Sandor’s voice was hoarse and he was a little breathless. He pulled away and his shoulders sag.

Sansa realised he must have assumed she stopped him because that was expected from a maiden – emphasis on the word ‘maiden’. How could she convey to him that it didn’t matter? And if she did, would he still respect her? Was it possible for a man of his time to think outside the prevailing narrow views of propriety; that women were either virtuous or wanton and there were no shades in between?

Fuck society.

“Not here”, she whispered meaningfully, and touched his shoulder. “Not now.”

Sandor’s eyes widened but he said nothing.

“Will you join me for this trip?” Sansa said in a normal voice, forcing herself to get back to the matter
at hand.

“Already said that much to your father. First thing tomorrow morning, we leave.” Sandor moved, lifting his knees up but showed no signs of getting up.

Sansa smiled. “Then I’d better go and get things moving, as well.”

She got to her feet, still a bit shaken, but that couldn’t be helped. “Shall we go?”

“You go first. I’ll come later.” Sandor hadn’t moved but sat as before, his knees raised. He appeared uncomfortable and in a flash, Sansa understood, why.

Oh.

“Sure, it is better if we leave separately,” she said, trying her hardest not to blush. It was a perfectly normal reaction and to be expected. She had experienced arousal as well, but luckily in her case, it didn’t show.

Wanting to give him the time he clearly needed, Sansa hurried to the stairs and climbed down, trying hard not to think what Sandor might do as soon as she was gone. Afterwards, anyone seeing her making her way to Brienne’s room might have been baffled by her making strange faces for apparently no reason at all; alternatively smiling, blushing, grimacing and grinning.

Yet Sansa couldn’t have cared less.

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The next morning saw them on their way before the sun had even fully climbed above the horizon: Sansa, Sandor, Brienne, Jarwin the Archer and Beren from the masterly House Tallhart. The last two had come with high recommendations from Ser Rodrik, and after careful vetting by Ned, they had been accepted as members of her entourage.

Sansa liked them both, Jarwin being the more talkative of the two. Beren was a solemn young man who took the task entrusted upon him as seriously as one might take guarding the king himself, but he, too, was quite affable. Above all else, both were trustworthy and capable. Even Sandor had grunted his approval when Sansa had enquired his opinion of the pair, which she took as a sign of high esteem.

The morning dawned beautiful and refreshing. It felt strange to be riding on horseback instead of sitting in a cart, but luckily Sansa’s muscles had already adapted to it after her earlier spell, so she was able to fully enjoy the freedom it represented. She patted her mare – one of the horses the Starks had brought all the way from the North – and complimented her for her steady step and pleasant gait. Straightening up, Sansa’s gaze fell on the party riding in front of them.

As she had predicted, Tyrion had commanded most of his mountain clansmen to wait for him at the inn. From what Sansa gathered there hadn’t been much opposition to it, the men enjoying a rare luxury of idleness, good eating and good drinking. The men he had chosen to take with him had been no surprises, either, according to her parents and Ser Rodrik. There was Jaime, naturally, and the sellsword Bronn, as well as Timos from the Burned Men and a Lannister swordsman called Myles Lannet, who was rumoured to be a distant relative to the Lannisters of the Rock.

The last two were tough and strong and quick with their blades and likely chosen exactly because of those particular attributes. Shae was part of the group as well, which Sansa didn’t mind despite her parents’ silent disapproval. However, most importantly, Podrick Payne rode with the party.
Sansa had itched to talk with him ever since the day she had heard him singing the Brittany Lance tune. However, with one thing or another keeping her contained or busy, and the poor boy being run off his feet on Tyrion’s errands for most of the day, she hadn’t had her chance. Yet.

Sansa tried to think of a way how to get close to him for most of the morning’s travel, concluding that it might draw unwanted attention if she simply walked to him and asked for a moment of his time. The parties were travelling more or less together – there was strength in numbers, and times were still unsettled – but Sansa had no particular reason to interact with Pod.

Then it hit her that she may not need to worry about how to get to him – when she could leave it to him to get to her instead.

She knew one of Pod’s duties was to set out the meals for his master during the midday break, so when the time came, Sansa made sure to sit close to where Pod was preparing Tyrion’s and Jaime’s platters, pretending to be sewing. As her cover, she had taken a shawl with a small tear in it, as well as her small box of needles and thread.

From her seat on top of a fallen tree, Sansa observed Pod as he pulled a large ham from a bag, then a loaf of bread and piece of cheese from another and started cutting them to pieces. He hummed under his breath, but Sansa didn’t recognise the tune.

It was her turn now.

Sansa had figured that if it was just a happenstance that Pod knew the song after picking it up from another time-traveller, her approach would have to be much more subtle when talking with him. If, however, he was truly from the future… surely he would recognise other songs from that era?

Sansa didn’t pride herself on her singing voice, although she knew she could carry a passable tune, but getting ready to sing, she felt butterflies in her stomach. She pored over the piece of cloth in her hands, coughed to clear her throat, and started.

*Oops, I did it again, I played with your heart, got lost in the game, Oh baby, baby, Oops, you think I'm in love, That I'm sent from above, I'm not that innocent…*

She felt foolish. The song required a proper musical background, a chorus, electric guitars – not just her tremulous voice that sounded thin in her ears. She was thankful that there were no other people near them, aside Brienne, who had taken to follow her everywhere. The other woman sat a small distance away and when Sansa started singing, had looked at her, surprised. Sansa knew she was probably wondering about the song and its lyrics, but would be too respectful to ask her directly.

While she sang, she observed Pod. At first, he didn’t seem to notice, focussing on his task – but then he froze in the middle of a movement. Sansa tensed but continued to sing.

*You see my problem is this, I'm dreaming away, wishing that heroes, they truly exist…*

Pod dropped things in his hands and got onto his feet, turning his head to scan his surroundings. His gaze swept past Sansa… and returned. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped, but Sansa continued until the end of the verse, then caught Pod’s eye.

*Let’s talk later,* she mouthed silently and motioned with her head in Brienne’s direction, then shook her head. She hoped that Pod got the message; that they couldn’t discuss while Brienne was there, but he should find an opportunity when she wasn’t.

She almost felt sorry for the poor boy, so shocked did he look, but eventually Pod gathered himself, nodded at her, and sat down.
Sansa gathered her things and walked away, smiling.

Soon.

Chapter End Notes

As this chapter was going to be so long, I broke it into two parts in order to post at least something sooner - so the next chapter is also from Sansa’s POV. This is where she has plans… Thanks for reading, and any comments are warmly received, should you feel so!
Sansa’s Plan

Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter (Sansa):

Sandor confronts Sansa about her plans to travel to the Quiet Isle with the Lannister brothers, of all people. The tense situation is resolved when Sansa tells him her reasons, including wanting to get to know him better. Sandor can’t believe why she would bother, but Sansa convinces him otherwise… Sansa interrupts their intimate embrace before it goes too far, but to Sandor’s obvious disbelief she leaves the door open for something later.

They start their journey and Sansa figures out how to get Pod to come to her for a much-awaited conversation about Brittany Lance and their shared musical tastes by singing “Oops I did it again”. Pod couldn’t be more surprised about her impromptu performance.

Chapter Notes

Surprise, darlings! Got to finish this earlier than I expected, so here goes… Many thanks to Hardlyfatal, as usual, of course!

Incidentally, I also notice that it has been almost exactly one year since I started posting this fic (1 year and 6 days, but who’s counting!). It makes this fic the longest I have written and posted, although there was one that took one week short of a year to post. Yet this has already passed that and is still continuing, so I guess only time will tell how long this goes on… Anyway, yay to 1-year anniversary and thank you everyone who has joined the journey!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Sansa

It was much later in the day, as the travellers stopped for the night, when Sansa saw Pod approaching. She had tried to make herself available by sending Brienne to help set up their tents and supplies, assuring her that she was going to stay close and would be perfectly safe to sit on her own for a while. Brienne hadn’t wanted to go, but in the face of them travelling in so limited numbers, every pair of hands was needed and eventually she had agreed.

“Lady Sansa,” Pod stammered, staring at her as if she had sprouted horns in her head.

“Pod - thank you for coming,” Sansa said and glanced around, seeing everyone in her party being busy with setting up the camp and that nobody paid attention to them. Even if they did, it was hardly unusual for Pod to be seen with her – he might have been there to deliver a message or something equally practical, as far as they knew.

Pod confirmed this with his next words. “Lord Tyrion requests your company for the dinner. In his tent. Together with anyone of your party you may choose.”

“Thank Lord Tyrion for his kind invitation and tell him that Lady Brienne and I will be delighted to join him.” Sansa bent her head. Pod shuffled his feet and seemed to be gathering his courage for a moment.

“My lady, how – who – I mean, when –” he then blurted.

“Pod, I am from the future, as it seems you are, too.” Sansa smiled at Pod hoping it would encourage him, and motioned him to sit next to her on the flat boulder she was using as her seat. He did, teetering at the edge of the rock a respectable distance away. For anyone glancing in their direction they would appear as two fellow travellers discussing the progress of their journey, nothing else.

“You? But how…” Pod was lost for words. Looking at him now and having learned the truth, Sansa thought she could recognise in him some traces of the young boy whose picture she had glanced briefly in the notice board of the Red Keep that fateful day, so long ago.

“I honestly don’t know. It just…happened.”

Briefly Sansa told him about her own disappearance; her visit to the Red Keep, the eerie sensation as the room filled with thick and heavy air, the suffocating warmth. And how she had woken up in this strange world and had tried to find her feet there ever since.

Pod listened, his eyes wide as saucers, but didn’t interrupt even once. Only when Sansa was done with her story, he whispered, “Only a few months ago?”

“What about you, then? What is your story?”

“I…I came here five years ago. A bit more.”

“From where, and how?”

“It happened in the Red Keep, just like with you, my lady. I was there with my uncle, who raised me, as my own parents died when I was just a baby. He was old and didn’t take stairs so well, so I ran ahead on my own to see all the places I had heard about. I wanted to see the cellars where they
kept the dragon skulls, but got lost and ended up in a small room; an old cell, probably. Then the room got really warm, and I couldn’t breathe, and I lay down... But I didn’t wake up there, my lady!"

Sansa pulled back. “What do you mean? Where, then?”

“I woke up in a field near Pennytree, in the Riverlands. I knew the place, as I had been there only a year earlier camping with my uncle.” Pod shivered. “We came there to a tree they called a Hanging Tree, as apparently hundreds of years earlier there had been a group of outlaws who had hung their victims from it. It was a dark, dark place, my lady, and I remember it well, as I had the most peculiar experience there; one that I shall never forget.”

At Sansa’s urging, Pod told her about a sensation he had felt under that famous tree: a feeling as if his airways had been squeezed, making it impossible to breathe. He had clawed at his throat and for a fleeting moment, had felt a heavy hempen rope around it, before his distress had alerted his uncle who had rushed to him – and the moment had passed.

Sansa stared at him. How was it possible? She had woken up exactly at the same place she had lain down... Then again, nothing in the whole experience made sense, and under whatever implausible rules of nature it worked, who was she to say what was normal and what was not?

She also remembered, and told Pod, about her own previous experience in Winterfell, where she, too, had felt the presence of the past strongly. Her experience had been positive, Pod’s had been harrowing – but who knew how those things worked?

Pod told her how after his transition he had wandered that whole day and night on his own, trying to make some sense of what had happened. Eventually, exhausted and hungry, he had stumbled into a camp where a man called Ser Cedric had called him ‘Pod’ and given him a hiding for having run away. Pod had been so grateful of having found at least some place of safety in that strange world that he had stayed silent and accepted his lot from thereon. First he had followed Ser Cedrick, then Ser Lorimer, with whom he had narrowly avoided the noose by a stroke of luck due to the name he had been called, finally ending up in Lord Tywin’s, then Lord Tyrion’s, service.

They didn’t have much time to compare their experiences, but Sansa asked a few more questions. Pod’s name in the future had also been Podrick, but his surname hadn’t been Payne but Plumm. Sansa gained an impression he had been a normal, happy boy, although perhaps somewhat lonely and slightly neglected by his elderly uncle, who nonetheless had taken good care of him and his needs. To Sansa’s question whether he missed his family or his own time, Pod shrugged his shoulders. He had accepted that he was unlikely to ever find his way back to his old life – but he confessed really missing ice cream and video games.

Sansa felt sorry for the boy. He had been so young when he had crossed over, so inexperienced and timid, trying just to fit in, not challenging or fighting against it. Nonetheless, maybe it had been for the best.

When Sansa told him about her plan to change things for better, and how she had already started on that road, Pod stared at her in awe.

“You think you can really do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll just make a big mess of things. Yet I have to try.”

“Can I help?”
Sansa thought about it. What could a lowly squire do? Probably not much. Then again, it wouldn’t hurt to have support.

“Would you like to see the Lannisters and Baratheons defeated and a Targaryen dynasty restored?”

The boy looked confused. “Of course I would. Targaryens have always been rulers of Westeros – or so I thought. When I came over, I was surprised to hear about King Robert, and now of King Joffrey.”

Of course, Sansa realised. He had been so young and probably hadn’t read about the past as much as Sansa had - and the Baratheon dynasty had been just a small blip in the annals of time when it came to the history of Westeros.

“In that case, your lord has a big role to play in it – he just doesn’t realise it as yet. So if you have a chance, please support him in finding his independence and in his attempts to remove himself from his family. They will turn against him if things go as they once did, and very likely even if things go differently. His father and his sister hate him and there’s not much I or he or anyone can do about it, because it’s not even his own fault. However, the sooner he realises that and joins Queen Daenerys, the better chances we have at avoiding all the unnecessary blood-letting a great war will bring. And wouldn’t that be better?”

“I will try, my lady. I don’t know if I can do much, but I’ll try.”

Sansa smiled. “Don’t try too hard. Take care of yourself, first and foremost. Only IF you have a chance, you might throw a word in here, another there, to show him that your support is not because of his Lannister connection, and that his family doesn’t have his best interests in mind … who knows, that may help.”

Pod nodded, his expression so serious it might have been comical had the situation not been so momentous. He stared at his hands, clearly mulling something over in his mind.

“What is it, Pod? Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“So what happens now? Do you think we are the only ones – or are there more people like us?”

Sansa had wondered about the same thing. Maybe she had met some of them already, all thinking themselves to be unique and trying to hide their origins as much as she tried to hide hers?

“I don’t know how many there are – but maybe, if we try to draw them out with songs and stories, we’ll find out.”

“We?”

Sansa’s spirits sank. Their paths would go different ways after their return from the Quiet Isle; he travelling with Tyrion and she with her family.

“Even if we are not together, we can do it on our own. Maybe we shall meet again and can compare our experiences?”

“I’d like that, very much, my lady.” Pod smiled, the widest smile Sansa had ever seen on his face.

“Me too, Pod.” Taking a quick look at her companions and seeing them all occupied, she quickly patted his hand, even just that innocent touch causing him to change into the colour of a beetroot.

“For now, you better leave. You have dallied here long enough.”
Pod got up and looked at her seriously.

“Thank you, my lady. I always felt so weird because of where I came from, so it’s good to know I’m not the only one”

“It’s the same for me, too, so thank you, Pod. And it is Sansa; call me Sansa when we are alone.”

Another wide smile. “Yes, Sansa.”

Sansa stared after Pod’s retreating back for a long time, wondering about the mysteries of the world. She really hoped to be able to talk to Pod again, he being the only person who could fully understand her peculiar situation, but Brienne’s continuous presence was going to make it difficult. If she was going to continue along the same vein, Sansa’s much-awaited time with Sandor would be hard to come by too.

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Sansa’s prediction of the difficulties of seeing Sandor alone turned out to be true when Brienne didn’t leave her side day or night. They shared a tent, which made sense, but also denied Sansa any modicum of privacy.

The second evening she had had enough and after they retired to their tent after another dinner feasting on delicacies Tyrion had brought along, she feigned to have forgotten to inquire about the next day’s route and sent Brienne to talk to Bronn and Myles Lannet about it.

The tent flap had hardly fallen down behind Brienne when a shadow emerged from the back of the tent and Sansa felt strong arms circling her from the back.

“Sandor!” She turned around and faced the shadow, now materialised as a man.

“Little bird, I had to come.”

“I’m glad you did – but what would you have done had I not sent Brienne away?”

Sansa liked this new, bold Sandor – taking chances because of her.

“I would have slipped away the same way I came,” he said and shrugged, pointing to the back of the tent where Sansa could see the two over-lapping pieces of canvas had been left untied. She recalled Sandor being the one overseeing raising the tents, and again felt a sense of excitement. She hadn’t exactly planned a game of secret trysts, but if that was the only way…

Sandor held her still, his hold loose, and Sansa wrapped her arms around him and stood on her toes to reach him for a kiss.

“We don’t have much time,” she whispered - and Sandor took her meaning.

A deep kiss, and Sandor lifted her fully in his arms. Sansa felt weightless, intoxicated and overwhelmed. She didn’t want the moment to end, but much too soon Sandor placed her down on her feet again.

“I don’t know what to do with Brienne – she never leaves me alone,” Sansa sighed while trying to get her bearings back. She hadn’t let go of Sandor but rested her chin against his chest, looking up at him, her fingers absentmindedly touching his hair and his cheek. She marvelled how relaxed things were between them now, where before the air had been filled with tension and unease.
“She’s only looking after you,” Sandor muttered, sliding his hand down Sansa’s back, letting it rest at the curve of her waist. “Would you want me to hurt her a bit in a sword practice? Nothing serious, just so she would have to be abed for a while?”

“Of course not!” Sansa was shocked to hear such callous suggestion, but when she glared at Sandor, she noticed the side of his mouth twitching suspiciously.

Did he... did he just make a joke?

Sansa calmed down, hiding a smile. She liked this new Sandor, she liked him a lot.

“I know, and I love her for it, but I wish she had something else to focus on!” Sansa enjoyed the warmth of his palm and imagined how it might feel against her bare skin... and blushed.

“Or someone.” Sandor’s tone at the last word drew her attention, but before she could ask him what he meant, they heard Brienne’s voice from the outside. She was talking to Beren about the better position of the watch for the night, getting closer as she spoke.

Hurriedly and without another word, Sandor withdrew and disappeared as if he had never been there, leaving Sansa amazed how it was possible for him to be so fast and so quiet.

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Sandor’s words came back to her the next morning as they were packing. She observed Brienne, trying to figure out what to do with her – something that didn’t require violence – when she noticed the other woman stopping in the middle of carrying a stack of boxes to the cart. She seemed to be focussed on something outside the parameters of their camp, and when Sansa followed the direction of her gaze, she saw Ser Jaime being carried in a stretcher by Timos and Myles.

Just then Timos dropped one arm of the stretcher and Jaime’s head lurched alarmingly close to the ground before Timos was able to grab a better hold. Brienne scowled and mutter something under her breath.

Sansa smiled. She had an idea.

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The Elder Brother looked nothing like what Sansa had expected. He was not thin and austere, nor godly and demure as a dedicated servant of the Seven might be, but a tall, bald man with a square head, heavy jaw and a veined, bulbous nose. His set was heavy and his stance that of a soldier. His sharp eyes seemed to miss nothing.

Sansa gazed in amazement at this genius of medical sciences, the forefather of modern medicine, the poet and philosopher – the man she had spent so many years idolising. If he noticed her star-struck gawking, he didn’t comment on it, however, but welcomed the visitors in a calm manner despite being undoubtedly taken off-guard to receive such substantial visitation without notice.

Their party was received in a common hall at the top of the hill, where they had climbed partly along wooden steps, partly on a narrow path meandering between rocks and small trees battered down by continuous winds blowing across the island. On the way, Sansa had seen well-maintained terraced fields, grazing sheep, fishponds and even a mill – the brothers seemed to have everything they needed to sustain their community in that lonely stretch of land.

After welcoming the parties and announcing that any official business must wait until tomorrow due to the lateness of the day, the Elder Brother gave instructions to the few brothers who seemed to have
permission to speak to show the guests their quarters. They were also welcomed to join the meal that was soon to be served.

Sansa followed Brienne, Shae and the brother assigned to them, and when they reached the modest windowless huts, she insisted for their own cottage each. On the road Shae had naturally shared a tent with Tyrion, but the Elder Brother had made it clear that any such arrangements between unmarried couples were not accepted on the island. Brienne tried to argue back at first, as after having shared the tent with Sansa she had assumed that arrangement to continue. Sansa, however, had her mind set and assured Brienne that any danger was much less likely to threaten them on that holy island and that she felt safe enough to have her nearby. That was what Brienne eventually had to settle with, and so she grudgingly agreed.

Just before the dinner Sansa pleaded for a moment alone and escaped Brienne to purportedly examine the building housing the common hall and a few common and guest rooms. She had overheard that Ser Jaime had been assigned to one of the guestrooms there, and she needed a moment of his time.

She was quick, in and out in just a moment, leaving possibly a very confused Jaime behind her, but she had had to do it. Her plan had to be foolproof.

Sansa had spent hardly any time in the presence of the Kingslayer at the inn, but attending to Lord Tyrion’s dinners during their journey she had found him to be quite different to what the gossip at the Red Keep had suggested. Quieter, less arrogant – but how much of that was due to his recent circumstances was anyone’s guess. For Brienne’s sake, she had stayed back on most evenings after Tyrion and Shae had retired into their tent, knowing that Brienne wouldn’t leave the table before she did.

It hadn’t been hard to see that Brienne had developed feelings for Jaime, even though she tried to hide them. What Jaime thought of her was another matter, though.

Unlike many others, Sansa didn’t see anything odd about the possibility of the two of them being together. Such unconventional couples were not unusual in her time, but she also realised that she was probably one of the few who saw things that way. Besides, there was also the tiny little thing of Jaime being in the Kingsguard and forbidden to marry, and Brienne’s honour surely not allowing her to become his mistress…

Sansa sighed. She had enough on her plate trying to manage her own love life, so she could perhaps be excused for not trying to manage anybody else’s. She knew her reasons for her plan were entirely selfish, her intent being to remove Brienne shadowing her every step. If it gave Brienne and Jaime’s impossible love story a boost, so be it – and if not, well, that was just not to be.

Yet Jaime agreed to her plan, and that was the main thing.

The meal was a modest but tasty affair with mounds of freshly baked bread, crocks of freshly churned butter and gallons of ale accompanying a hearty mutton stew. The guests had been seated separately, the brothers at other tables, with the Elder Brother at the end of the largest. It was also a subdued affair, everyone in both parties being tired and worn out after the day’s hurried journey to reach the Quiet Isle before high tide.

After everyone had eaten and started to retire for the night, Sansa gestured to Brienne and Jaime,
who were sitting not far from her.

“Lady Brienne and Ser Jaime, if I may, I would like to exchange a few words with you.”

Brienne looked surprised, but nodded, as did Jaime, waving away the clansman assigned to look after him and telling him to come back later. Tyrion threw questioning looks towards them when he left, but as he hadn’t been asked to stay, accepted the situation without protest.

“Ser Jaime, I understand that you have had some difficulties with your current caretakers. Is that so?” Sansa had to suppress her smile when asking the question, but she had decided to do it right and go through the motions.

It had been obvious to everyone within a hearing distance that Jaime had not been best pleased with his handlers, fuming and cursing them for all the knocks and jolts they subjected him to. Especially Timos appeared to have two left hands and feet when attending to Jaime, and Sansa suspected that when choosing him for his entourage, Tyrion had thought more of his skills as warrior rather than a handler of an invalid.

“Very much so. Those two wouldn’t be suited to carry carcasses, not to mention a man still living. Pod is better, but he has no strength, so…” Jaime shrugged.

“I also understand that Lady Brienne was much better with the task?”

Jaime’s face lightened. “She certainly was. Lady Brienne has a soft, sure touch and she was not determined to kill me with a thousand cuts like those two oafs. Although I’m sure many times she was tempted.” He grinned at Brienne, his teeth flashing behind the golden stubble of the beard he had allowed to let grow again, and her cheeks flared a violent pink.

Sansa nodded thoughtfully. “I thought so. Hence I’d like to suggest offering the services of Lady Brienne to you while we are staying here. But only if it is acceptable to both, especially to you, my lady.” She looked straight at Brienne.

Brienne squirmed under the unexpected spotlight. Sansa felt sorry for her, but she also knew that had she asked Brienne on her own, her honour wouldn’t have allowed her to accept the task. With Jaime’s urging – which Sansa had confirmed beforehand – she might be persuaded.

“My lady, your lady mother asked me specifically to look after you. If I attend to him, I can’t do that,” Brienne protested, although somewhat feebly.

“I am sure I’ll be perfectly safe here. Sandor, Jarwin and Beren are surely enough to protect me from harm in this isolated island. We have nothing to be concerned about from anyone, I am assured of that.”

Sansa was too polite to express that the main danger they had been worried about was Lord Tyrion – and by extension, Ser Jaime – but Jaime was not stupid and followed her lead.

“My brother and I have repeatedly assured you that we will honour the terms of the exchange and no attempts will be made towards your person by us. Even if my word is worthless—” here, he paused, a melancholic expression flitting across his face “—my brother’s honour is not besmirched, so maybe you’ll believe him better. So you see, Lady Brienne, there is no reason to hesitate.” Jaime broke into a broad smile and added in a lower voice, “I would like it very much.”

Brienne seemed to hesitate for a moment, then after a quick glance at Sansa, seemed to make up her mind.
“I agree, if you are sure, Lady Sansa,” she muttered, staring at her empty platter. Yet when she looked at Ser Jaime from under her brow, Sansa could see that she was far from disappointed, hunger showing in her every expression.

Sansa truly liked Brienne and had gotten along well with her from the start. It hurt her to see Brienne’s insecurities when there was nothing to be insecure about. Only the cruelty of the society and people around her had made this magnificent woman to feel like an outsider and doubt her worth when it came to her feminine side. Sansa wished she was free to tell Brienne about the future where women like her were valued and appreciated and rose to high positions because of what they could do, instead of being shunned as disappointments to their sex. However, her secret was too big, so all she could do was to encourage her in less obvious ways.

So it was agreed, Brienne’s first task to be to help the Elder Brother to examine Jaime the next day after her already-agreed morning sparring session with the other warriors. Although the Quiet Isle didn’t encourage such warlike behaviour, the Elder Brother had grudgingly granted them permission to use the stable yards for it.

Both Sansa and Brienne’s steps seemed to be considerably lighter on their way back to the huts as they had been on the way from there. Knowing that Brienne was going to be away for a good part of the day allowed Sansa to finally plan some alone time with Sandor.

Just the thought made her skin tingle.

Chapter End Notes

As for the next chapter, unfortunately, it is moving away from this exciting anticipation...sorry! But Brienne has something on her plate too, and boy, is she up for a surprise next!
In the previous chapter (Sansa):

Pod reveals to Sansa that he, too, is from the future, swept away during a visit in the Red Keep. Unlike Sansa, he ended up in the Riverlands and eventually stumbled into a Lannister camp becoming Podrick Payne, a squire. Sandor sneaks into Sansa’s tent for a brief encounter, during which Sansa expresses her frustration at Brienne’s vigilance limiting their time together. Sandor suggests Brienne should focus on someone else – and after observing Brienne, Sansa has an idea just who that someone might be… After their arrival in the Quiet Isle, Sansa offers Brienne’s services to Jaime, if both are willing – which they are. Sansa’s mood is lifted as she starts to plan alone time with Sandor.

Chapter Notes

Surprise, darlings! A mid-week update – because why not? Thank you Hardlyfatal for betaing, once more!

Apologies for any possible mind-blowing inaccuracies in the medical content of this chapter – if anyone finds it jarring and would like to provide some constructive comments or advice about it, please do feel free. I did some research on the topic and considered this to be in the realm of possibilities - and then again, in a story incorporating time-travel, reincarnation, dragons and white walkers (no matter how ‘scientifically’ explained), maybe it wouldn't be such a biggie even if not...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brienne

Brienne woke up to a distant crow of a rooster, the unusual sound leaving her confused for a moment in that undefined space between sleep and full wakefulness. Then the memories of their arrival in the Quiet Isle came back to her, reminding her of where she was and why.

There was no time to waste; the morning light already streamed in through the smoke hole at the ceiling. She stretched herself in her narrow cot, regretting it immediately after her arms hit the wall behind her. As usual, the bed was too short for her tall frame despite her legs already hanging off its foot.

Rubbing her elbow, Brienne got up, and after washing her face in a washbasin dressed hurriedly just in a simple tunic and breeches. Her padded gambeson and armour were already packed into a sack to
take with her just in case if they decided to train in full gear.

The morning was refreshing with a cool wind and clear skies. It was perfect weather for some sword practice and during her walk to the stables Brienne’s mind drifted towards the upcoming day.

It was nice to stay in one place for a while and to have a purpose other than watching over Lady Sansa. Not that she minded the task. When Lady Catelyn had first asked Brienne to join her daughter – and by default, the Lannisters – her heart had leapt at the thought that her goodbyes with Jaime had not been final, after all. She didn’t truly understand why Lady Sansa wanted to risk her safety by insisting on a trip to the Quiet Isle, but as long as her parents approved it, Brienne had no objections.

Besides, the presence of Sandor Clegane alone was probably enough to discourage any unwise attempts at Lady Sansa’s safety. When Brienne had first been introduced to Clegane, she had had been struck by surprise. Based on the reputation of the famous Hound, she had expected him to be more aggressive and perhaps a bit arrogant, but instead, Clegane was someone who seemed to need no extra posturing to boost his ego. He was not a man of many words and didn’t suffer fools gladly, and Brienne certainly didn’t want to find herself at the receiving end of his ire, but on the whole, Brienne had been rather impressed with him.

Most importantly to Brienne, the trip had also meant more time to spend with Jaime – even if not much. During the journey, Jaime had travelled in a small cart at the back of the group, whereas Brienne had ridden next to Lady Sansa in the front. Pod and the two oafs assigned to look after Jaime had taken care of his needs during the breaks, so even then Brienne hadn’t seen much of him. Luckily Sansa and Brienne had been invited to Lord Tyrion’s table in the evenings, allowing her a few more precious moments in Jaime’s company.

Brienne was well aware that the extension of their time together – as it was - was going to be only temporary and that their paths would soon diverge again, leaving behind only memories to last a lifetime. Something to look back at in longing.

Brienne winced. It had been hard for her to admit the truth for so long denied, but somewhere along the journey from the Stark camp to the Quiet Isle she had finally had to do it.

She had fallen in love with the Kingslayer.

To acknowledge it was a bitter pill to swallow and she cursed her poor judgment when it came to men. Who else but she would fall for a king who didn’t even care for women? And then for the knight of the Kingsguard and possibly the most handsome man in whole Westeros? Both unreachable, impossible dreams, especially for a woman like her.

What is wrong with me? To be so manly and strong outwardly - and yet hide a pathetic heart of a love-struck maiden inside... what a terrible irony, indeed.

Sighing, Brienne concentrated on the narrow path in front of her and pushed her futile musings aside.

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After reaching the stables, she was greeted by the men with whom she was to spar: Sandor, Beren and even Jarwin, whom Sandor had insisted to join them despite Jarwin’s claims that an archer needed no sword practice. ‘When someone tries to stick a sword up your ass, your bow won’t help you’, he had grunted, refusing to hear any further arguments.

Bronn, Myles and Timon were there too, the occasion being the first time the Stark and Lannister men were to train together. Brienne was looking forward to it, always welcoming new opponents
and learning new tricks.

After a warming round of fast changes of opponents, they settled into more serious one-on-one sessions. Brienne’s first challenger was Bronn, the sellsword with an acerbic tongue and a demeanour of a man who took nothing seriously. Well, she was going to show him that with her, his frivolousness would not work.

Bronn’s moves were fast but their variety limited, Brienne soon discovered. He feigned and deflected more than he attacked, which was a good way to preserve energy, but also dragged the fight on for longer. The others had soon finished their own bouts and were watching the two of them.

“Once you’ve finished that one, I’ll take you on next,” Clegane shouted.

“Sure, just let me finish this dance with the lady,” Bronn panted.

“I wasn’t talking to you.” Clegane grinned and a renewed boost of energy, from hearing that he believed in her, invigorated Brienne. In a few short strokes she made her kill and Bronn had to grudgingly drop his sword, admitting his defeat.

Brienne loved it, the exaltation of knocking into the dust one more man who had dared to doubt her only because she was a woman.

Sparring with Clegane was a completely different matter; he attacked heavily and with no intention of being coy. Brienne had a real struggle on her hands but she rose to it, driving her strikes home at every opportunity. The end result was nonetheless inevitable: Clegane’s blade stopped within a hair’s breadths of her neck. It didn’t deter Brienne, though. She just had to learn more and become better, and this kind of practice was exactly what she needed. She dropped her sword and muttered her surrender.

After one more session Brienne had with Jarwin – that man really needed to practice his sword skills – everyone seemed to have had enough. They collected their weapons and started to make their way back to their other duties when Bronn pulled a skin out of his pack.

“Anyone care for a drink for a hard-earned thirst? From Lord Tyrion’s private stash, so I dare say it’s a decent drop,” he asked, waving the wineskin in the air.

Brienne declined, knowing she was soon expected to be with Jaime for the examination of the Elder Brother. She took her things and started walking towards her hut to drop her things there first. However, having just passed the stable yard she realised she had left her small dagger behind, the one that usually hung from her sword belt but which she had removed for the practice.

She turned around and walked through the empty stables to the small seat against the inner wall where she had left it – but it wasn’t there. Frowning, being sure it to be the place, Brienne examined the surroundings. Maybe it had fallen on the floor? She dropped on her hands and knees and peeked under it.

Approaching steps and sounds of someone sitting on the bench on the other side of the wall indicated she wasn’t alone.

“…would fuck her. Would you? She ain’t that ugly. Big as a horse, and probably as strong, but that would only make it more interesting. Have never fucked a woman who could take me in a fight.”

It was Bronn.

“You wouldn’t get near her, I bet, before she would geld you if you tried anything,” a raspy voice
replied. Brienne recognised it belonging to Clegane.

“Maybe so. Maybe not.”

“Besides, she’s a lady, not some tavern slut. She’s not for the likes of you,” Clegane continued. The
men seemed to be alone.

Brienne’s cheeks burned hot. They were speaking about her – of course they were. By now she
should have gotten used to crude speech and innuendo about her person, but still, it stung.

“Ladies like to fuck as much as sluts – probably even more. I’ve had my share of both, so I’d know.”

“Be my guest, but once you’re lying in a pool of your own blood, I won’t hold back from telling you
I told you so.” A sound of liquid sloshing suggested they were sharing the wineskin from hand to
hand. This was confirmed by a deep sigh after one of them took a long drink from it.

“Nah. I think I’ll better not take my chances. Besides, it’s not only her I’d have to worry about. The
Lannister golden boy would kill me if I tried. Would probably drag himself on his bare hands to
murder me.”

“Jaime?”

“Who else? Haven’t you seen how he looks at her; like sun shone out of her ass? He’s been mooning
over her ever since the inn.”

Brienne’s head shot up so quickly she banged it against the underside of the bench. She grimaced,
then froze, hoping the sound hadn’t alerted the men.

“Aye, I’ve seen that. Wondered about it too. The last I saw him, he had eyes for none but one.”

“Aaah, the fair Cersei. Everyone knows that. Yet it seems that at least the Kingslayer is still sticking
to blondes.”

“Hmph.”

Another sound of someone gulping wine. Brienne’s mind raced. They couldn’t…it wasn’t
possible… they must be wrong! Jaime, looking at her?

“You think they fuck? Wonder if he can get it up, in his state. If he can, maybe she rides him, you
know?”

“Shut up about it already. Who fucks who is none of your concern. And as I said, she’s a lady.
Probably a maiden too.”

In other circumstances Brienne would have appreciated Clegane’s attempts to shut down Bronn’s
lewd innuendos, but for now, all she could think of were the implications of what they had said.
Could it be true?

She recalled at times catching Jaime looking at her, especially during this trip. There had been
something new in his eyes, but she had thought it to be just Jaime’s wishful thinking, hoping she was
still looking after him instead of his clumsy ‘helpers’.

The talk on the other side drifted to swords, Bronn starting to explain the advantages of his short
blade as opposed to Clegane’s broadsword. Brienne’s eyes caught her dagger resting against the
wall, and she retrieved it with care, then withdrew quietly. Only after stepping outside the stable, she
started to run, her mind swirling in chaos.

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“Please, my lady, help me to turn him on his stomach,” the Elder Brother said, removing Jaime’s blanket.

They were in the simple room appointed to Jaime, in the cloisters. It was convenient for him to be near the common hall and the room where Elder Brother attended to matters requiring his attention.

Brienne had arrived early, trying hard not to let the emotions toiling inside her show on her face when Jaime greeted her. She hadn’t probably done it very well, Jaime staring at her for a long time as if wanting to say something, but the arrival of the brother had prevented it.

The next long while was spent by Brienne turning and supporting Jaime every which way the Elder Brother wanted him while he was poking and pressing Jaime’s legs, back and neck, asking questions.

Jaime had acquired some more sensation in his feet, which the healer seemed to take as a good sign. He paid much attention especially to Jaime’s back, massaging and feeling it with his long fingers.

“It is possible that the damage may be reverted if it’s only the swelling and contusion around the spine that caused it. You said there was no blood nor broken bones?” He addressed the question to Brienne and she confirmed that to have been the case.

“It will require a long recovery, adequate rest and ensuring that the spine is not jostled or damaged further. I also recommend exercise, so the muscles of the leg and back don’t start to shrivel.”

“Exercise? How could I do that when I can’t move them?” Jaime exclaimed. Hopefulness in his face had been palpable at first but was now replaced by frustration.

“Easily. You just need someone to force your body to do it. May I assume that someone to be you, my lady?” The Elder Brother turned to Brienne. “Will you be his long-term carer?”

“No… only for now,” Brienne stammered. She wasn’t sure how long Sansa wanted to stay at the Quiet Isle, but Lady Catelyn had made her swear to make sure they returned to the inn by the time the full northern host was estimated to be back there. It would be only for some weeks, at most.

“A pity. Well, I can teach you how to do it nonetheless, and then you can show it to the person who comes after you.”

After that the Elder Brother launched into a long explanation and demonstration of how she should twist and press Jaime’s legs, back and upper body, working partly against gravity, partly against Jaime’s own strength as he – hopefully – started to gain more and more control of his movements. He also showed how to massage Jaime’s back and encouraged Brienne to try it.

She did, hesitantly at first, but gaining confidence as the Elder Brother complimented her of her technique. When her hands slid against Jaime’s warm skin, Brienne felt as her fingers were on fire, tingling and sensitive against that soft expanse.

Jaime lay unnaturally still for most of the time, his eyes following Brienne’s every movement when his head was turned towards her. Remembering what she had just overheard made it impossible for Brienne not to notice it – and think about what it could mean. What it was impossible for it to mean.

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Eventually, the Elder Brother was done for the day and left to look after his own flock, promising to come back again the next day. After the door closed behind him, Brienne was left alone with Jaime.

It was awkward. It had always been awkward, but now…

Luckily Jaime spoke first.

“We had news from King’s Landing this morning,” he said.

“Oh?” How? Brienne wondered, but Jaime answered his unspoken question without her needing to put it into words.

“Tyrion sent one of his ravens from the inn when you and I first got there, and now a raven and a rider delivered a reply all the way here. The poor lad looked like he had ridden all through the night.”

“What was the news?” Brienne asked, assuming that Jaime wanted to share them, as why would he have otherwise brought them up in the first place? Her back was turned against Jaime as she was collecting the ointment and lotions the Elder Brother had left behind into a small basket.

“I was made the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard in my absence. It seems that Joffrey broke hundreds of years of tradition by dismissing Ser Barristan – and undoubtedly my sister saw to it that I was appointed as the Lord Commander in his stead.”

Oh.

“Congratulations,” Brienne muttered. So, Jaime would go back to King’s Landing and back to Cersei. Not that she had expected anything else.

“That’s not all. I was also dismissed from that position and the Kingsguard in the very same post, in a separate letter. Joffrey thinks a crippled commander is not suitable to protect him.” Jaime released a long, low sigh. “That must be the influence of my father. He undoubtedly sees this as an opportunity to force me back to Casterly Rock to take my place as his true heir. To marry and make him grandsons to carry on the family line.”

Oh.

“I am…sorry?” Brienne ventured. She knew how important being in the Kingsguard was to Jaime.

“Thank you. Although, to be honest, I am not sure I care.”

“About what?”

“None of it. The Kingsguard, whose dignity is being stripped away by random fancies of kings and queens. My father and his scheming.”

Brienne had finished her task but it seemed Jaime was not ready to be left alone quite yet. She turned and took a few tentative steps towards Jaime’s bed.

“I have had a lot of time to think. That being about the only thing I have had: time.” Jamie sneered, one side of his mouth curving downward, twitching. “About things that used to matter. Things that didn’t. How one thing has led to another, how my path has changed.”

Brienne stood still, the basket forgotten, although she still dangled it in her hands.

Jaime glanced at her and patted the bed beside him, there being no chair in the room. Brienne hesitated for a fraction of a second but then sat down, gingerly, placing the basket on the floor.
“Cersei didn’t write a single line. There was a missive written in Maester Pycelle’s hand, another in Joffrey’s, but nothing from her.”

“Maybe the other notes said all there was to be said,” Brienne suggested. She was not stupid, though. Cersei had just heard that Jaime had suffered a terrible injury and had not sent even a briefest note to wish him a speedy recovery. That’s what Jaime meant.

“Maybe. Yet the oddest thing is that I don’t care about that, either.” Jaime turned to look at her, really look at her, and in the light of things she had heard, Brienne allowed herself to imagine for a moment that it was true. That he was looking at her as if he truly cared for her, in the way of a man for a woman.

“Brienne…”

“Yes?”

Brienne looked down at her hands, marveling how soft her skin still felt from the massaging oil. Even without looking at Jaime, she noticed there was a change in the air – an imperceptible thrum of potential.

“Nothing.” Jaime swallowed.

And it was gone, that moment of something.

“I’d better go. Lady Sansa may need me. I’ll be back tomorrow for another session.” Brienne shifted, ready to get on her feet again, when she felt Jaime’s hand on her arm, touching her with careful gentleness.

“Brienne.”

“Yes?”

“Damn it, wench,” Jaime croaked, then reached for Brienne’s head with his other hand, pulled her down and pressed his lips to hers. She was too slow to stop it, and after the initial reaction of trying to pull away was thwarted by Jaime’s hand heavy on her neck, she didn’t try a second time.

Brienne had never been kissed, not even a dry peck on a closed mouth, the experience so many other girls used to giggle and gossip about when her father had still invited daughters of his bannermen to keep her company. Brienne had never had anything to share in those gatherings, and that, along with many other things she had no common with those girls, saw them eventually leaving and never coming back.

If she had ever imagined what it would feel like, this was something different – different to anything. Jaime’s lips were soft and despite the relentless force of his grip, the press of his mouth was gentle, almost delicate.

As soon as Brienne stopped resisting, Jaime, however, loosened his hold, his fingers only softly caressing the nape of her neck. Brienne could have stepped away easily, but she didn’t. Not for one moment, not for the next. To her surprise, she didn’t even try to analyse it for what it was and how she was doing it; no nervous speculation of whether she was too inexperienced or bad at it. Just the feel and touch of her lips on Jaime’s, and a shock of realisation that it had been he, who had initiated such an intimate encounter.

It was Jaime who pulled away first, whispering against her mouth something that sounded like ‘finally’ – Brienne couldn’t be sure. Dazed, she straightened up and for the good measure, leapt to
her feet and backed away from the bed, to the other side of the room. There she stared at Jaime, feeling lightheaded.

*Did it just happen?* She touched her still-tingling lips in wonder.

“Brienne…” Jaime said softly.


Jaime smiled sheepishly and shrugged his shoulders. “Because I wanted to. Because I thought it was about time. Because I wanted to see what you would do.”

Brienne was starting to get some of her composure back, but then his words hit her and an awful suspicion crept into her mind.

“What would I do? Why, did you have a bet riding on it?”

As she approached Jaime again, he raised his hands defensively in the air.

“May I remind you that I am a defenceless invalid? It wouldn’t be honourable of you to hit an unarmed cripple.”

“I’m not going to hit you,” Brienne snapped. *What if… what if it had been a bet? Instigated by Tyrion, perhaps, with his twisted sense of humour.*

“Brienne,” Jaime got serious again. “Not a bet. What do you take me for? Or no, don’t answer it. But believe me, there was nothing dishonourable behind this. I only… have wanted to do this for a long time.”

“Why? Why me?” Brienne needed to know. To understand.

“Why not you? Who else?” Jaime pushed his blanket aside to make more room on the bed and gestured Brienne to come closer. She didn’t, crossing her arms across her chest and standing her ground.

Jaime sighed and seemed to accept his defeat.

“I would rather not tell you this while you are staring at me like an executioner, but you don’t leave me much choice.” He adopted the expression of a long-suffering victim of some horrible injustice.

“Because you are *you.* You still believe in the goodness in people, despite everything telling you otherwise. You think you’re dull but when you speak, I actually want to hear what have to say. And when you have nothing to say, you stay silent instead of filling the void with mindless chatter. You make me want to be a better man, and sometimes when you look at me, I think I just might be able to become one.”

Jaime spoke slowly and hesitantly, without his usual bravado, staring right at her. Brienne heard him, heard his every word, but had difficulties in getting her head around them. Jaime… saying those things about *her?*

There had to be a natural explanation for all of this, and she shouldn’t be sucked into believing it could be true, that Jaime truly cared. He was hurt and angry from Cersei’s rejection - that was all.

“You just feel that way after hearing the bad news. You’re upset,” she said weakly.

Jaime smiled. “I don’t blame you for thinking so. I *did* expect to feel hurt, maybe even angry, about
Cersei. Yet I felt neither of those things.” He shook his head, slowly, deliberately. “This is something else, has been for a while now. When I thought we were going our separate ways…”

Jaime didn’t finish his sentence but stared at his lap with vacant eyes. Brienne didn’t know what to do or what to say. Her whole young life hadn’t prepared her for a situation like this.

“Would you stay with me?” Jaime finally asked, his tone closer to normal.

“I… I can’t. I have to see if Lady Sansa needs me,” Brienne stuttered.

“I don’t mean only now, but for good. Come with me to Casterly Rock. It would be the only way I could imagine going there.” Jaime stared at her expectantly.

Brienne didn’t know what to say. She had sworn to follow Lady Catelyn and she didn’t want to join the Lannisters. The more she had heard about Lord Tywin and his machinations, the less she wanted to be associated with his house. The irony of Jaime being the notable exception was not lost on her.

Besides, Jaime wouldn’t be there for her, as he would be expected to marry and be the lord of the castle. And she couldn’t be his mistress – that was not how she had been brought up. And the thought of seeing him with someone else; another woman bearing his children… no she couldn’t do that.

Jaime must have seen her answer from her face, as he opened his arms to her in an appeasing gesture.

“Marry me, that’s what I mean!”

Marry?

The notion was even more unbelievable. She, marry the young Lion of Lannister? Lord Tywin wouldn’t hear of it, Brienne thought; his sights must be set much higher for Jaime. People would laugh at them and she would be mocked and ostracised, Brienne could see all that in a flash. Eventually, Jaime would realise he had asked her only because he had been susceptible and at his lowest point and would come to regret his choice.

Brienne started to back out of the room, small steps, having only a nominal notion of the direction of the exit. She hit against the wall first, then after a quick glance located the door and shifted towards it, still staring at Jaime. He was so handsome, still the most beautiful man Brienne had ever seen despite the lines on his face being sharpened by his suffering - how could she turn away from him? And yet she must.

Jaime followed her progress with a furrowed brow. “Brienne, don’t go. Stay here, let’s talk this over. Damn it, wench, I am proposing to you!”

Brienne shook her head, hot tears starting to well behind her eyelids. It was a beautiful, impossible dream but she wasn’t sleeping. This was the real world and the harsh reality, and monstrous women didn’t marry handsome knights and lords.

“Brienne!” Jaime started to shout after her as she groped at the handle of the door to get away.

“Brienne, don’t go!”

Brienne slammed the door shut behind her and ran. She could hear Jaime’s voice still behind her, through the closed door.

She ran faster.
Chapter End Notes

Sansa and Sandor have still quite a few things to sort out, so the next chapter sees us returning to them…
Truth Shall Set You Free

Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter (Brienne): After a sword practice, in which Brienne defeats Bronn but is defeated by Sandor, she overhears the two discussing the obviousness of Jaime’s fascination towards her – a notion Brienne finds unbelievable. Afterwards, she helps the Elder Brother to examine Jaime and learns how she can help in his rehabilitation. Jaime tells Brienne about first being made the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and then being dismissed, but confesses not being truly disturbed by it. After some hesitation, Jaime kisses Brienne, confesses his love and asks her to marry him. Brienne is shocked and thinks it to be impossible – and runs away.

Chapter Notes

“Honesty is the best policy” – or is it?? Sansa may eventually find out!

I understand some readers are keen to know what is happening to our other party; Arya, Gendry, Ned and Catelyn. Sorry about the delay with them, but unfortunately it might take a few more chapters to get there, as there is still much to do at the Quiet Isle…

Thank you Hardlyfatal for betaing, again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

Sansa couldn’t remember a time she had been as nervous as she was now, straightening the blanket serving as her bedspread for the hundredth time, then running to the door to see whether she could see her much-awaited visitor approaching.

She had whispered her invitation to Sandor the previous evening when he had escorted her and Brienne back to their huts despite Brienne’s protestations that she could look after Sansa’s safety on her own quite well, thank you very much. He hadn’t responded, but Sansa was sure he had heard her – yet as the morning went on with no sign of Sandor, her doubts started to grow.

She sat down on her bed, forcing herself to sit still for a moment or she would go crazy, and looked around the room one more time. Not exactly the grand scene of seduction she might have hoped: no featherbed, no champagne or roses, not even smooth jazz playing on the background. Just a small room with a crudely-hewn wooden bed, a stool, a small table with a washbasin, and an assortment of bags and boxes of her personal belongings on the floor.

Yet the simplicity of the setting was the least of her worries. What if she was being too forward? Sandor was still a product of his upbringing and his own time — if he saw how eager she was to go to bed with him, would he think less of her?
And even before they got that far, there was the small thing about telling him the truth about her origins… If *that* didn’t scare him away, surely anything that followed was sure to be of no consequence, Sansa consoled herself.

She had considered telling Sandor the same embellished version of her story she had shared with her family, at first. He could have accepted that, she was sure.

And yet…

What was between her and Sandor was not just a fling or something to pass the time, she had become increasingly aware of since their first tryst at the attic. Sansa had tried to dissect her feelings and what it was in Sandor that drew her to him, but that had been as futile as trying to decide if breathing in or out was more important. It just *was*, that undeniable attraction that concealed currents of high passions and soft gentleness just under its surface. And curiosity; the desire to know all there was to know about this person who had somehow become the focal point of her thoughts.

For a person like that, and for a relationship that promised so much, there was no room for lies.

A sound from outside alerted Sansa, but before she got back to her feet, Sandor was already inside.

“Little bird,” he said simply, watching her from the door.

“Did anyone see you coming?”

“Don’t think so. Your nursemaid has gone to tend Jaime for now, so we should be fine.”

“You meant him when you said ‘someone’ the other day, didn’t you?”

“Aye, I did. And was I right?”

Sansa walked to Sandor and touched his sword belt, wordlessly. She wanted him to remove it, its steel too hard and hostile to stand between them. Sandor understood her meaning and unbuckled it, laying it carefully on the floor – within an arm’s reach from where he sat down on her narrow bed, Sansa noticed.

The atmosphere changed at that, as if the temperature of the room had suddenly risen by a notch. Sansa felt her cheeks reddening despite her best attempts to control it.

"Tell me if I'm wrong about your motives in inviting me here,” Sandor murmured, reaching towards Sansa and pulling her close, the heat of his hand evident through the fabric of her dress as he ran it slowly up her arm "To discuss the safety arrangements, undoubtedly?"

His fingertips reached Sansa’s shoulder and then slipped over her collarbone, touching the bare expanse of her skin. Sansa leaned into his touch.

“No, not that…” she said, slightly breathless, then pulled back. “But there is something else I need to discuss with you first. Something important.”

Sandor swallowed, his throat moving, and then he released her, his touch slowly lingering on Sansa’s arm before he removed his hand.

“Tell me.”

Sansa gathered her thoughts. It would have been so easy to let go, to succumb to the temptation offered by Sandor. Whether he imagined her to be ready to give herself to him fully or not, he was
clearly prepared for some degree of physical intimacy.

Sansa desperately hoped he wouldn’t change his mind after hearing her.

“Well…” She took a deep breath. She had practised what to say a few times, intending to follow vaguely the same approach she had used with her family. To first open his mind to new possibilities, then tell him briefly and succinctly where she came from, and finally share with him more about what it meant and what she knew. It had seemed to work with her parents, so maybe it would work with him too.

“You remember when I promised to reveal to you more about my reasons coming here, and that I would tell you all about it?”

Sandor nodded.

“Before I do, I want to remind you that there is more to this world than what meets the eye. There are stories of wargs, skinchangers and greenseers, of old and new magic, the old gods and the new. Life is full of mysteries.”

“Aye, I know.” Sandor leaned back, studying her. “Is that why we are here? Are there some mysteries on this island?”

“No, not so much here…” Sansa let her words hang in the air for a moment before continuing. She, too, had sat down, perching on the stool in front of Sandor, looking up at him. “But there are strange things people can be. Like, they may have had other lives: having lived in the past or in the future – or both.”

Sandor raised his eyebrow. “One of these brothers is like that? The Elder Brother?”

“No, not him.” Sansa touched him gently by the arm, letting her hand rest on top of it. Her heart had fastened its pace and was drumming hard against her ribcage; it was now or never. “I am one of those people.”

Sandor stiffened but didn’t move away.

“I have lived another life, but now, somehow, I’ve entered into this one,” Sansa continued, desperate to say all she had to say before Sandor would say or do anything harsh. “My accident was not a real accident, but a transition from my old life to this.”

Sandor maintained his composure remarkably well, only the almost imperceptible twitching of the corner of his mouth revealing that he had registered her words.

Sansa let the silence continue for a while before asking, tentatively. “Did you understand what I said?”

“So… who are you, then?” Sandor asked, still stone-faced.

“I am me. I’m still Sansa. I believe that I’m the same Sansa you first met, the difference being that now I remember more than she – than I – did at the time. I believe our existence is not limited only to this body between our birth and death, but our soul exists beyond that, and can move between time and place.” She cocked her head. “I know it probably doesn’t make any sense, but that’s my only explanation to what has happened to me.”

Sandor got up and walked to the door. It had been left slightly ajar to let some light in, and he stared out for a while, silent.
“So you have lived before, is that it?” he finally said.

“No – or at least I’m not sure if I have. I have lived in the future.” Sansa walked to him, staying one step behind Sandor’s broad back. “I come from some 700 years from the future. I don’t know why it happened and why to me; I didn’t call for it or want it. But it happened.”

“How?” Sandor hadn’t turned. Sansa felt a bit foolish talking to his back, but if it was his way to deal with unexpected – nay, impossible – news, she accepted it.

“I was visiting the Red Keep one day – by that time it is open to the public and has become a popular destination to visit – and after seeing the exhibitions, I was left behind by the group I was with. I ended up in a room, which I now know to have been my room, the one I stayed in while I was there. It felt strangely familiar, and then I started feeling dizzy and tired and sat down to rest for a while…”

It was hard for Sansa to go back to that moment and feel again the shock and helplessness she had felt at the time. Somehow it had been easier to tell it to Pod, as he had been through the same experience.

“…and the next thing I knew, I was woken up by my maid in this time, and I probably scared the poor girl half to death. And then you came,” she whispered the last words. At least Sandor had his own personal memories to anchor her story into.

Sandor spun around. “That’s why you were so deranged?” He took hold of Sansa’s shoulders and studied her intently. “I thought you had gone barking mad. That you had finally lost your senses. But you were just…”

“…still thinking I was in my own time. I thought it was some elaborate ruse at my expense. That’s why I was so angry and demanded to be taken to the people who were responsible for it,” Sansa finished his sentence.

Sandor dropped his hands and raised his head, staring at the wall behind Sansa. He frowned, opened his mouth but then closed it again.

“I was horrible to you, I am so sorry.” Sansa had never had a chance to truly apologise him for her outbursts at the time – but at least now she hoped he understood why.

“That certainly explains it…” Sandor started slowly, the looked back at her. “And the accident?”

“Purely my imagination. I had to think of something, and Pycelle kept on asking if I had hit my head and I thought, ‘why not?’”

“All the things you suddenly knew? And your escape, you knew something that helped you and your father to flee the Red Keep?”

“I knew of a passage in the black cells that went to the stables. I told my father about it and left a trail of twine to lead him there when I visited him. As for my own escape, that wasn’t hard at all. I just dressed like a servant and walked out of one of the smallest gates.” She felt a need to add, “Men of this time do underestimate women, you know, thinking that we’re not capable of doing things on our own.”

Sandor stared at her incredulously, as if he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“I am sorry I haven’t told you before. I haven’t told anyone, not even my parents.”

“I knew something was off,” Sandor said slowly. “I just couldn’t place what it was. Nor could I
have, not in a thousand years.”

“I know I was different. Odd, even. I hoped that my story about the accident was enough to cover me – and for the most part I think it did it.” They walked away from the door and sat down again. Sansa held on to Sandor’s arm, but he was too distracted to probably even notice it.

“I knew it was something else. You had become suddenly so much bolder. Cleverer.”

“And yet you said nothing?”

“It was not my place to say anything. You were still Sansa-fucking-Stark, a high-born maiden, Joffrey’s future queen.”

“It is your place now,” Sansa reminded him. He had to realise that this didn’t change anything that was between them – at least not for her.

“Is it?” Sandor’s voice sounded strange. He hadn’t tried to touch Sansa since her revelation and a horrible thought took over her. Had she destroyed everything? Was he going to turn away from her, seeing her as an abomination?

“It is if you want it to be,” she whispered, squeezing his arm tighter.

Another long silence fell between them. Sansa knew Sandor had a lot to think about, so she didn’t push him, allowing him to process things at his own pace. She hoped she would have had even some indication of his thoughts – but as usual, his expression gave nothing away.

“I can’t even guess what the fuck all this means,” Sandor finally sighed and turned to her. “Maybe you have a purpose to be here. Maybe you shouldn’t be distracted from it by someone like me.”

His tone gave Sansa new hope. He sounded so resigned – so he didn’t want to distance himself from her, only thought he should?

“I know this is a lot to take in. I’ve had months to adapt, but you have had only a few moments, so let’s not do anything hasty. Maybe we shouldn’t try to analyse it further... but stop here so you could get your head around it?”

Sansa pressed her body closer to Sandor. He allowed it.

“You say you are the same Sansa I first met. Do you remember anything of it – of us?”

Instead of being stung by the same stupid jealousy she had experienced before, this time Sansa felt comfortable answering his question.

“I don’t remember the exact details, but I remember some things. Emotions, mostly. I remember being afraid of you at first, but then being comforted by your presence. I remember compassion, being sorry. It’s as if I’m seeing it through a blurred glass, or as if reaching for memories that are covered with such a heavy layer of dust that I can’t see their outlines clearly anymore - but I know they are there.”

While she talked, she wiggled closer and closer, and Sandor had to shift to make room for her, thus allowing her to sneak practically into his lap.

“You were strange even then. I didn’t know what to make of you.”

“Make of me what you will, as long as you stay with me.”
“Hmmph.”

After a while, the anxiety Sansa had felt before evaporated – for the time being. Sandor hadn’t run away, so it must count for something. Sansa knew there were many questions yet unanswered and that she would have to tell him more about everything, including her plans to change the future. For that, she needed to share with him what she knew about how things had turned out in her own time. Maybe she would also tell him about what she knew of his fate in that version of events?

But all that could wait.

“What?”

“Yes?”

“Will you lay down with me?” Feeling Sandor’s body tense, Sansa continued, “To rest. Just for a while. I think we both could use some respite.”

She wished things could be simpler between them. She wished they could have been back in her time when many issues obstructing their relationship didn’t exist; their respective positions, history of hostility between their houses, matters of propriety…

Distractions of that time would have also made spending time together so much easier. They could be watching TV or listening to music, they could be playing video games, they could be laughing at the antics of silly memes and cat videos on VideoTube, or they could be going out for a hamburger or a drive or just to hang out with friends – they could just be.

Longing for that simplicity, for just being in each other’s company without the stress of expectations, Sansa pushed Sandor down on the bed without waiting for his response. She figured that if he didn’t want it, he had the strength to refuse. He didn’t.

She removed his boots and pushed a pillow under his head while he observed her, but offered no resistance. When she was satisfied that Sandor was as comfortable as he could be in that narrow cot, Sansa laid down next to him, wrapping her arm across his chest and snuggling her head into the groove of his shoulder.

“Let’s just lie here for a moment. No need for anything else,” she whispered, sliding her hand chastely up and down his arm. He was so solid, so big, so warm, and as time ticked on, his body gradually relaxed.

The last thing Sansa registered before she fell asleep was Sandor’s steady heartbeat against her ear – thump – thump – thump…

“Wake up!”

Sandor shook Sansa by her shoulder, not hard, but persistently. She opened her eyes and for a moment didn’t remember where she was and why Sandor was leaning over her, speaking urgently into her ear.

“Uh?” was her eloquent response.

“Somebody’s coming. Brienne, likely.”

Sandor had already jumped up and was peering through the door he had inched slightly open. Sansa
followed slower, her head still fogged after such a drastic wake up call. She had slept soundly, a deep dreamless sleep.

If Brienne had returned, her first call was probably to see if she needed anything…

“Quickly, crawl under the bed!” she hissed at Sandor. He stared at her, then the narrow bed, then her again as if she had said the stupidest possible thing. Maybe she had; the bed frame was hardly large enough to hide Sandor’s big body even if he did what she asked.

Sansa, too, peeked out of the door, and to her relief saw Brienne walking briskly directly to her own hut and disappearing inside. That didn’t mean that she wouldn’t be coming to her at any moment, though.

“I’ll go and distract her while you sneak away,” she whispered to Sandor while already pulling a shawl over her shoulders. That suggestion was much better received and Sandor nodded.

Luckily the door of Sansa’s hut was at the edge of the clearing and faced away from Brienne’s, allowing Sandor an easy path to take off unnoticed.

Just before Sansa stepped out, she turned to Sandor.

“Come back tonight, after everyone retires. I’ll make sure we’re not disturbed.” The impact of Sansa’s revelations and the matters between them had yet to be sorted out – and Sansa wanted him still. But did he want her?

Once the doubt entered her mind, her confidence wavered and she continued, “If you want to. If what I have told you hasn’t changed the situation.”

Once again she cursed Sandor’s unreadable face. He was not like most people, whose moods Sansa was usually able to read reasonably well. She forged ahead, nonetheless, knowing that she couldn’t bear the thought of a relationship that wasn’t based on full honesty and acceptance. Anything less than that – no, she couldn’t do it.

“No now you know who I am and where I come from, and you know I may do things differently. That I don’t see myself confined to the way things are here and now, as far as it comes to making up my own mind and my own decisions. If you can live with that, come – but if you can’t, please don’t lead either of us on any further on this path.”

Sandor had picked up his sword belt and put it on, seemingly totally focussed on the task – but Sansa knew that he paid attention to what she said. He always did.

“If you don’t come, it will not affect the way things are between us otherwise. You will still be my protector and a trusted man, and I swear I will not think ill of you. So whatever you decide, consider it thoroughly and only act if you are absolutely sure.”

Sansa felt she needed to add the last bit. This was it: the watershed moment for them and their budding relationship.

Sandor didn’t say whether he would come or not, only pushed Sansa gently towards the door.

“Go now, before Brienne comes this way.”

Having no other choice, Sansa stepped out and walked to Brienne’s door, fighting against the instinct of looking back over her shoulder.
When Sansa knocked on the door, it took a moment before Brienne opened. When she did, the first thing Sansa noticed was her face; red and blotchy, as if she had been crying.

“My lady, I’m sorry – do you need something?”

Taken aback by her demeanour, Sansa scrambled to find something to say.

“No, not at all. I only… I trust all went well?” As soon as the words left her mouth, she hoped to have been able to pull them back. Clearly, things were not well.

Brienne blinked, then stepped away to make room for Sansa to enter.

“Yes, everything is fine. How may I assist you, my lady?”

Sansa followed her and reached to touch her arm.

“Brienne, I am sorry about the stupid question. It seems that something has upset you – please tell me, maybe I can help?”

“No, my lady, it is nothing. I… I am just tired after the practice, and…” Brienne’s words trailed off. Then she straightened herself and smiled; a forced smile, but enough to tell Sansa that whatever it was that had distressed her, she was not going to share it. At least not now.

“Indeed, what can I do for you, my lady?”

Judging enough time having already passed to allow Sandor’s departure, Sansa made a hasty withdrawal, muttering only wanting to ask whether the Elder Brother had said anything about when he would have time to see her. He hadn’t, and that concluded her matter with Brienne.

Closing the door behind her Sansa decided that she needed to have a good talk with Brienne as soon as she was ready. If her unhappiness was because of something Ser Jaime had done or said, Sansa would immediately call off the arrangement, no matter how hard it would make for her to see Sandor.

If he wanted to keep on seeing her.

Before going back to her own hut, Sansa, however, had one more errand to do, one she had wanted to do already earlier but had lacked the courage for it. She turned towards the hut where Shae resided.

Shae sat cross-legged in the middle of the room, her brow furrowed in concentration as she leaned over one of her dresses with a needle in her hand.

On the first evening of the journey, she hadn’t been present at Lord Tyrion’s dinner, but after Sansa had queried after her and been told that it was not appropriate for a woman of her stature to sit in the table with noble ladies such as herself and Lady Brienne, she had become almost angry at the stupidity of such rules. She hadn’t expressed it in so many words, of course, but had insisted that no such formalities were needed among such a small group – and from thereon Shae had joined them.

She was vivacious, witty, and – as Sansa suspected – ambitious beyond the limits society forced on her. She had observed Sansa and in subtle ways had started to take cues from her in the way she did
her hair and how she dressed, including altering some of her most revealing dresses to a more modest style.

“Lady Sansa?” Shae said, looking up in surprise.

“Shae, I hope I’m not disturbing.”

“No, my lady, not at all!” Shae sprang up fast and gracefully, putting her handiwork on the table.

Sansa fingered the fabric, admiring its colours and cut, knowing that she was only delaying the moment she had to ask the uncomfortable question she was here for. *Oh well, no point of delaying* – she just had to do it.

“Shae, I have a big favour to ask of you. If you can do it, I’ll be in your debt,” Sansa started slowly.

Shae looked at her curiously, her dark eyes glittering. “From *me*, my lady? If I can be of service, just tell me and I’ll do my best.”

“Please don’t ask me why or anything about my reasons, and please, be discreet about this.” Sansa swallowed, knowing how it would look – well, how it was. If Sandor came.

Shae cocked her head waiting for Sansa to finish her request.

“The thing is; would you happen to have, or know where I could get, some moon tea?” Sansa squared her shoulders and stared challengingly at Shae. She didn’t want to give the impression that she thought there was something shameful or disgraceful behind her query.

Shae’s eyes widened, but to her credit, she didn’t comment on the strangeness of Sansa’s question.

“As it happens, I *do* have it. For my own use, but I should have enough to give you some,” she announced matter-of-factly, as they had been discussing a piece of bread or an item of clothing.

“If you indeed could, and tell me how it is best to be used, I would be very grateful to you. I am happy to pay for you for it, naturally, more than it’s worth, as I realise it may not be easy to come by here,” Sansa continued, reaching for a hidden pocket in her skirt where she kept the coin Ned had given her before they had parted.

“Thank you, my lady. But it may not be so hard as you think, and I suspect the brothers here might have it because it has other uses too…” she didn’t finish the sentence, either being tactful or because she was focussed on rummaging in one of her bags, pulling various boxes and pouches from it.

Shae soon found what she needed, and after lecturing Sansa about the correct dosage and how to prepare and drink it, she separated a few handfuls of the dried leaves into a handkerchief and handed it to Sansa. During the whole time, she behaved cordially and politely, not once smirking or teasing Sansa, for which she had prepared herself – but was thankful she didn’t have to face.

“I meant what I said; I am in your debt and if there is anything I can do to repay the favour, please don’t hesitate to ask,” Sansa assured her once again as she bundled the parcel against her chest.

“Maybe there *is* something you could do for me, if that would be agreeable to you,” Shae said thoughtfully.

“Anything.”

“Can you show me how to be a lady? Not a *real* lady, of course, but could you give me some advice
about how I should dress and behave, if I wanted to move in better circles.”

Relieved that there seemed to be a currency she could use to pay for the service Shae was doing, Sansa immediately agreed. After discussing the best time and place to start their lessons, Sansa thanked her once more and walked back to her hut.

She held her head high and had no regrets – she had done the right thing by telling Sandor. She had prepared for the consequences of their relationship possibly moving to the next stage. She was ready. *If* Sandor came.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to come and say hi in Tumblr if you feel so, at ladytp! The next chapter sees Tyrion again, wondering what is happening to his brother…
Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter:

Sansa tells the truth about her time-traveling to Sandor, who finally seems to understand her odd behaviour since her ‘fall’. Overwhelmed by Sandor’s lack of reaction, Sansa asks him to just stay with her for a while - no pressure, no expectations – so they lay chastely together and Sansa falls asleep. Alerted by Brienne’s return, Sansa ushers Sandor out but asks him to come back later that evening – but only if he’s sure, despite her revelations. Sansa sees Brienne is distressed, but Brienne doesn’t tell her why. Sansa asks Shae for moon tea, which she gives in return of a promise for lessons on how to be a lady.

Chapter Notes

Just a short chapter this time – but enough to cause some confusion among our characters…
Shout-out to Hardlyfatal for stellar betaing, many thanks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tyrion

‘Will you be strong enough, little brother?’

Tyrion stared at the empty sheet of parchment in front of him, a pen poised in his hand – but his mind was blank and the sheet stayed empty.

Jaime’s words taunted him, no matter how much he tried to ignore them.

It had been not been easy, reconciliation between the brothers. It had taken many conversations, some escalating to heated arguments, some ending in cold silence – but in the end they had cleared the air. Although Tyrion understood at an intellectual level how hard it would have been for Jaime to refuse their father’s orders in regards to Tysha, it had taken him longer to accept it, forgive him, and admit his own share of the blame. He had been naïve thinking his spontaneous marriage had had a chance of a snowball in seven hells – but gods, he had been just a stupid child!

Eventually, Jaime’s heartfelt apology had sealed the festering wound and in an odd way, after all had been said and done, Tyrion felt their relationship had become even stronger.
Then Jaime had asked the question tormenting Tyrion now. Admitting that he had been too weak to stand against Lord Tywin, Jaime had asked if Tyrion would be able to do it himself, if faced with that prospect.

‘Will you be strong enough, little brother?’

Sighing, Tyrion pushed the sheet away, stood up and walked to the window. The open vista, from his guest room in the main building across the meadows and bushland all the way to the sea, soothed his soul.

He had been trying to formulate a letter in response to the missives they had received from King’s Landing bearing the news of Jaime’s elevation to Lord Commander of the Kingsguard – and his unceremonious dismissal. There had been no mention of Tyrion and although he told himself it was because the letters were addressed to Jaime, and because his family might not have known that they were travelling together, part of him knew that it didn’t matter. If Cersei or Joffrey – or for that matter, Lord Tywin – had wanted to pass a message to him, that letter would have been a chance, at least.

‘Your family is not your friend, you know. They don’t want you to succeed, and sooner or later they will turn against you.’

Damn it!

Lady Sansa had not said those exact same words on their way to the Quiet Isle, but her message had been more or less the same. They had had many discussions, riding side by side when the road allowed, or before evening meals at his table, sipping the wine Tyrion poured so generously. He found the girl – nay, the young woman – more and more intriguing as he got to know her better.

Lady Sansa was sharp and surprisingly knowledgeable about matters of the state. She refused to tell him her sources, but Tyrion could only surmise that she had spent more time in Ned Stark’s solar during his time as the Hand of the King than anyone might have guessed.

To Tyrion’s banter about her having become a rebel and a Targaryen supporter, Sansa had only smiled coyly and mentioned the rumours drifting across the Narrow Sea about the Targaryen girl and rebirth of the dragons. Tyrion knew about the last Targaryens who had escaped after the sacking of King’s Landing, but he had never heard anything about dragons. Yet if there was even a smidgen truth in what Sansa said…

Dragons.

Just the thought made Tyrion shiver – not from fear but from excitement. He couldn’t remember the time when he wouldn’t have been fascinated by those fierce beasts, and he had read every book he could get his hands on about them. If they were truly stirring on the other side of the sea and decided to fly to Westeros as they had once done at the command of Aegon the Conqueror… what chance would the Baratheons or the Lannisters have against them?

Tyrion was interrupted from his musing by Shae’s arrival.

“My lord, why so moody?” the girl cajoled, wrapping her arms around Tyrion’s neck and shoulders and leaning to press a quick kiss on his cheek.

“Oh, no reason. Just contemplating life and its mysteries,” Tyrion replied. He truly liked Shae, although he didn’t deceive himself believing that the feeling was truly reciprocated. She seemed to like him well enough – and Tyrion was satisfied with that state of affairs.
They stared out of the window, observing the comings and goings of the busy community. A few brothers were pushing a wheelbarrow on their way to the fields, a man was carrying a bag of grain to the kitchens, and a boy was chasing after a runaway flock of geese waddling through the yard.

“I need to write a letter and I have to see my brother about it,” Tyrion said finally, stirring. Even if he had run out of ideas, maybe Jaime had something to say. The news was all about him, anyway.

“Be sure to knock on his door before entering,” Shae said, smiling mischievously. As Tyrion turned to look at her, she tossed her hair back and pretended to be examining her fingernails as if she hadn’t just dropped such an odd statement with no reason whatsoever. Why should Tyrion have to be sure to knock on Jaime’s door?

Tyrion was not fooled. Shae clearly had something to say, but was determined that he had to beg for it.

“I always knock on my brother’s door – but why should I be especially sure to do it this time?” Tyrion was ready to play the game.

“Oh, you know, he might be occupied,” Shae said, grinning.

“With the Elder Brother? That is true – although I hear he usually sees him in the mornings.” Tyrion walked to the side table. “Some wine, my dear?”

After Shae nodded, he poured two goblets and carried them to the window, handing one to Shae.

“You make me curious. Tell me more, and I make it worth your while.”

“I really shouldn’t… I promised to be discreet about it.” Shae squirmed, her pretense of being reluctant to break confidence not fooling Tyrion for a second.

“Discretion is my middle name. Whatever you have to tell, I swear to keep it to myself.”

“Well, since it is you, and it is about your brother…” Shae leaned over, obviously keen to share a juicy piece of gossip. “I think Lady Sansa and Ser Jaime are lovers!”

Tyrion raised his eyebrow. Sansa… and Jaime?

“Why would you think so? They have hardly spent any time together – and our houses are not exactly friendly with each other.” Tyrion sipped his wine, curious to hear what could have made Shae contemplate something so far-fetched.

“Oh, that’s half the excitement – forbidden love,” Shae gushed. “And they have spent more time together than you’d think. During our journey here they stayed behind after dinner almost every evening after you and I retired for the night.”

“How would you know that?”

“Bronn told me.”

“That’s not yet proof of anything untoward. Besides, I can’t believe Lady Brienne would leave Lady Sansa alone, even with a man so unlikely to be a maiden’s threat as my brother is in his current condition.”

Shae waved her hand dismissively. “They might have kept up the appearances of propriety, but Brienne does what Lady Sansa asks her to do. Yet that’s not all. On our first evening here I saw
Lady Sansa coming from Ser Jaime’s room – alone! And it all makes sense; he is one of the most eligible men in the whole Seven Kingdoms. Any girl would try to snare him, and Lady Sansa is not stupid.”

Tyrion digested the news. To him it didn’t make any sense. Sansa didn’t strike him as a maiden hell-bent on securing a good catch. Besides, Ned was likely to rather marry his little girl to any other man in the realm than to a Lannister, even to the Hound or to the Mountain That Rides.

“It’s an interesting theory, but I can’t say your proof is very substantial. Besides, my brother’s condition may not allow him to marry, at least with hope for an heir, if you know my meaning.”

“I know – and that’s what I would be worried about too. But Lady Sansa knows it as well, and I think she is planning to try him out first –”

The rest of Shae’s sentence was cut off by Tyrion’s laugh. “You mean she is planning to seduce my poor invalid brother to see whether he would be a suitable husband-material?”

“Yes, exactly!” Shae declared, pursing her lips and narrowing her eyes in the face of Tyrion’s refusal to take her seriously.

“Have you seen them together? Have you sneaked around Jaime’s room and caught them in the act?” Tyrion chuckled. The notion of the two of them filled him with mirth.

“Not seen – but she asked me for moon tea. Why do you think that would be?” Shae proclaimed triumphantly.

Tyrion stopped laughing. Now, that was a suggestion that something odd was going on. For a young woman there could be only one purpose for the herb.

He sat down and frowned.

“Moon tea? Truly?”

“Yes, truly. Previously I might have thought she needed that because of that hulk of a man, Clegane, as he has been trailing after her like the hound he is. Yet I have never seen them together and she doesn’t seem to notice him much anyway. But now…”

Tyrion didn’t pay attention to Shae’s renewed speculations but was caught in a few of his own. Yes, Jaime was now free to marry, and he was a good catch. Maybe Sansa was trying to convince Jaime to her cause – whatever it was – by using a different approach? As unbelievable as the notion of a noble maiden contemplating bedding a man before marriage was, Lady Sansa had shown herself to be unusual in many other aspects – so why not in this, too? After all, the main purpose of a marriage was to procreate, and wife’s position was strengthened through her children. Or maybe it was Jaime who was pressuring her? Though that was hard to believe, too, knowing of Jaime’s history with women as Tyrion did.

Tyrion couldn’t believe that Sansa would be ready to return to King’s Landing, but Casterly Rock might be a different proposition altogether. Or maybe she intended to snare Jaime into the North, right under Lord Tywin’s nose? Men were known to do sillier things for women when they thought they were in love.

None of it made any sense, but stranger things were known to have happened. Well, there was only one way to find out: to ask Jaime.

“Hmph,” Tyrion huffed, interrupting Shae’s monologue about what a beautiful couple Sansa and
Jaime would make and how perfect their children would look. “I thank you for this interesting speculation, my dear. I’ll make sure I’ll add some extra coin to your monthly stipend – or would you rather have some beautiful jewellery once we get to King’s Landing?”

“Coin will be fine, my Lion of Lannister,” Shae said smiling. “I’ll think of it as a special gift from you.”

Tyrion drained the rest of his wine in one gulp. “I still need to go and see Jaime about the letter. But don’t worry, I’ll be extremely discreet about this matter.”

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After knocking on Jaime’s door, Tyrion waited an extra moment before entering. He didn’t truly expect to find Jaime and Lady Sansa in a passionate embrace, but better to be safe than sorry.

Jaime was sitting on his bed staring at a basket filled with small jars on his lap with a thoughtful expression.

“Brother,” Tyrion waved the empty sheet of parchment in his hand as a way of greeting. “Any words you would like to send to King’s Landing? My head is empty.”

“All words I might have in mind would not be suitable to put down in writing,” Jaime muttered, grimacing as he leaned back against the bed rest.

“I wouldn’t blame you.” Tyrion sat down on the chair he had requested to be brought to the room. He glanced around and seeing no discriminating evidence of a feminine presence, decided to tackle the matter head on. If Jaime was contemplating doing something as stupid as defiling Lord Stark’s daughter, somebody needed to talk some sense into him.

“I hear you have received a certain lady visitor here recently. On important personal matters, perhaps?” he started, tilting his head.

The impact of his words on Jaime was instantaneous. His face brightened and his grimace turned into a smile.

“The word spreads quickly, it seems. And yes, if you must know, I have. How did you know?”

“Shae told me. And?”

“I asked her to marry me.”

So, it is true. Tyrion was surprised despite having been forewarned.

“Isn’t that a bit fast? And what about…?” He gestured at Jaime’s midsection with his hand, raising his eyebrow.

“Oh, that?” Jaime, too, lowered his gaze to his groin and grinned. “If waking up at full attention in the mornings is any indication, everything seems to be in good working order.”

“Have you tried?”

“My hand is such a poor substitute. I’d rather wait for the real thing.” From the determined look on Jaime’s face, Tyrion had no choice but to believe him. The situation was more serious than he had imagined.

“Whatever you do, don’t even dream of dishonouring a noble maiden or you might find your
mornings considerable gloomier in the future. Her father would geld you for sure.”

Jaime rolled his eyes. “What do you take me for? I know she’s a maid, and an honourable one. Whatever else you believe of me, I’m not a molester of maidens.”

“Fine, fine. But how do you think it will work out? It is not as if an alliance between our houses would be an easy thing.”

“It will work out. It has to.”

“What about Cersei?”

A dark shadow passed Jaime’s face and he balled his hands into fists. “My sister can continue to play Queen Mother quite well on her own. She doesn’t need me – and I won’t need her.” Then his stance relaxed and he shrugged his shoulders.

“Luckily Casterly Rock is far enough from King’s Landing, so I hardly need to bother with her.”

“Are you ready to put that into a letter?”

“I better wait until the lady says yes, first. She didn’t take my proposal too well so I am not quite sure where I stand.” Jaime crossed his arms over his chest. “And until then, I will not discuss this matter any further. And neither will you. I forbid you to say anything to the lady in question – or to anyone, for that matter. Can I trust that you keep this to yourself? And that Shae will do the same?”

Tyrion raised his hands. “By my honour, I promise.”

Jaime was clearly not in a mood to jape about the matter, which was a shame as Tyrion could already think of several quips about the challenges of courting a maiden from a sick bed. However, he might have to drop the matter for now. If and when Sansa gave her answer to Jaime, he could approach the matter again. If she rejected the proposal, there would be no need for Tyrion to do anything, but if she said yes, he and Jaime would have to have a serious discussion about the likelypercussions.

The whole thing still didn’t make any sense, but if Shae – and Bronn – had seen them together, and Jaime himself now confirmed something was going on, Tyrion had no choice but to believe it.

He stayed with Jaime for a while, getting an update on Jaime’s condition and the Elder Brother’s instructions, including the strenuous exercises he had prescribed. The letter was pushed to be dealt with later, one of the many advantages of being far away from their father’s demanding presence.

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As Tyrion retired into his lonely bed, his last thought was to wonder how Ned and Catelyn Stark would react if Sansa said yes.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter picks up where Sansa and Sandor left things the last time. Will Sandor come back or did Sansa’s story spook him too much?
Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter:
Tyrion and Jaime have reconciled. Jaime’s taunt of whether Tyrion could have stood against their father weighing heavily in Tyrion’s mind. When Shae visits Tyrion, she tells him about her conviction that Jaime and Sansa are lovers. Tyrion is sceptical and questions Jaime about the matter. Getting confirmation that Jaime has proposed, and refuses to discuss the matter further until he finds out how he stands with the lady in question, convinces Tyrion that Jaime is indeed in love with Sansa, and that Sansa has some designs on him... as odd as the whole thing sounds.

Chapter Notes

I would like to draw your attention to the changed ratings and tags – as suggested in the original tags (“Rating May Change”, “Tags May Change”). Nothing that grown-up adults wouldn’t have seen million times already in a fanfic, and actually quite mild, but changing them just in case if anyone is upset about such things not being tagged... Thank you again Hardlyfatal for betaing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

Once again, Sansa’s patience was being tested; her anticipation when waiting for Sandor was greater than before, the stakes in the game having increased.

Will he come?

For a moment, she regretted of making the situation harder on herself. Had she not told him to think of it carefully? Had she not asked him to come back only if he was absolutely sure? If Sandor still harboured some doubts and thus refrained from coming to her, she might have needed that chance to convince him.

Yet, it was too late for such misgivings now. What was said, was said. Besides, if Sandor returned, it would mean that he was sure and not deterred by her story, and they could move on. If he didn’t... well, then it was not meant to be.

Sansa walked to the table and lifted the bundle Shae had given her, sniffing it cautiously. She had read about moon tea, of course, it being a well-known early form of contraception before more effective hormonal treatments had been developed. She knew how it worked, too, and Shae’s
instructions had been rational and to the point.

Would she need it?

She wondered what Sandor would say if he knew how eager Sansa was to take their liaison to the next level. For her it was natural, just an extension and another aspect of their developing relationship, but for Sandor, it could be different. Not only might the societal norms of the time influence his thinking, but also his background and experiences.

From the embraces they had shared so far, Sansa had formed an impression that he was not very experienced with women – at least not in a way men of her own time were expected to be. Initially, there had been no joy in his kisses, but a hesitant kind of greediness interspersed with a tension of keeping himself in check – as if there was only one way to enjoy physical contact, that being to ravish and take. She could imagine Sandor never having been in a truly loving relationship and hence being so new to what was developing between them.

Sansa rubbed the coarse leaves between her thumb and forefinger and recited a silent prayer in her mind to any god who might hear her. It was very vague, as far as prayers went; more like wishful thinking that she would be able to guide Sandor in that new world of intimacy and make him understand how much joy and pleasure could be in it.

After setting the bundle down, Sansa walked back and forth in the small room like a caged wolf, sitting down for a moment to leaf through the book she had borrowed from the brothers’ collections, a summary of teachings of the community. She had yet to meet with the Elder Brother privately, but he had agreed to see her the next day, an occasion Sansa was very much looking forward to.

A tap on the door alerted her and her head shot up.

"Who is it?" she queried in a low voice. It had to be Sandor, but...

"It's me."

Sansa opened the latch and Sandor stood there, raising his eyebrows. "Who did you expect - the Imp?"

"Shush, of course not. I couldn't ask you by name – it could have been Brienne or Shae. Did you see any signs of them, or anyone else?" Sansa knew she was babbling; being nervous made her do that. She took a deep breath and tried to calm down.

There was a shadow of a smirk on Sandor's face for a second before he walked in. "Would I have come to your door if I was seen?"

He had already moved to the middle of the room when Sansa turned around to face him. He was dressed in a simple tunic and breeches, with his ever-present sword and dagger on his belt.

"So, you came," Sansa said, stupidly.

*Of course he did, he is standing right there.*

"I did."

"Does it mean that you accept me as I am, then?" Her tone was sharper than she had intended, but if Sandor had any misgivings or more questions, Sansa wanted them out and addressed sooner rather than later.
Slowly, Sandor’s gaze took her in, travelling from the top of her head to her toes, making Sansa shiver. He took a step closer, but something made Sansa step back. She wanted to hear him say it. Sandor took another step, and again Sansa backed away, soon finding her back against the wall and Sandor looming over her, so close that their bodies were touching. Sansa looked up and despite their faces being so close, she saw his clearly, and the solemnity in it.

“I’ll accept you any way you are,” Sandor murmured, his voice hoarse. “And I’ll take anything you’ll give me, in any way I can.”

Sansa might have felt overwhelmed by his intimidating stance, cornered as she was, but instead... suddenly all her worries and muddled thoughts disappeared and she smiled. She wanted him, he wanted her – what could be simpler than that? The pressure and stress of uncertainty fell away and a rare joy rippled through her whole body.

She rose on the tips of her toes and kissed him on the mouth. "Then take me." Another kiss and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "But only if you let me take you."

Sandor kissed her back, and this time their kisses held none of the hesitance of their first encounters, nor the greediness and tension of the later ones. These kisses were for knowing that they had all the time in the world; that there were only two of them in this room and they wouldn't be interrupted for the night; that it was warm and the light was low and there was a bed...

Sansa wrapped her arms around Sandor’s shoulders and felt his hands envelop her waist. He was so strong and his body so solid and big - she had never been with a man like him, and vague memories of her previous boyfriends paled in comparison to him.

They shuffled away from the wall still wrapped in an embrace, and for the longest time that was enough. No words were needed - just the touch and feel of one another. Eventually, Sansa pulled away to catch her breath and was arrested by the sight of Sandor looking at her. She had learned to read his stony countenance somewhat over time, discerning his mood from almost imperceptible signs – but this was an expression she had never seen before.

His eyes glinted at a firelight and there it was: hunger.

It mirrored her own emotions and they resumed their kissing with ferocity and hungry mouths, fingers eagerly tangled in each other’s hair in a desperate need to feel more, to be closer. On another occasion she came up for air, Sansa ran her fingers across Sandor’s back, relishing the feel of firm muscle and bone. She had often wondered how Sandor would look without clothes on and finally, here was her chance. She lifted the hem of his tunic experimentally and was met with a sigh when she touched the bare skin of his stomach.

"May I?"

Sandor nodded wordlessly and after Sansa lifted the fabric higher, he took her meaning and pulled his tunic away in one seamless motion, throwing it on the floor.

_Gods!_

Sansa had been right: Sandor _was_ magnificent. His chest was broad and muscular and covered in dark hair, his freshly-scrubbed skin still faintly glowing red in the dim light. She had noticed that he had taken a bath when he had first walked in with the tips of his hair still wet. It must have meant that she was not the only one with expectations of how the night might turn out. Sansa stifled her smile, the thought making her stomach flutter.
She ran her fingers over the faint lines of old scars crisscrossing Sandor’s upper body, following the patterns they formed. They were all healed, but one or two showed that there had been nobody to stitch them closed, and her heart went out thinking of the pain they must have caused. She leaned closer and pressed a kiss on one particularly large and ragged scar and was rewarded for her actions by Sandor’s shudder and a sharp intake of breath.

"We don't have to..." Sandor whispered, running his hands on her hair, gently.

"No, we don't. We can just..." Sansa agreed but didn’t finish her sentence, being arrested by the view that greeted her when she lowered her glance: his erection clearly showing under the fabric of his breeches.

The sight was oddly animalistic and powerful, a symbol of blatant masculinity and crude sexuality – especially as Sandor had followed her gaze and noticed that she had seen it, but did nothing about it. No awkward shuffling, no turning away, no trying to raise her head to prevent her from seeing a spectacle that might offend her innocence. He just stood there, waiting.

The sight of Sandor’s arousal sent a surge of desire though Sansa and her own body reacted, almost violently. A dull ache that had begun to build between her legs already from their first touch intensified, and now she felt her wetness spreading through her smallclothes.

She had to have him.

Sansa couldn't have said which one of them took the initiative or whether it was some irresistible force that saw them moving towards the bed, all scrambling hands, kisses and touches, but when her knees met the edge of the bed she gave in and fell back, pulling Sandor with her.

"We can just..." she repeated and shuffled against the wall to make room for Sandor. It turned out to be unnecessary, as he pulled her in the middle of the bed and crouched above her, like a hunter honing in on his prey, ready to deliver a killing bite.

Sandor stopped, observing her as he pulled tentatively at the fabric of her dress. Sansa nodded, then lifted her body and shimmied as Sandor slid his hands down to the hem and dragged her dress and shift up her body, finally divesting her from the garment. The cooler air hit her bare skin, but it was not cold that made her nipples stand up.

Sandor stared at them as if he had never seen anything like it before hesitantly lifting his hand to her breast. Sansa closed her eyes and felt his rough fingertips on her skin, then his palm cupping her whole breast. It made her tremble - and she wanted more. Sansa pushed her chest further into his hand. A sharp twinge of lust pierced her belly and she rocked her hips against his.

“Little bird…” Sandor murmured.

“Sansa. Call me by my name,” Sansa panted. Somehow it seemed important.

“Sansa”, Sandor repeated, pressing his face between her breasts.

“Sandor,” she sighed back, the intimacy of their names making the outside world fade away and leaving only two of them at this moment, in this place. Then she pulled him down, and soon his breeches and her smallclothes joined the clothes already on the floor.

Sandor didn’t hesitate to cover her body with his and the feel of his naked skin against her own was the most exhilarating thing Sansa had ever known. She sighed and allowed her body to mould against him, the hard planes of his form meeting her soft curves and matching them as if they were meant to complement each other in this manner.
Soon Sandor’s hands were everywhere; discovering, grasping, squeezing her thighs and the swell of her buttocks. He was greedy, he was impatient. More than once Sansa flinched when the force of his grip pressed too heavily on a sensitive spot. Yet she understood that to be a sign of his eagerness rather than any particular callousness on his part, and she didn’t ask him to stop.

How could she have, when her own hands travelled urgently along Sandor’s hard contours and firm muscles, dragging her nails on his skin without finesse or gentleness? This is what I wanted, flashed in her heated mind as she scrunched her eyes shut and drew in lungfuls of his scent. Their bodies were so flush against each other that Sansa felt Sandor’s cock resting stiffly against her belly, teasing and tantalising. She pressed against it, on purpose.

“Gods, woman,” Sandor sighed in strained undertones. His shoulders were tense as he pushed himself higher and took the most of his weight on left arm, his other reaching down between them. When he pushed his fingers between Sansa’s legs, the jolt made her shudder – not from pain but from pleasure.

“I will hurt you, I know I will,” Sandor grumbled. Sansa opened her eyes and saw Sandor’s tightly shut, his face strained. His fingers teased her further and then he fumbled with himself and the next thing Sansa knew was his stiff member being pushed against her sex.

She had been prepared for their first encounter to be short in light of her deductions about Sandor’s love life. She didn’t mind – she wasn’t in this for instant gratification. Besides, she was enjoying every moment of it, with all the sensations travelling through her body and plucking her chords, playing her like a harp.

And when Sandor entered her, Sansa finally had an answer to her speculations about whether her body was a virgin even if her mind wasn’t: it was. It hurt. Stabbing pain and stretching, quite unlike what she remembered from her first time in her other life, took her by surprise and she gasped.

Then again, Sandor was different. Bigger. Yet when a stifled wail escaped her lips he stopped, allowing Sansa to adjust to the intrusion. He was taut as a bowstring and sucked in a quick breath, but he stayed completely motionless until Sansa felt ready and tentatively moved her hips against him. Only then he resumed his strokes slowly, carefully, deliberately.

Sansa loved him even more for it.

Soon the pain went away, faded into a shadow, and was replaced with the satisfaction of all her senses being filled with him; his girth, his smell, his ragged breathing, the sight of his pinched face. Sansa’s entire body was humming in tune with his, her blood liquid fire burning through her veins.

By the time Sandor shuddered, let out a deep animalistic growl and spilt himself inside her, Sansa hadn’t yet reached her own peak, but she didn’t mind – terribly. Sex for her had never been just about physical release, but about something much, much more. And that she had experienced, abundantly. When Sandor collapsed on top of her, crushing the air out of her lungs, she felt more alive than she had felt for a long time, the whole world having shifted and becoming different. She looked at Sandor and he looked at her, and they had just made love and nothing was ever going to be the same.

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Afterwards, they lay on the bed sated and silent. Sandor had raised his arm across his eyes, his chest still heaving and his upper body slick with sweat. Sansa was trying to catch her own breath and accommodate all the jumbled sensations still flowing inside her while resting her head against Sandor’s shoulder and twirling her fingers in the hair of his chest. It was coarse and wiry and
endlessly fascinating to her.

“Did I hurt you?” Sandor broke the silence, his voice hoarse.

“A little,” Sansa replied. All of a sudden, she felt a bit shy. A ridiculous notion considering what had just happened, she knew, but she couldn’t help it.

“But I did?” Sandor lifted her chin with his free hand. “I’m sorry.”

Sansa smiled, touched by his words.

“I’m not.” She lay her head down and resumed her motions. She wanted to ask… “Do you think less of me now?” She blurted the question before she had time to consider whether it was wise to ask such a thing. It was unlikely Sandor would admit something like that to her, in any case.

Yet his denial, when it came, was enough to assure her.

“Never!” Sandor’s hand clasped her shoulder so hard it hurt.

“You need to understand that things are different where I come from. Societal values are not the same as here.” In spite of everything, Sansa felt a need to justify herself to him. Although the values of that time didn’t truly affect her, it was his time, his values.

“Different how?”

“Men and women are more equal. People are free to choose with whom they want to be, and marriages are not decided by their parents but people themselves.”

Sandor raised his eyebrow. “Marriages?”

Sansa blushed. Did he think she wanted to marry him? The notion, as ridiculous as it was when it first entered her head, sobered her. What would it be like to be married to Sandor? Could they have a true chance of it?

Those were questions for another time and she pushed them out of her mind for now.

“Or just being with each other. Marriages are not so important anymore and people can choose just to live with each other if they want. If they have children, they are not called bastards or looked down upon.”

“It sounds far-fetched. How do houses form alliances, then?”

“There are no big houses as such anymore – or if there are, they don’t play such a big role. The whole world is different; there is no king in Westeros but the country is ruled by a group of individuals chosen by all its citizens. It’s called democracy.”

Sandor frowned. “No king? Who then decides what is done?”

“That group, chosen by the people. Imagine the Small Council, but instead of the king appointing its members, they are chosen from volunteers by the votes of every man and woman in Westeros. Those with the highest number of votes get elected. The council isn’t small either, but with many more members; two hundred, to be precise.”

“Hmmm.” Sandor tucked his hand back under his head and stared at the ceiling. Sansa bit down a smile. She had just lost her maidenhood to the Hound, and here they were, discussing politics of the future Westeros!
“Are there still wars, and do men still kill each other?”

“Well, yes - there are still some wars and unrest. Not so much in Westeros, but in other countries like Essos and further in the east.”

“Then nothing has changed.”

Sansa had no argument against that so she dropped the subject. There were other things she wanted to ask, now that the moment of intimacy made it easier.

“Sandor, may I ask you… Why did you follow me that day, from the Red Keep to the inn where my father was?”

She had wondered it often. Initially, she had thought he had simply wanted to apprehend her and hoped to find Ned as well. Yet he had come alone, with no backup, and told nobody about his suspicions.

Sandor didn’t reply for a moment and Sansa prompted him again. “Did you suspect I would lead you to my father? Did you mean to capture us both? If so, why did you come alone?”

“Why didn’t your father kill me when he had a chance?”

So, he was trying to deflect her question with one of his own. Sans was not so easily distracted, though.

“I’ll answer your question once you answer mine. Why?”

Sandor shifted. The bed was much too small for the two of them and although Sansa was already practically lying on top of him, they were cramped.

“I wanted to see what you were up to. I suspected you had something to do with your father’s escape; your visit was just too much of a coincidence.”

“What were you planning to do, or what would you have done, if Father hadn’t knocked you unconscious? Would you have taken us both back to the king?”

Sandor ran his hand across his face and grimaced. “Fuck if I know. I honestly hadn’t thought that far. I didn’t like the notion of him being executed just because he spoke what everyone knew to be true.”

He glanced at Sansa with a wry smile on his face. “He wasn’t very smart about it, though.”

“So you might have taken us back, is that what you mean?”

“Stop putting words into my mouth. No, I don’t think I would have. You deserved to get away and you needed someone to help you. I guess I just needed to know.”

Sansa’s heart swelled. She had been right all the way from the beginning, putting her trust in him! She kissed Sandor on the mouth, softly.

“What about my answer?” Sandor said once they disentangled from their embrace.

“Why he didn’t kill you? He wanted to, but I convinced him otherwise. I said we couldn’t leave your body behind as that would have raised suspicions and put people on our tail earlier.”

“What about after?”

“I told my father I thought you could perhaps be persuaded to join our side. That you deserved a
chance, at least.”

“Why?”

“Why did you think I deserved to get away?”

They stared at each other for a moment until the humorous side of the situation caught up with both of them, simultaneously. Sansa laughed out loud, and Sandor smiled. It changed his face, smoothing his customary deep furrows and making him look younger and carefree. Sansa loved that look on him and swore to try to make him smile more often.

However, it wasn’t long before Sandor grew restless, shifting and attempting to find a better position in the narrow bed. Sansa guessed he was not used to sleeping next to a woman, nor to physical closeness in any form, but she didn’t hold it against him.

“Do you need to leave already?” she asked, instead.

“I’d better. Best not to risk anyone finding us. You have your reputation to think of.”

Sansa sighed. She loathed seeing Sandor leave but knew he was right.

“Will you come again? Tomorrow evening?”

Sandor was already up and pulling his clothes on but stopped and turned to Sansa. His gaze drifted slowly upward, then towards the door: anywhere except to meet hers, and he hesitated for a moment before he spoke.

“Do you want me to?”

“Of course I want you to! Did you expect this to be the end of it?” Sansa gestured at the dishevelled bed, more bemused than really upset at him. She might not have learned all about this man as yet, but she was pretty sure he was not one for light dalliances.

“I don’t know anything anymore, which way is up or which way is down,” Sandor groaned. “This – I don’t even know what this is.”

“So you’ll come,” Sansa concluded. She had pulled the blanket up to cover her nakedness. Sandor leaned over her and slid his hands under the blanket to caress her bare body. Sansa shivered. If not for the dull ache between her legs she would have been ready to have him again – but no, it had to wait. She swatted him playfully.

“Tomorrow evening. I shall wait for you.”

One more kiss, one more embrace, and then he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, we shall visit Arya again – and see glimpses of Ned, Cat, Gendry and even Robb and Theon a bit…
Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter: Sansa anxiously awaits for Sandor’s return, as it would signify he accepts her true circumstances. He does – and after initial nervousness on both sides, they soon acknowledge that time for consummating their relationship in a physical sense has arrived. They make love, which confirms to Sansa that she has, indeed, become Sansa Stark of that time also physically. Afterwards, they discuss politics of the future and share tidbits of the reasons why neither sought to harm the other during Sansa’s escape and Sandor accosting her and Ned.

Chapter Notes

Whoa, this chapter was work and half, going through a few different iterations…
Anyway, here we are – so where do we find Arya and her family this time? And what about the titular bastard? Is Arya still consorting with lowborns or did the Hound’s words have an effect on her? All this will be revealed…

I suspect most of you will be keenly looking forward to the Game of Thrones Season 8, so maybe this is a good time to kindly remind that this fic is based on the book canon, not show… So some things may be different even besides the general fanfic AU concept itself.

Thank you Hardlyfatal for betaing this troublesome chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arya

“I swear, sometimes he reminds me so much of Robert, it’s eerie,” Ned sighed, sitting heavily on his chair at the end of the table in the Great Hall of Riverrun, the location of the Northern headquarters. “Not only his looks, but the way he cocks his head or rubs his chin when he’s thinking.”

“Thinking? Not sure if Robert ever did such a thing,” Catelyn said, her tone neutral. She sat at the other end of the table, not by the side of her lord husband, as before.

Arya frowned. She knew her father was talking about Gendry, having just returned from the smithy.

“That fat old man?”

“Arya!” Catelyn admonished her.
“Robert was not always fat or old – besides, he was of an age with me,” her father said, directing a harsh look at Arya.

“I’m sorry, Father,” Arya mumbled, abashed.

She had done as Sansa had suggested and asked their father if he could tell Gendry more about King Robert. Ned had agreed, and to Arya’s surprise, the two of them had met several times during their journey through the Riverlands. What they talked about, Arya never knew, as Gendry was as tight-lipped as her father when she tried to pry. Whatever it was, it seemed to have helped Gendry with his confidence, allowing him to gradually become more outgoing and take his place in the Stark retinue – just as Sansa had predicted.

Unfortunately it didn’t translate to any more opportunities for Arya to spend time with him. Gendry’s wariness of her company ever since they had joined her family continued, and remembering the Hound’s words, Arya, too, was hesitant to push her presence to him unwanted.

‘…the next time when you decide to play your games with a lowborn, you might want to stop and think what can happen.’

Arya had approached Gendry a few times in Riverrun, but there had always been too many people around, too little time, or the time had not been right. Day by day Arya saw him slipping further and further away – and day by day, she felt just a little bit lonelier. Even being surrounded by her loving family was no cure for that, as what she had shared with Gendry had been different - and just for the two of them.

Arya stared gloomily at her platter when the door banged open and Robb stomped into the hall.

At their arrival, Arya had first found it hard to believe that the tall and broad young man waiting for them at the gate was truly her brother. The last time she had seen him he had been a fresh-faced youth, both adorable and annoying as is the way with older brothers - and now he was a grown-up man and a leader of troops. Yet as soon as they had reached indoors, the young commander had transformed into a son and the brother Arya remembered, embracing his family with tears in his eyes, no matter how hard he had tried to hide them.

Uncle Edmure and Great-uncle Brynden had joined them as well; Edmure at first somewhat awkward in the middle of the emotional family scene, Blackfish having no such compunctions, hugging his niece fiercely and squeezing Arya so hard she had thought her ribs would break.

It had been a magical night with lots of talk and laughter and tears, and once again, Arya had been reminded how lucky she was being surrounded by her family – a privilege Gendry didn’t have.

“Robb, why don’t you sit down for a proper breakfast?” Catelyn suggested to her eldest, who had grabbed a thick slice of ham and chewed it while circling the table for more.

“I’m sorry, Mother, but I don’t have time – I am late from practice as it is.” Robb winked at Arya, who winked back – after making sure that their mother didn’t see it.

“Remember we’ll be meeting with the commanders later. So much still to do for the journey to the North,” Ned reminded Robb, who nodded, pocketed a piece of bread in his jerkin and walked to the other door. Before stepping out, he stopped and looked at Arya.

“Little sister, do you want to come?”

Arya didn’t need to be asked twice. Before either of her parents reacted, she had already jumped down and ran to Robb, eager to spend some time outdoors.
“Don’t be long!” Catelyn shouted after her – but Arya was already gone.

The keep was buzzing with preparations of the troops’ journey back to the North. The messengers Ned had sent ahead had done well in alerting Robb of the news, and by the time their small retinue had arrived, everyone had already heard of Joffrey’s lies and their lord’s miraculous escape. They had been welcomed enthusiastically and the news that they were to return home to the North had elevated the mood even higher. Everyone was tired of battles, waiting and uncertainty.

Arya hastened after Robb, following his footsteps. Lord Eddard’s return had meant Robb stepping down as the leader, but he was still respected as the Young Wolf and remained an important member among Ned’s counsellors. Wherever they went, men made space for him.

The practice yard was humming as well. The long weeks of waiting had forced Robb to think of something to keep men occupied, and the obvious solution had been to make them practice, practice and practice some more. Several groups were training at the same time, mostly sword-fighting, although Arya saw some engaged in old-fashioned wrestling, and others a bit further away shooting with their bows.

“Stark, here!” Theon Greyjoy waved at Robb who changed his direction towards his friend. Theon, too, had grown up in Arya’s eyes, the slim youth with a ready smile becoming a man, hardened by his experiences in the battlefields. He was surrounded by a few others, chatting and swishing their swords in the air, getting ready for their turn in the yard.

Arya followed. She didn’t have anything particular against her father’s ward, but after having heard Sansa’s greendreams of Theon and Ironborn invading Winterfell, she had looked at him with suspicion. Robb had been updated about Sansa and her newfound abilities, including that particular vision, but he had had a hard time believing it. He had accepted Sansa’s greendreams readily, having spent time with the crannogmen and knowing of their association with such old magic, but he adamantly denied that Theon could ever betray him.

Ned had admitted that it hadn’t happened yet and might never do, but had also advised Robb to keep an eye on Theon and keep him close – and whatever happened, not to send him back to Balon Greyjoy as Robb had suggested earlier. Robb had agreed and his friendship with Theon seemed to continue unimpeded.

The young men organised themselves in pairs and soon the clatter of metal filled the morning air. Arya settled at the edge of the area to observe them, wishing that she, too, could have joined them. However, since her mother had taken over her education, this was as close as she was likely to get.

Lady Catelyn had shaken her head at Arya’s dishevelled appearance after their reunion, rolled up her sleeves and worked tirelessly on making the wild wolf-child a presentable young lady once more – or as much as Arya had ever been one. Maester Vyman of Riverrun, as requested by Catelyn, was patiently giving her lessons in history, houses, economies, housekeeping and even teachings of great wars and conquests; an addition Ned had suggested in light of the recent events.

Arya herself had gained a better understanding of the way the world worked during her adventures and now saw her part in the bigger picture more clearly. She still protested about the chafing dresses she had to wear, but she also understood that the role of the lady of the castle was more than just doing needlework and being pretty. She had observed her mother in the meetings, discussing tactics and politics, and seen how she got her point across without needing to resort to posturing, harsh words or a loud voice, as men often seemed to do. She admired the veneer of gentle diplomacy hiding her mother’s ironclad determination and realised that women did play an important part – just
a different one from those of men.

And yes, Arya had had to accept even the yoke of needlework, although she had insisted on working on something useful rather than purely decorative, and thus had made great advances with a tunic. She had told her mother it was meant for Robb, but secretly she hoped one day to give it to Gendry.

The morning went on and the dance of battle wove on between the men. More than once Arya’s thoughts wandered towards the other kind of needlework she really wanted to be doing: the kind taught to her by Syrio Forel, the first sword of Braavos. She wished he would have been there with them; not only for her lessons, but for his own sake. He had been a good man and a valiant friend.

Swift as a deer. Quiet as a shadow.

Arya felt the beginning of tears in her eyes and she swiped them with the back of her hand, hoping that nobody saw it.

“Hey, boy!” A shout across the yard interrupted Arya’s musings and she followed the sound. It was Theon, calling at someone.

That someone was Gendry, carrying a bundle of swords he had been repairing. The smith at Riverrun, Elmo One-Eye, had welcomed his help with relief, the presence of the troops keeping him and his apprentice swept off their feet for most of the time.

Gendry only glanced at Theon under his brows but didn’t stop or comment. As well liked as he was among most of the men, he didn’t seem to get on well with Theon. Or rather, Theon didn’t seem to get on well with him, and more often than not when he had a chance, was needling Gendry about this or that.

Arya suspected he was jealous of the attention Gendry had received from Ned and Robb. When Robb had first heard of Gendry’s role in ‘rescuing’ Arya, he had made it his mission to offer his thanks and friendship to him, and he always addressed Gendry politely and with respect when they met. The story about Arya and Gendry’s adventures had spread through the keep speedily, as those things tend to do, and everybody knew about the high store the Starks set on the new blacksmith. The general knowledge of him being King Robert’s bastard didn’t hurt him either, many still remembering the friendship between their lord and the late king.

For some reason all of that seemed to agitate Theon.

“Blacksmith! Wouldn’t you itch to fight with one of those swords, instead of only polishing them all day long?” Theon drawled, pointing his own sword at Gendry. His opponent stopped to look, as did many of the other men.

Gendry ignored him, proceeding to stack the swords into the racks standing next to training yard. Theon tapped his fingers against his thigh, having completely forgotten their interrupted session, growing more irritated by the second.

“Blacksmith, I am talking to you!” he shouted. His training partner, a young Mollen boy, tried to catch Theon’s attention and urged him to continue their interrupted session, but Theon paid no heed to him.

“Are you afraid you would be found wanting if you did?” Theon walked to Gendry and crossed his arms, standing in front of the rack so Gendry had no option other than to stop what he was doing.

“The name is Gendry,” he muttered. “And I leave swordplay to fancy lords and knights, who have nothing better to do with their time.”
Theon’s face darkened. “Take that back. The knights are the ones who protect your kind, who hide at the back in the safety of the castle while better men do the fighting.”

“And what would you fight with if there were no men like me – with sticks or with your bare hands?” Gendry straightened into his full height, towering over Theon... who didn’t seem to be so easily intimidated, however. “Let it be, Greyjoy. He’s a good blacksmith, just doing his job. Come back here and let’s show him how the real men fight,” the Mollen youth shouted at Theon, clearly as discomfited as the others about the scene playing in front of them. Robb was still engaged in his own bout further away and hadn’t noticed the altercation.

Arya had, and her blood started to boil. How dared Theon?! Yet she knew that if she interfered, it would be seen as a sign that Gendry needed to be protected by a girl – so she stayed still. Her hands curled into fists though, and she wished she had brought Needle with her so she could challenge Theon with it once the spectacle was over.

The two men stood opposite to each other, glowering.

“I challenge you. Sword against sword – and as you are not a real soldier, we’ll use practice swords only. Let’s see how I do without your tools, bastard,” Theon emphasised the last word, sneering.

_Turn away, just turn away_, a part of Arya wished – and yet another part hoped nothing more than to see Gendry whopping Theon’s ass. She knew Gendry was strong as an ox, and what he might lack in formal training, he compensated with street-smarts learned in the alleys of Flea Bottom.

Gendry stared at Theon, the cords on his neck clearly visible as he seemed to struggle to keep himself in check. Yet he was a man and had a man’s pride, and between tightly pursed lips, he accepted Theon’s challenge.

Theon laughed and commanded the men closest to him to make room and find swords for them. He placed his own sword carefully into the rack and accepted a wooden practice sword instead. The men were eager to see some entertainment brightening up the monotony of the usual practice, and one of them offered Gendry a sword, but he waved it away and took one of those he had just brought.

Men moved into a circle to make room for the combatants, more joining them as they heard the commotion. Finally Robb, too, noticed what was going on and walked towards the action. He pushed his way through the crowd into the front line, next to Arya.

“What is this all about?” Robb asked, eyeing Theon and Gendry, who were flexing their arms and getting ready for their duel.

“Theon challenged Gendry. He should have declined, but Theon made it impossible. It is unfair – you know he hasn’t had any training. Theon wants to humiliate him in front of everyone and that is just stupid!”

Robb shook his head. “Theon can be rash at times, but he’s not stupid. I don’t know what he has against Gendry, but I guess it’s too late to interfere now. We’ll just have to see how this plays out. This kind of thing happens between men all the time, so I wouldn’t be worried.”

“I’m not worried. I’m annoyed,” Arya declared, but then her attention was drawn towards the fight that had started at earnest.

Theon did all the right things; he had the right stance, his opening lunge was executed perfectly, as were his feigns to goad Gendry into making a mistake. Gendry did all the _wrong_ things; his stance
was terrible, he held the sword like an axe, and his lunges at Theon were cumbersome. From the very beginning, it was clear which one of them was more experienced, and even though Theon was at best only average swordsmen, compared to Gendry he was the Sword of the Morning.

The men shouted encouragements, at first at Theon, but when Gendry didn’t go down as easily as expected – by some miracle, he was able to parry Theon’s lunges time after time – some started to urge him on. Arya was in the thick of things, whooping every time when Gendry avoided a hit and cheering when he executed one of his own attacks. Robb was diplomatically silent, taking no sides, but every now and then when one or the other did a particularly clever move, he, too, shouted his approval.

The match went on for a while, and gradually Theon’s movements became more stilted and his reactions slower. To the contrary, Gendry didn’t show any signs of fatigue but rounded on Theon relentlessly, and slowly but inexorably he started to gain on his opponent. The crux of the match was achieved when Gendry’s precipitous swipe made Theon drop his sword – followed by Gendry dropping his own and crashing into Theon, changing the match into a wrestling bout. It didn’t last long, though, before Gendry had Theon immobilised, straddling him with his knees pinning Theon’s arms on the ground.

Gendry didn’t hit him, though, as Arya would have done in his place, but only pressed the weight of his whole body to keep the squirming Theon firmly in his place. Both men were flushed and sweating heavily from the exertion, snarling at each other.

Time stood still and Arya didn’t know what might happen next when slow clapping behind her alerted the audience gathered around the scene. She looked to see who it was and to her surprise, saw her father and the Blackfish walking through the crowd, which parted to make way to them.

“Well done, both of you! However, I’m not sure what inspired this bout – usually, we don’t set so unevenly matched competitors against each other. The outcome seems pretty obvious, though,” the Blackfish shouted.

Ned eyed Theon and Gendry, who had hastily gotten into their feet.

“Theon Greyjoy, you knew this man has had none of your privileges to learn how to fight with a sword. It was not honourable to challenge him into a fight you had so much better chance of winning.”

Theon winced but said nothing.

Ned addressed Gendry next. “Gendry, you know he did this only to rile you. If you succumb to provocation so easily, you will never do well in this world.”

Gendry’s ears turned red and he stared at his feet.

Ser Rodrik had arrived also, probably alerted by one of the men, and it was to him Ned turned to next.

“Ser Rodrik, please see that Gendry receives proper training from now on. The boy has the right instincts, and if he is to become a master swordsmith, it might do him good to learn how to use one of his own weapons. I place his training in your hands.”

Arya’s heart made a jump. Gendry, training in the sword? That would be almost like training to become a knight - or at least, a man of consequence. Not every soldier in the Stark host received their sword practice from Ser Rodrik, who despite his advanced years was still one of the very best, with a
vast knowledge of everything to do with fighting skills.

Gendry’s eyes widened and he glanced at Ser Rodrik, warily, but when the older man smiled and nodded at him, Gendry’s stance relaxed. Theon followed the proceedings with poorly concealed amazement but refrained from saying anything – probably for his own good.

After the excitement seemed to be over, the crowd dispersed. Ned and Blackfish returned to the keep and the men started talking to each other, japing and laughing, and Arya hoped it was more at Theon’s expense rather than Gendry’s. Robb went to Theon and jabbed him at the shoulder, hopefully intending to deliver him the sermon he so badly needed.

Arya slipped away, her heart still palpitating at the sight of a Gendry she had rarely seen; that of a warrior, of a man triumphing over his opponent with his sheer physicality.

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Yet training in the sword turned out not to be the only new skill Gendry was about to gain.

On one of the rare occasions when Arya had accompanied her father and Robb to the smithy, she had noticed Gendry struggling to note down instructions for an order. He could read and write, as required by Tobho Motto, as how else would a smith be able to take note of what a customer wanted? Nonetheless, his writing was rudimentary and full of mistakes, and so – in hopes of finding a way to spend some more time with him - Arya had suggested that Gendry would be allowed to partake in her newly re-established lessons with her.

She had heard her parents discussing it in the Great Hall that evening when they had thought her not to be within an earshot. Somewhat to her surprise, her mother had been in favour of the plan.

“Our bastard trying to better his position in this world, Ned.”

“Oh course not. I worry only that he takes it as a false encouragement. You know as well as I that Stannis will never legitimise him, and if he aspires too high with all his new learning, he’ll only end up disappointed.”

“He is an unusually level-headed young man and I think he knows how the world works. But if he can read and write and do sums well, he might be able to set up his own smithy one day and be a man of his own destiny rather than tied to a service of a lord.”

“I promised he’ll always have a place in Winterfell, so why should he seek a place elsewhere? It would be a shame to lose him. Arya would be upset, she is very fond of him.”

“Exactly.” Arya heard a deep sigh. “If Gendry learns sword as well, he could aspire to be a real swordsmith and could establish his business anywhere he wants. Maybe not in King’s Landing, but in Barrowton, Harroway Town or even White Harbor. It would be a big advancement for a bastard, so why wouldn’t you want it for him?”

Ned had admitted that Catelyn had a point, and from thereon Gendry started a new path in his learning. To Arya’s dismay, he didn’t share them with her, though, having private sessions with Maester Vyman instead.

That didn’t prevent her sneaking to see him with a book whenever she could, using the pretence of giving him additional lessons in history and houses to complement his other studies. Gendry was initially wary about those meetings, too, but once they found an empty barn at the back of the keep where nobody ever ventured as their meeting place, he finally started to relax from his vigilance. There, usually after Gendry’s lessons when he could steal some extra moments from his duties, Arya
read him stories about wars of conquest, battles and kings of old. Gendry was an apt student and listened with fascination the stories of intrigue, betrayal and heroism.

As happy as Arya was about those stolen moments and seeing Gendry being set up for a better life, what her mother had said about the possibility of him leaving, disturbed her. She was being made to become a lady, Gendry was being made ready to leave – where would that leave their friendship?

Then one day, after Maester Vyman mentioned in passing the bastard brothers Addam and Alyn of Hull, legitimised by Queen Rhaenyra Targaryen I during the Dance of the Dragons, a jolt of excitement ran through Arya and her mind started to race. She missed the rest of the story Maester Vyman was telling, being so deep in thought when a new notion started to grow in her mind.

*Kings are able to legitimise bastards – and if Jon is going to be a king…*

Arya’s heart started pumping louder – could she ask it? Would Jon do it? Gendry might not inherit Storm’s End, but that wouldn’t matter – at least he would have a name! And then they wouldn’t be all that different, and their friendship wouldn’t danger him anymore, and he wouldn’t have to leave Winterfell but he could become a Stark retainer of noble blood, an acknowledged son of her father’s best friend.

*Could that truly happen?*

Chapter End Notes

As always, feel free to drop a comment, even if constructive criticism – and/or drop by on my Tumblr [ladytp](http://ladytp.tumblr.com).
The next chapter sees Sansa finally meet the famous Elder Brother. Will she be a geek and fangirl all over him? What do they talk about? Tune in…
In the previous chapter: The Stark troops have united in Riverrun, where Lady Catelyn has made it her mission to transform Arya into a lady again. Arya accepts it better than before, having learned more about the world and a woman’s role, but to her chagrin the gulf separating her and Gendry grows bigger and bigger. As a result of a challenge issued to Gendry by Theon, Gendry starts training in sword and scholarly matters, a notion Lady Catelyn supports as a way for him to become his own man one day. A chance remark Arya hears makes her wonder if King Jon could legitimise Gendry in the future, thus making their situations more compatible.

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay with this chapter… The start of Game of Thrones Season 8 is confusing me a lot, many characters there being so profoundly different than in the canon and consequently, in this fic, that it just makes my head spin… And it is hard to avoid it, its presence so pervasive in the media at the moment. Besides, I don’t particularly need to avoid it either, as I do enjoy different fanfictions of our beloved characters - some more, some less, and try to endure the bad with the good.

That said, the writing is a bit slower for now – but the good news is that the season is short.

Once more, many thanks to Hardlyfatal for betaing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

“Lady Sansa,” the Elder Brother greeted Sansa from behind his desk that was overflowing with books, parchments, earthen jars, hessian bags and various tools and utensils. It looked like the desk of her Uncle Tobin, an amateur genealogist and historian. The only thing missing was her uncle’s trusty laptop.

The man behind the desk was nothing like her uncle, though, with his military bearing and stern outlook, and in truth, Sansa was a bit nervous.

She had woken up that morning still feeling the warm aftermath of the previous night’s encounter, the slight physical discomfort having already dissipated. It had been all she had dreamt of, Sandor a surprisingly gentle lover despite noticeably not having had much experience in the finer aspects of lovemaking. Yet his instincts had been intuitively correct, and his body just as glorious as Sansa had
anticipated, as much as she admonished herself for such shallow thoughts.

After dressing and visiting the kitchens to get hot water for her moon tea, Sansa had made her way to her long-awaited meeting with the Elder Brother; the busy leader of the brothers had finally found time for it.

The Elder Brother looked upon Sansa kindly enough; thus encouraged, she stepped closer and sat down on the chair he pointed.

‘Elder Brother, I am so glad you agreed to see me,” she started.

“My duties keep me busy, as you can see, but we rarely have visitors of nobility. The least I can do is to give you some of my time.” He leaned back, put down the parchment he had been studying and crossed his arms, all the while studying Sansa from under his eyebrows. “What can I do for you, my lady?”

“I…” Sansa didn’t know how to start, a rare uncertainty creeping in. This man was her idol. She had read everything about him she had been able to find – which was admittedly not that much. His origins were obscure, his personal life clouded in shadows, even his exact date of death had been debated by the academics. What had been known, without a doubt, was that he had been a genius and one of the most forward thinkers of all time.

No wonder Sansa felt jittery. Yet there was something she wanted from him and there was only one way to get it - to ask - so she plunged ahead.

“I would like to become a healer to help people in need and your skills are highly regarded in that area. Hence I was wondering if you could help me to learn?” Her mouth was dry and her throat was growing thick. Meeting people she admired always had that effect on her, despite her usually unflappable self-confidence.

The Elder Brother smiled benevolently. “To help people, you say? It’s very admirable; the smallfolk will be grateful for a lady who is so invested in their well-being. And there is so much you can do: provide a safe space, food, warmth, and carers to look after the sick... and coin is always welcome, and can be used in many ways to assist the stricken.”

Sansa pinched her lips together. Obviously she hadn’t made her intentions clear.

“I didn’t mean that way – although I will make sure that it, too, will happen. I meant that I personally want to become a healer.”

The Elder Brother frowned. “Why would you want that, if you don’t mind me asking? You’re a noble lady, and undoubtedly you shall marry soon and your time will be taken by supporting your husband and his house, and in due course, supervising your children. Being a healer is hard work and it would be most unusual for a lady like you to take on such a dirty and unpleasant vocation.”

Sansa understood him, she truly did, but couldn’t help a flash of annoyance. She clenched her jaw and tried to maintain her patience.

“With all due respect, I know that, but I came here specifically to see you and further my skills, if possible.” Sansa maintained her tone calm and polite, but was determined to get her point across, “I escaped the Red Keep on my own after being kept there as a prisoner of the crown. I travelled across Westeros in a one-horse wagon with my father without being apprehended by the troops sent after us. I came here with only a few of trusted companions, in the company of men whose house is the stern enemy of mine. I believe many of those things could be considered unusual for a lady.”
The Elder Brother pressed the tips of his fingers together and eyed Sansa thoughtfully. He didn’t seem offended, which Sansa took as a good sign.

“Yes, they would. Maybe you are, indeed, different. But why healing? What do you know about the mysteries of body and mind?”

Sansa though for a moment. She tried to recall how much was known about medical science at that time. Would she blow her cover if it appeared she knew too much? However, she knew she had to impress the Elder Brother for him to accept her.

“I know that a human body is a magnificent and complicated instrument. Its powerhouse is the heart that drives blood through many vessels to limbs and torso, and it is fuelled by food that gets absorbed from our guts, and air from our lungs. I know that people can get sick because of reasons beyond our understanding, or because of an injury, or because of elements they catch from the air, water or from their surroundings.” Sansa stopped to gather her thoughts, then continued.

“I know that a broken bone must be set to the same shape as it was before, and with the wounds, the most important thing is to keep them clean so they don’t suppurate. I know that if the disease is in the guts, it is harder to treat, but there are herbs that can be used to help. I know that the sick must be kept clean and well-nourished and allowed to rest, but once they start getting better, they must exercise to regain the strength of their body and muscles.”

She stopped to catch her breath before continuing, but the Elder Brother raised his hands and bowed his head in mock submission.

“That is quite enough, my lady! I see when I’ve been beaten. What you say is mostly true, although some of those statements are quite radical. Where did you learn all that?”

Sansa blushed. “We had a wise maester in Winterfell, and some old women still had ancient knowledge from the times reaching as far as to the First Men. In King’s Landing I spent some time with Grand Maester Pycelle.”

All that was naturally just blatant lies but she hoped that it sounded believable enough. Luckily the Elder Brother didn’t interrogate her on the details but leaned back in his chair, smiling.

“You have paid attention, I see. I trust you would do the same should I share some of my secrets with you?”

“I would, I swear!” Sansa bit her lips to avoid smiling too broadly. “If I could just follow you on your rounds and observe, maybe ask a few questions – I would be ever so grateful!”

“I can see no harm in having you to join me – but if you do, you must promise to do exactly as I say and when I say. Do we have an understanding?”

Sansa nodded. “We do.”

They agreed for Sansa to come again the next morning, and then the Elder Brother gave her a handcrafted booklet filled page after page with descriptions of various illnesses, their symptoms and suggested cures. Sansa had a quick look at it but didn’t recognise it as one of the books later reproduced as facsimiles she had read in her own time.

That made it even better – what a luxury it would be to read unpublished works of the famous Elder Brother!

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As Sansa was leaving the main building, one of the brothers who was allowed to speak ran after her.

“Lady Sansa!”

Sansa stopped and smiled at the man. “Yes?”

“Ser Jaime asked to speak with you, if you may.” The brother was breathing hard after his sprint. Sansa wondered when Jaime had had a chance to ask after her, and for a moment she felt a temptation to decline. Yet… maybe she was being unfair. The least she should do would be to hear the man.

“Very well. I will see him right away.” She bent her head in acquiescence and turned back towards the guest rooms.

Sansa knew that Brienne’s upset the previous day couldn’t have been caused by anyone else, and the good opinion Sansa had started to form of Jaime had been ruined in one sweep. Irritation hastened her footsteps until she had arrived at his room.

Jaime lay in his bed, his upper body supported with pillows. As soon as Sansa entered the room, he straightened himself even further.

“Lady Sansa, I am grateful that you came,” he said. His face was haggard, deep grooves etched into his forehead.

“You wanted to see me about something?” Sansa didn’t waste time on preambles or courtesies. If she was right in her suspicions, the man didn’t deserve any.

“I did, indeed. I can’t exactly come and go from this room, so….” Jaime shrugged. “I wanted to ask you about Lady Brienne.”

Sansa frowned. “What about her?”

“She didn’t arrive this morning as agreed, so I was wondering what has happened. Did she say anything to you?”

Jaime leaned forward as he spoke, his expression keen. Sansa wondered whether it was only the loss of a personal helper or whether there was something else behind his apparent eagerness.

“No, she didn’t. I only suggested this arrangement if she was willing, and she is free to change her mind about it at any time. Maybe she decided that it didn’t suit her, after all.”

Jaime dropped his head. “I was afraid of that, and yet hoped it would not be so.”

“What happened yesterday, in any case?” Sansa’s curiosity got the better of her.

“She didn’t say anything?”

“‘What did you do to her?’” Sansa wanted to ask but settled to hearing what Jaime said, first.

The muscles of Jaime’s jaw tensed. “If she didn’t share it with you, I shall respect her decision on it. Suffice to say that I told her something she didn’t take too well. I never meant to offend her, believe it or not.”

“Hmph.” So it had been something Jaime had said. Sansa’s veneer of courtesy chafed and she longed to leave him to stew in the mess of his own making. He probably deserved it, the arrogant
man. How dared he to be rude to Brienne!

Then Jaime Lannister surprised her.

“When you see her, would you – could you tell her that I want to apologise to her? Tell her also that should she decide to come back, I promise I will not raise the subject again.”

Jaime swallowed hard, his eyes intent upon Sansa’s face. From the way he then cleared his throat and pulled his collar, Sansa guessed Jaime had not resorted to such pleading many times before in his life.

She relented, but only slightly. “I will pass the message to her, but it is completely up to her what she does with it. I will not presume to pressure her one way or another. Good day, Ser Jaime.”

With that, she turned on her heel and left.

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“He has nerve, I’ll admit that much,” Sansa remarked to Brienne later that evening.

“How did he look?”

Sansa turned to face Brienne, thrown by her question. “Look? Well, he appeared tired. Worn-out. Pale.” Then she understood. “He did seem to be regretting whatever it is he did or said.”

They were sitting on a long bench outside Sansa’s hut, opposite the woods and shrubs surrounding the clearance where the women’s accommodation had been built. The wind rustled the leaves and brought with it a salty breeze from the nearby sea. Sansa breathed it in, enjoying the smells and sounds so deeply ingrained in her consciousness from her childhood in White Harbor.

Throwing another sideways glance at Brienne, Sansa touched her arm.

“You don’t have to share your secrets with me, Lady Brienne, but it pains me to see you hurt. Whatever Ser Jaime did, he had no right and I don’t expect you to go back to him. I am sorry I even asked.”

Brienne closed her eyes and flinched visibly. “He was kind to me, my lady.”

“Kind? To make you cry? I saw the signs of your tears yesterday, Brienne. I have understood you have a certain fondness for him, which I have to confess surprised me at first. My lady mother told me you didn’t even like the man and wanted to be removed from his company – but I guess something changed along the way.”

“He is not what people think he is.” Brienne’s voice was quiet but steady.

“I thought so too when I met him. I had formed quite a different picture of him from the gossip at the court,” Sansa admitted. “And yet he hurt you. I can’t forgive him for that.”

“He proposed to me,” Brienne said so softly that at first, Sansa wasn’t sure if she had heard her correctly.

“What?”

“He asked me to marry him,” Brienne repeated, only marginally louder.

Sansa was flabbergasted. Jaime? Proposed to Brienne? How was that even possible?
“But… how could he? He is in the Kingsguard and the knights of the Kingsguard have sworn not to take a wife!”

“He was dismissed from his position. He suspects Lord Tywin pulled the strings, but it was in Joffrey’s hand the letter of dismissal was written.”

“Oh!” Sansa’s surprise was turning into excitement. “In that case, and if you truly like him, isn’t that wonderful?” She squeezed Brienne’s arm in her delight, being rewarded only with a heaved sigh.

“My lady, can’t you see that it would be impossible? Lord Tywin wouldn’t settle for a gooddaughter from a minor noble house, especially one sworn to his enemy. He married his own daughter to a king and won’t settle for much less with his son and heir.”

Sansa was speechless. The indifference with which opinions and preferences of children were met by their parents still sometimes caught her by surprise. Even Jaime, who must be well into his thirties, was expected to toe the line his father drew in such matters.

“Surely it wouldn’t matter so much? Lord Tywin would get his wish of seeing Jaime married and the next lord of Casterly Rock, and you –”

Brienne interrupted Sansa, a rare occurrence for her. “—and I would be the goodsister of Queen Cersei and the new lady of Casterly Rock. I would have to abandon my own house and my lord father, as long as he supports House Baratheon. People would call me a broodmare and worse, and one day Jaime would look at me and realise that he asked me only because I was there to help him when he needed help the most.”

Sansa stared at Brienne’s downcast head and slumped shoulders and realised with sadness that Brienne spoke the truth: the truth about what people would say and what kind of nightmare would await her in the den of proud Lannisters and under Cersei’s wrath – although perhaps not about Jaime’s feelings. Sansa re-assessed her meeting with Jaime in a new light after Brienne’s confession and recognised the agony behind Jaime’s pleading.

She patted Brienne’s hand, not knowing how else to comfort her. The unfairness of the situation – not of Brienne’s or Jaime’s doing, but because of the patriarchal views of the time – frustrated her, but how would either of them be able to do anything about it? If Jaime had indeed been dismissed from the Kingsguard, he was expected to marry, and marry well. Meaning, according to Lord Tywin’s wishes. Although Sansa hadn’t met the famous Warden of the West, she had read and heard enough about him to know that he was a man not easily swayed or prone to sentimentalism, even when it came to his children.

The women sat still for a long time, Sansa’s hand still resting on Brienne’s, while the sun descended behind the woodland, sending its last purple hues across the field before the darkness of the night swallowed them.

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Sandor arrived after midnight. Sansa had dozed off, secure in her knowledge that he would not abandon her, the nervousness of the other days completely forgotten.

A quiet sound of door opening and closing woke Sansa. When she opened her eyes, she saw Sandor standing in the middle of the room still as a statue, staring at her.

There was no threat in his gaze and despite the menacing figure he presented with his size and looks, Sansa felt something soft and fragile blooming inside her, something that filled her with happiness
and security. She was not alone anymore in this foreign world amongst strangers, having to hide her secret in order to survive.

She had Sandor now: a confidante, a lover, a companion. He was a hard man, yes, and reserved. He harboured secrets of his own, nightmares beyond anything she could imagine, but she hoped that in time Sandor, too, would realise that his time as an outsider and a loner was over.

Sansa stretched herself, thus alerting him to the fact that she was awake.

“Sandor,” she whispered, her tone an invitation.

And he came to her.

This time their time together was more relaxed, more exploratory. As comfortable as they were in each other’s company, they didn’t talk more about Sansa’s revelations and Sandor asked surprisingly few questions from her. Sansa gained an impression that as long as he didn’t know about the specifics, he could brush them aside and pretend they didn’t exist.

She understood him and in part felt the same. She neither, was ready to face anything that might shatter the hard-won accord they shared. Just to live and love and enjoy, without bringing in the complications of real life – she needed that as much as he did. There would be time for serious discussions later. They would have to face obstacles and challenges whether they wanted it or not, so would it be so wrong to have this time to live in their own little cocoon of happiness?

Afterwards, Sansa told him about Jaime and Brienne. Sandor nodded, not surprised by the turn of events, astounding Sansa once more with his perceptiveness.

“He may not want to give up so easily,” Sandor spoke into the crook of her neck, his lips moving against her skin, the scarred side scratching it.

“Why do you think so?”

“Stubborn as a mule when obsessed. Doesn’t know when to let go.”

After Sandor left, Sansa thought about his words and wondered where it would leave Brienne. Would Jaime be successful in wooing her, or would she give up her chance for happiness because of Jaime’s affiliations? The fact that she might be facing a similar battle with her own family over Sandor was not lost on her, but she refused to think about it.

Later. All that must wait until later.

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The next few days saw Sansa busy, spending her mornings with the Elder Brother on his rounds with the sick at the island and afterwards in his study discussing the cases they had seen, her afternoons with Shae teaching her how to dress, do her hair, speak and carry herself, and nights… they were reserved for Sandor.

They didn’t have all that much time, Sandor sneaking into her hut after everyone had retired, leaving again well before the dawn to avoid being caught. As much as Sansa trusted her companions, she wasn’t sure they were ready for the scandalous revelation of her relationship with the Hound.

Brienne had stayed away from Jaime for one day, but after some deliberation, had agreed to go back to him. To Sansa’s renewed assurances that she didn’t have to, Brienne had pursed her lips and said that she had promised to help him and that’s what she would do.
From thereon Brienne went to Jaime every morning, but as far as Sansa knew, those sessions were their only interactions. However, Brienne never came back from them in distress, so Jaime must have been a man of his word and Sansa felt it would have been imprudent for her to meddle in it any further.

On the third day of Sansa’s new arrangement with the Elder Brother, he got called away on an urgent matter in the middle of their session in his study. He left, instructing Sansa to wait, as sorting the issue shouldn’t take long and he would be back soon.

While he was gone, Sansa meandered around the room studying the items and manuscripts scattered so freely across all available surfaces. One big bundle of papers especially piqued her interest after she glanced the heading at the top: ‘Observations On The Effect Of Nourishment On Recovery From A Fever’.

She picked up the top stack of papers and saw it was a carefully constructed study where people recovering from fever were given different foods and observed for their recovery. The first group had received mostly dairy products, the second mostly meat and the third mostly vegetables. Everything was written in a neat hand in an organised fashion, and something in the way the observations were laid out, intrigued her. Somehow it looked, in the lack of a better word, familiar.

Sansa looked through the next stack and saw that it was very similar in structure and style, but about comparing different herbs and their effects on wound healing. The next after that was about analysing the stools of a patient to see whether there was a connection in their appearance and the condition from which the patient suffered.

All of the studies were very methodical and organised in the same fashion, proceeding from general observations and background to the way how the study was conducted and which endpoints were analysed and how, then proceeding to the results and conclusions and what it meant. After recognising the pattern, Sansa looked in more detail the papers in her hand and gasped.

Indeed, the first page carried the written heading of ‘Introduction’, and on the second page she could see ‘Materials and Methods’, then ‘Results’, ‘Conclusions’ and finally, ‘Discussion’. As she leafed through the rest of that stack and then through the other two she had already read, and a few more from the same pile, she saw all the headings repeated time after time, without the fail, in each of them.

She dropped the papers as if they burned her fingers when the realisation hit her.

The hours spent over scientific and medical journals during her advanced undergraduate studies came back to her, the universally used and accepted manuscript journal always following that same basic principle; IMRaD, as it was abbreviated. Nonetheless, it was a modern principle, only in use for a hundred years or so, as she knew from her readings of medical history.

Sansa stepped away from the table, sudden coldness hitting her at the core. Was it possible that the Elder Brother had invented that style completely on his own? Had he been a forerunner in this too, despite none of those manuscripts having survived until the modern times?

Sansa sat down, taking deep breaths to fight away lightheadedness engulfing her. After having calmed down, she tried to think the matter through rationally.

Maybe he had – maybe he had really seen the beauty and logic in organising his thoughts in such a manner? He was an advanced thinker and an experimentalist, which she had already seen with her own eyes.
Or…

Maybe he is from the future, too?

By the time the Elder Brother returned Sansa had calmed down. She had decided she needed to dig into the matter a bit deeper.

“So, where were we, my lady? I recall we were discussing the unfortunate boil Brother Hidbert has developed, did we not?”

“I am sorry, but while you were gone, I took a liberty of looking through some of these studies – I hope you don’t mind?” Sansa pointed at the stack.

The Elder Brother glanced at them without concern. “No, I don’t, not at all. I agreed to help you, and I was planning to get to those soon anyway.” He sat down, his heavy bulk making the chair creak under him.

“I noticed they have a rather unusual structure in the way they have been organised. I have never seen books in that format.” Sansa looked at him innocently, from all accounts being only an eager student wanting to learn from the master. “May I enquire what made you write them that way?”

The Elder Brother’s demeanour changed subtly. The way he tensed was hardly noticeable, but Sansa saw it.

“No reason, it just seems to make more sense.”

“It is rather unusual. Did you come up with that structure on your own?” Sansa was not ready to give up so easily, but she took care to use her most polite tone

The Elder Brother squinted at her. “Well, if you have to know, I was shown that way by a maester who spent some time on the Quiet Isle before unfortunately passing away. I found his method very efficient and practical and have followed it ever since.”

Sansa’s pulse quickened. There had been someone else? Or was that merely a cover story to hide the truth? They way he was shifting in his chair, as if it had suddenly become uncomfortable, made her think that was the case.

The Elder Brother was definitely hiding something, Sansa was convinced.

And she simply had to get into the bottom of the matter.

Chapter End Notes

What is the Elder Brother hiding? Will Sansa get to the bottom of it? The next chapter will pick up from Arya and Gendry again (and may I say that I rejoice the path their story has taken in the show and cross my fingers that it will be along the similar lines in
the books… with that extra finesse brought on by GRRM!).
As always, comments and also concrit are welcomed!
Arya's Move

Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter:

Sansa finally meets the famous Elder Brother, who accepts her as his student after Sansa assures him of her sincerity. Jaime asks Sansa to pass his apologies to Brienne, who dispels Sansa’s assumption that Jaime had offended her by telling her about Jaime’s proposal. Sandor comes to Sansa again at night and a new tenderness develops between them. Sansa continues to spend time with the Elder Brother and one day notices the unusually modern format of his notes. The Elder Brother becomes evasive and tense when she asks him about it, leaving Sansa convinced there is more to the story than his feeble excuse about a visiting maester.

Chapter Notes

I know… it was hard for me too to get back into this world after the recent GoT shenanigans, especially for this couple! Well, we shall soon know how it all ends, and then sigh in relief while putting it all aside and continuing their story in our fanfictions. At least I know I will…

Thank you Hardlyfatal for betaing, once again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya

Arya faced yet another new experience during that time of busy preparations for the Northern troops’ departure: she had admirers.

And not just one, but two.

At first Arya didn’t even notice how Gawen Glover and Darrel Hornwood seemed often to be where she was, sitting close-by during the meals in the Great Hall or running into her when she was going somewhere in the keep or in the yards. Only when Gawen brought her a small bunch of wildflowers he had picked from the edge of the moat, and when Darrel gave her a berry pie wrapped in a handkerchief, did she register their odd behaviour.

It felt strange. Sansa had been always the one towards whom young men’s eyes turned, whereas Arya was the Horseface, the Underfoot – not the kind of girl boys noticed. Yet here they were, both members of noble houses, smiling at her and complimenting her dress and hair and shoes – who even
complimented someone for their shoes? – and Arya didn’t quite know what to make of it.

The lads were affable enough, more young men than boys, having left their childhood behind by joining the campaign to serve their liege lord. After recovering from her initial shock, Arya didn’t even mind the attention she received, finding shared interests with both of them. Gawen was a keen archer and Arya joined him in practice a few times, drawing his bow and to her delight finding that her aim was still true. Darrel liked to read and debate, and many times Arya ended up in a heated discussion with him about this or that, often about Robert’s Rebellion, in which Darrel’s house had played a role.

She tried to gauge if Gendry had noticed her new admirers. Once, when she was walking with Gawen and Gendry walked towards them, she grabbed Gawen’s arm by an impulse only to see Gendry’s reaction. He glanced at her, then at their clasped arms, but didn’t say anything – and as soon as he walked past them, Arya dropped confused Gawen’s arm as if it suddenly burned her.

Afterwards, she felt ashamed of her own behaviour and tried to make it up to Gawen by seeking him out for a session with a bow and arrow, but that didn’t erase her frustration of Gendry’s obliviousness.

Gendry didn’t bring it up when they next met for their book session in the barn and Arya was too embarrassed to say anything.

There was somebody else, however, who noticed.

“Arya, may I see you after breakfast? There is something important I need to talk to you about.” Catelyn asked her one day when leaving the hall, not long before their planned day of departure.

“Of course, Mother,” Arya replied, surprised about the official tone in her mother’s query. She finished her plate hastily and dashed upstairs to her mother’s temporary solar.

The room that had been first Minisa Tully’s, then Catelyn’s when she had become the lady of Riverrun, was neat and well-organised. Stacks of correspondence and other notes were strewn across the large wooden desk, the only nod to aesthetics being a single flower in a jar on the shelf of an old bookcase. Arya looked around, imagining her mother sitting there as a young girl when attending to the matters of the keep on her father’s behalf. The image made her proud but also somewhat sad, because her mother’s childhood had ended so early and definitively.

“Please, sit down, Arya,” Catelyn asked from her seat behind the desk.

Arya did, remembering to cross her ankles and lay her hands demurely on her lap as a lady should, in case Catelyn had asked her there to be chastised for some misdemeanour.

Catelyn looked troubled – which, however, was an expression she carried most days. Arya wished there was something she could do to help her mother and father to reconcile, but so far had found nothing. They were cordial to each other, but the warmth they had shared before was there no longer.

“Arya, there is a matter I should have shared with you before, but due to so many other things happening, I have neglected. Something that concerns you.”

Arya was puzzled but also curious. Concerning her? She nodded politely, waiting for Catelyn to continue.

“You remember when I told you about crossing the Twins and the negotiations I did with old Walder Frey?”
Arya did – and of Robb’s frustration at having been betrothed to a girl he had never met, the consolation of being able to pick her from amongst the daughters of old Walder only slightly diminishing the sting. She also remembered the greendream Sansa had shared with them, revealing a horrible betrayal and violation of guest rights when Robb had broken that promise and married someone else instead.

Ned had cautiously suggested breaking the engagement, as if the Freys could be foreseen to succumb to such treachery, they simply couldn’t be trusted. However, Catelyn had pointed out that in that scenario it had been Robb who had betrayed the arrangement first, and now they just had to make sure that it didn’t happen. Catelyn had also reminded that although she wasn’t too keen to join their house to Freys, either, she had made a solemn promise and she had to honour it.

“I do, Mother.”

Catelyn took Arya’s hands in hers and looked deep into her eyes. “Robb’s betrothal was not the only thing I had to promise. Lord Walder wanted more. So I had to agree to betroth you to his son, Elmar Frey.”

Arya wasn’t sure if she heard her correctly. “Me? Betrothed? What do you mean?” She pulled her hands away, not caring how rude it was.

“Nothing will happen for years, of course; we agreed on a long betrothal. The boy is a year younger than you, so it will be quite some time before the marriage will take place,” Catelyn replied.

“Marriage? To a Frey? You can’t be serious, Mother!” Arya’s palms started to sweat and nausea bloomed in her stomach. It was one thing to notionally be aware that her parents would arrange her marriage someday, and quite another to be told that it had already been agreed upon. And to a Frey! That house was famous for its prevarication and duplicity.

Arya jumped up and backed towards the end of the room. “I don’t want it! Do you hear, you can’t make me!”

Catelyn looked at her, her face portraying real sympathy and possibly even a smidgen of regret, but Arya didn’t care about it in her own anger.

“As I said, nothing is going to happen for years. Who knows, maybe it will never eventuate. Betrothals have been called off before, and when Robb marries a Frey daughter, it may be enough to soothe Lord Walder for a while. He might die and the new lord may not be so prickly and we could maybe negotiate it anew.”

Arya stared at her. “Can you promise me that?”

Catelyn sighed. “You know as well as I that there can be no promises. Besides, this boy could be good for you. He is Lord Walder’s twenty-second son and probably left mostly on his own, removed from all the political wrangling within that family.” She raised her chin. “This is the lot of a noblewoman, so don’t tell me you are surprised. I had no say when I was married to your father, either.”

“And look how well that turned out!” Arya huffed, but her words were immediately followed by a pang of conscience at the pained expression it elicited in her mother.

“I tell you this because I have seen how young Glover and Hornwood have been paying attention to you lately. I can’t blame them, but we have to be careful. We still have to cross the Twins on our way back and nothing must make Lord Walder to go back on his promises. Your father will talk to
Galbart Glover and Timos Hornwood about their young charges’ behaviour, but I wanted to warn you not to encourage them with your own conduct.”

A boiling fury started to swell inside Arya and she wanted to stomp her foot on the ground as she had done when angered by something as a child. She was not a child anymore, however, and such performance would only make her appear as one. This matter was too important to be considered as a child’s fancy – her parents had to understand that she was insulted by being sold and bartered as a chattel.

Instead, Arya forced herself to stay calm.

“So I can’t even have friends of my own anymore? And that is my worth – crossing of a bridge?” Her voice was cold, and knowing that she couldn’t maintain control for much longer, she left the room, all tension and stiffness.

Arya wasn’t truly upset about being asked to curb down her interactions with her admirers. She wouldn’t have chosen either of them, so it wasn’t going to be a hardship to send them on their way. Arya had nothing against them, but they were too young, too inexperienced, too skinny, too blond… in short, they were not Gendry. So it was not that – but to have been part of a bargain, haggled and being bartered, what really stung. Sansa’s words about the freedoms she had seen in her green dreams haunted her. To be free, to choose one’s own path – how wonderful would it be?

Once outside the door, her brave façade started to crumble and tears stung her eyes. Her mother being the cause of those tears, it left her only one other avenue to find comfort: she went to find Nymeria.

She ran out of the keep and stopped in the middle of the yard, trying to sense where Nymeria might be. The wolf was not far, she knew, and so she continued to the godswood to find some peace among its redwoods and small streams. Riverrun’s godswood even had a weirwood as a heart tree, towards which Arya made her way.

As she had known, Nymeria was already there, and Arya knelt down next to her and buried her tear-streaked face into the wolf’s fur. Ever patient and reassuring, Nymeria’s silent sympathy soon saw the end to Arya’s tears, the strong bond between the girl and the wolf serving as a salve to her soul.

Yet another new experience for Arya had been acquiring new ways to bond with Nymeria. For a long time she had been able to warg into her only when she slept, unable to conjure the connection during daylight hours.

Nevertheless, as her frustrations grew from being cooped inside so often, she had gradually learned that if she concentrated really hard and pushed all other distractions out of her mind, she could renew the connection even then. It was not easy, and it wasn’t always successful, but there were times when she found herself trotting through the camp, the scents of tightly-packed humanity assailing her nostrils and the flex of powerful muscles under coarse fur making her feel strong. Often she was playing chase with Grey Wind in the Godswood, almost like being a pup again.

It had been good to be reunited with her brother. Arya had felt the deep connection between the direwolves while in Nymeria’s skin, and somewhere at the edge of her consciousness she had also felt a tug of her other siblings, Summer and Shaggydog far away in Winterfell and Ghost even further. Only Lady wasn’t there anymore, a hollow spot the only reminder of her existence.

Many nights, Arya raced the forests surrounding Riverrun with Grey Wind, slipping in and out of the keep through the water drains in the wall, urged on by the call of the wild. Both direwolves were fed regularly in the keep, but nothing surpassed the tangy taste of fresh blood or satisfied as much as the
crunch of bones in her powerful jaws.

Besides, Arya had discovered yet another advantage from her newfound skills. Since Nymeria was not welcomed into her studies or sewing sessions, she consequently spent more and more time with Gendry. As Arya could to some extent guide Nymeria to go where she wanted, whenever possible she made the wolf sneak into the smithy to sprawl on the floor while Gendry hammered at the anvil, or follow when he went about his business in the camp.

The best times were when Gendry was dozing off, snatching a few moments of sleep when he could amidst his busy schedule of work, sword training and lessons. He lay down where there was some peace and quiet: next to the deserted training yard, behind the stables, in the Godswood. Then Nymeria curled by his side and rested her big head against his shoulder and Gendry stroked her fur, slowly, gently.

To Arya, his touch was her mother’s cool hand on her feverish brow, her father’s firm squeeze on her shoulder, Jon’s long fingers mussing her hair, Nymeria’s wet nose against her cheek – it was everything she could ever want, and more.

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“...and that’s how the rebellion was finally finished and there were Blackfyres no more,” Arya concluded, finishing her tale of the War of the Ninepenny Kings and Ser Barristan Selmy, who had slain the last of the Blackfyre pretenders.

Gendry looked thoughtful. “I knew there were many wars about the succession, but I never heard the full story.”

“Not about true succession, as everyone knew who the legitimate heir was, but about a rebellion with a long history,” Arya corrected him. She leaned back, letting the book she had been reading fall on her lap. Gendry was sprawled at her feet, cleaning his fingernails with the tip of his dagger.

It had been two days since Arya had heard of her betrothal, and although wanting to share her frustration about it with Gendry, she hadn’t. She had been afraid that he might fall into one his moods again, becoming all formal, calling her ‘my lady’ and refusing to be with her. Their private lessons – a lofty name for lounging about and reading stories – still continued whenever they had a chance, and Arya loved those times. It was almost like they were on the road again: no fuss, no tension, just being together.

“So it was the king’s bastards who caused all the trouble?” Gendry said, looking at Arya, smirking. “Should I raise a rebellion as well? What would you say about King Gendry, first of his name?”

“King Bull, first and last of his name, I’d say,” Arya laughed and threw the book towards Gendry, who only laughed harder. She knew he was japing, of course, but then she remembered, and before she had time to think much about the wisdom of saying it, blurted what was in her mind.

“Not a king, but you might be a Baratheon one day.”

“Nah, never. You know as well as I that Stannis Baratheon would never see me as one of them.” Gendry’s tone was light and Arya knew that he was sincere; he had never bothered to think of what could have or would have been, if only. He was very practical in such matters, happy to be where he was, on his way towards a good occupation and a guaranteed position in Winterfell.

“You know that kings can legitimise bastards too?” she persisted, stretching out next to him on the blanket. The barn was mostly empty and hence unused, with nothing but a few abandoned boxes
and crates scattered here and there. Arya had smuggled in a few pillows and a blanket to make a
cosy little corner behind the crates, in a place where the light streaming through the window was
sufficient for reading.

“As if King Joffrey would be any more interested in legitimising me…” Gendry replied
nonchalantly. “Killing me, perhaps,"

They lay side by side, staring at the ceiling. The buzz of the keep’s activity was faint in the
background, the dust of the room tickling their nostrils. At times like those, with the peace sinking
deep into her bones, Arya could forget her betrothal, the threats her family still faced from the
Southern politics, Sansa’s alarming greendreams, and all her worries.

To Arya’s delight, her act of dragging Gendry away from King’s Landing had been finally
exonerated when the news of the killings of King Robert’s bastards had reached them. Ned had told
them that Varys had likely been Gendry’s benefactor, but hadn’t been able to answer the question of
what Varys would have done with Gendry had he got to him first. Yet at least Gendry finally
believed that Arya had been right – which she didn’t neglect to rub in his face whenever she had a
chance.

“Maybe King Joffrey wouldn’t… but what if there was King Jon?” Arya held her breath. They had
decided not to share Sansa’s greendreams with anyone outside the family and she had agreed – but
surely she could tell Gendry? He was trustworthy and wouldn’t say a word to anyone if she asked
him not to.

“King Jon?” Gendry frowned. “Who’s that?”

Arya got up to her haunches and told Gendry about Sansa’s visions and Jon – after making him
swear to keep it only to himself. If Gendry had been fascinated before, now his eyes grew as big as
saucers. This was, after all, not an old tale that had happened a long time ago, but something that
existed here and now. The more Arya talked, the more excited she became.

“You see, if Jon granted you legitimacy, you would be a noble! Maybe not with a castle, but you
would have a name. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

Gendry narrowed his eyes, then shrugged. “They are just dreams, as you said. I wouldn’t put too
much store into them. Besides, what would I do with such a lofty name anyway? Would I get more
customers to my forge if they knew it was a trueborn Baratheon shoeing their horses and forging
their swords?"

Arya wanted to scream. Why were men so stupid? It would matter.

“For one, we could be friends openly. There would be no more talk about being a bastard. You
could even become knight; imagine that, being Ser Gendry!”

Gendry rubbed his chin. “Friends?”

“Yes, friends. I could be with you without needing to hide it.” Arya hesitated, suddenly unsure if she
should have raised the issue. “Would you… would you like it?”

Gendry tilted his head and looked at her oddly. He didn’t say anything but Arya saw his throat
moving as he swallowed. His eyes darted across the barn as if searching for an answer there, before
he finally spoke.

“It doesn’t matter what I would like – it’s unlikely to happen in any case. It could be just a dream.”
He pushed himself reluctantly to his elbows. “I’d better leave. Master Elmo knows to wait for me
about this time, and he’s busy as it is, so I can’t really dally here any longer.”

Arya sighed, knowing that to be the case, but still disappointed at Gendry’s reaction. She truly would have expected him to be at least a bit more excited.

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They walked towards the keep separately, Gendry first, then Arya some distance away. As they approached the smithy, Arya saw Theon Greyjoy standing in front of it, apparently waiting for Gendry.

Since their bout – and presumably after a well-earned lecture Robb had given to his childhood friend – Theon had been civil towards Gendry, even attempting to make amends by inviting Gendry to join him and his friends when they went out to entertain themselves.

Ned had explained to Arya where Theon’s insecurities stemmed from, and after realising how precarious was his position as a hostage to his father’s good behaviour, Arya had been somewhat more understanding of him. To be a prince of his own people, but a hostage that could be executed at any moment if the Ironborn raised another rebellion – yes, that would be enough to make anyone a bit touchy.

What Arya didn’t understand quite as much were Theon’s attempts to pull Gendry into his questionable pastimes, gambling and wenching.

As happened with any army, more than a few relationships had been formed between the soldiers and the locals, many of them young women from the keep or the countryside. Not all the relationships were transient, with quite a few girls packing their bags to follow their newly minted husbands to the north, some of them already with a babe in their bellies.

Yet there were those, too, who were in it only for a good time and some coin. As much as Arya couldn’t fault them, knowing how limited the choices for some young women were, she most certainly didn’t like to see Gendry spending time with them.

Nonetheless, that’s exactly what she knew was going to transpire after seeing Theon there.

“Gendry, are you coming with us tonight beyond the wall?” Theon greeted Gendry, winking.

“Might be our last opportunity to have some good times before we leave.”

Arya heard him and rolled her eyes. ‘Beyond the wall’ was the nickname for a place indeed beyond the walls of Riverrun, where the gamblers, the drinkers and the womanizers congregated.

Gendry greeted Theon in turn but didn’t reply to his question – probably on Arya’s account, waiting until she had passed them by. Arya stewed internally when she walked past the men, nodding at Theon. A few steps away, she threw a look behind her shoulder and saw Gendry talking to Theon and from the looks of it, not appearing particularly reluctant.

Why it bothered her, she couldn’t explain. It was not as if Gendry owed her any explanations of how he spent his time.

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As the evening went on, Arya became more and more restless, wondering what Gendry was doing. Would Theon and his friends teach him to drink and gamble? Would Gendry be enticed by one of the girls?
The more Arya thought about it, the more agitated she became. Catelyn noticed her squirming and asked what was the matter, but Arya only muttered something about an upset stomach and that she might retire for the night earlier than normal.

After excusing herself, instead of going to her room, Arya slipped outside. Nymeria was there to meet her as Arya had known she would. She had tried to warg into the wolf earlier, but that would have been useless as Nymeria was not allowed ‘beyond the wall’ anyway. Most people in the keep were accustomed to the direwolves, but there were places when their presence was not welcomed as they tended to make people nervous.

“Good girl!” Arya knelt on the ground to ruff Nymeria’s fur, and the direwolf poked her cheek with her cold nose. Arya smiled. “Let’s find Gendry!”

Her steps took her towards the smithy, where Gendry had taken quarters. She might as well first check if Gendry had already returned – and if he was alone – before exploring further.

The evening air was cool, her breath misting in front of her. Arya hastened past the stables, the kennels, and the kitchen gardens until she reached her destination standing a bit away from the rest in case of the ever-present hazard of fire. She stopped in front of the building and noticed a beam of light under the door leading to the backroom. Good. Gendry had returned. But was he on his own?

“Stay, Nymeria,” she whispered to her wolf and sneaked closer. She cocked her head and listened but heard nothing. She took another step, then another.

“Who’s there?”

Damn!

Arya knew she couldn’t run away without being noticed – and she didn’t want to, either.

“It’s me, Arya.”

The door opened and Gendry stood there, his form dark in the shadows against the light streaming behind him.

“Arya, this time in the evening? What is it?”

Arya found herself tongue-tied. Stretching her neck she tried to peek behind Gendry to see if anyone was there, but saw nobody.

“What’s the matter?” Gendry repeated. When Arya still didn’t answer, he sighed and stepped aside. “Whatever it is, you can tell it inside. It better be important.”

Arya stepped in, suddenly shy. It was stupid, for there shouldn’t have been anything unusual in her being alone with Gendry. She had travelled with him and even slept beside him, and just that same afternoon they had met in the barn. There had also been that one time when she had shown Nymeria who was the leader of their pack and had forced Gendry down on the ground and bitten him. Arya could almost taste the salt of his skin on her tongue and she shivered.

When Arya sat down on his bed, the only furniture in the small room, she couldn’t meet Gendry’s eyes.

“Well?” Gendry crossed his arms and stood facing him. Having him tower over Arya made her even more nervous, and she patted weakly at the spot next to her.
Gendry sighed but sat down. “What is it, Arya? You must have a good reason to come here at this hour. Is something wrong?”

Arya had a fluttering feeling at the bottom of her belly and her mouth had long since gone dry. Gendry was sitting so close that she could smell him: sweat, the whiff of smoke always accompanying him, a hint of sour ale in his breath when he spoke. She glanced at his hands, big with blunt fingers, broad and strong. He was wearing breeches and a tunic, which seemed hastily thrown on, as its hem rose high hand left a sliver of skin on his stomach exposed.

“Tell me, what is it?” Gendry’s tone changed. Where before it had been weary and slightly exasperated, now it was soft.

Arya snapped. She had no idea what she was doing and if she was going the right way about it, but she knew she had to do something. Taking a deep breath she turned to face Gendry. He watched her intently, and Arya knew he was worried. He cared so much…

Without a warning, Arya wrapped her arms around Gendry’s thick neck and pressed her mouth against his. She didn’t truly know how to kiss, but she had seen it often it enough to try, at least.

“Arya!” Gendry gasped and pulled away.

Arya drew him back. He was tense and resistant, but Arya’s firm hold meant he couldn’t withdraw again without a struggle. His lips were unyielding under hers, but as she pressed harder and opened her mouth just slightly, they softened.

Arya had closed her eyes but opened them now slightly, to see that Gendry had squeezed his own shut. His brows were pinched together and his expression that of a man in torment.

It was Arya’s first kiss and instead of being weird or uncomfortable as she had always thought, it felt just right. This was to be as close as possible to Gendry, this sharing of breath, this tasting each other. More than that, the sensations were not limited only to where their mouths met, the contact sending tingling sensations throughout her whole body. It was exciting, it was wonderful, it was glorious.

Yet before Arya had time to contemplate all she was going through further, she heard the door banging open, followed by a voice so cold it chilled her to the bone.

“Let my daughter go at once!”

She opened her eyes and saw her father standing there, aghast, hands clenched into fists.

And Arya knew she was in trouble – and so was Gendry.

Chapter End Notes

What will Ned do next; will he shrug his shoulders and leave Arya to do her thing? Has he become a modern parent all of a sudden? Or will he throw Gendry out - or worse? We will see all that in the very next chapter from Ned’s own POV.

As always, comments and also concrit are welcomed!
Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter:
To Arya’s great surprise, she gains admirers from among the Northern troops during the time her family spends in Riverrun preparing to return to Winterfell. Due to this, Catelyn tells her about the engagement she agreed to between Arya and a Frey son, which upsets Arya greatly. She doesn’t share that with Gendry, but tells him about Sansa’s greendreams and suggests Gendry might be legitimised by King Jon someday. Theon tries to befriend Gendry and invites him for a night out, which makes Arya anxious. Restless, she goes to see Gendry that night and when he lets her in, gathers her courage and kisses him – only to be interrupted by a furious Ned.

Chapter Notes

Pheeeewwww, it is over! Game of Thrones TV-show, I mean… It has really wreaked havoc in my writing, as the story and characters in it – especially in the last season - were just SOOO different to what I have in mind when thinking or writing ASOIAF characters. My poor brain simply couldn’t fathom!

I was also distracted by the burning urge to write a small post-finale fic about what happened with Daenerys and Drogon after they departed (you can check it in here; The Night is Not Alive)

Anyway, here we are again, back on track…Big thank you for my beta, Hardlyfatal, who shared my frustrations of the show, and was similarly affected by it. Thanks for sticking with this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ned

“I trusted the boy! I offered him advantages! And this is how he pays me back!”

Ned paced back and forth the Great Hall, presently occupied only by himself and Catelyn. The cold anger he had held in check all the way from the smithy churned inside him and finally he had a chance to air it.

Catelyn sat at the end of the table, her hair dishevelled, covered by a cloak she had hastily grabbed when Ned had knocked on her door and with a clipped tone asked her to accompany him, then and there.
After interrupting Arya and Gendry – Ned’s stomach roiled when he thought what might have happened next, had he not been there – he had dragged Arya back amidst oppressive silence. He hadn’t known what to say and had decided better to say nothing at all until his worry and anger had had a chance to subside.

Thank the gods he had seen Nymeria outside the smithy, behaving oddly. The sight of the direwolf itself hadn’t been unusual, she often spending time with Gendry, but something about her behaviour had arrested Ned, who had been on his way back from meeting with his commanders.

Nymeria had been standing behind the door, whining and scratching, as if wanting to get in. Ned had approached her with a friendly word and an intention to entice her to come with him if Gendry didn’t want to be disturbed, and just then had heard Gendry raising his voice inside. ‘Arya’, he had said, and that had been enough to make Ned push the door open – and witness his youngest daughter practically sitting in the lap of the blacksmith.

Ned’s blood boiled again, remembering the shock.

“Where were their hands?” Catelyn asked, stifling a yawn. He knew she had been ready to go to bed, but the matter couldn’t have waited. Ned needed to speak to someone: someone who knew more than he did about raising daughters. He needed his wife by his side.

“What?” Ned turned, confused about the question.

“Where were their hands?” Catelyn repeated, patiently. “Was he holding her or her holding him?”

Ned frowned, trying to remember. The boy had been sitting straight, his arms…

“Gendry’s arms were by his side. Arya’s were around his neck.” Ned shook his head. His little daughter!

“Then it is likely it was Arya who initiated the whole thing,” Catelyn said matter-of-factly. “This is what I’ve been afraid of, and why I have tried to keep them apart. Arya is too impulsive, and after what they have shared…” She shrugged.

Ned latched onto her words. “What have they shared? Has this been going on for long?”

“They have shared hardships and danger together, and it leaves its mark. Besides, he is a handsome young man, and despite how we feel, Arya is growing up, too.”

“But she’s just a child!”

“Not so much of a child anymore. Other young men have started to notice it too – it is just we parents who are blind to it. However, if it is any consolidation, I think they haven’t done anything inappropriate – yet. I spoke with her when she first returned to us, tactfully, and I trust her when she said he never tried anything dishonourable with her.”

Ned felt his anger dissipating a little with that knowledge. The thought hadn’t even crossed his mind before, which might have been naïve of him – but he couldn’t think of Arya as anything else but his baby daughter.

“So you think it was her more than him?”

“I believe so. Gendry is older and knows better, and he knows his position. That doesn’t mean that he was right in doing what he did, letting Arya into his quarters so late at night.”
“So what do we do next?” Ned stopped his pacing and stood in front of Catelyn. It was hard to be so close to her, as if it were just another late-night conversation while they both retired for night, as they had done hundreds of times before. His eyes swept over Catelyn’s long, loose hair framing her face in its luxurious shine. He wanted to touch it, but he knew the gesture wouldn’t have been welcomed.

It was true that Catelyn hadn’t raised her voice or shown her anger since the day of his confession, and she was always polite when speaking with him – but the warmth and intimacy between them was gone. He had apologised, more than once, and she had listened to him, accepted his apologies and repeated that they were the Lord and Lady of Winterfell and they had to work together for the sake of their children and their people, but that was not what Ned wanted. He wanted his loving wife back, but he didn’t know how to get her.

“We have to separate them, and more effectively this time. I thought that by keeping Arya busy with her lessons and giving Gendry all these other activities they wouldn’t see each other so often, and that in time, matters would have solved themselves naturally.”

“If you are sure that it wasn’t Gendry’s initiative, I can’t punish him for something my foolish daughter did,” Ned concluded. His sense of justice wouldn’t allow it, not after all the good the boy had done.

“We don’t have to punish him, just send him away. Isn’t there any task you could assign to him that would see him leaving us for a while?”

Ned thought for a moment. There was a plan to send a group of soldiers ahead to scout for supplies ahead of the main troops. Mainly food, as the long encampment had already used up much of the surplus food in the countryside near Riverrun. He could send Gendry with them. It wouldn’t be a demotion or a sign of his displeasure to anyone else, but just a new task... Yes, that could work.

He suggested it to Catelyn, who agreed with it. Then, the matter having been concluded, she pushed her chair back and stood up. She was going to leave, Ned knew, and knowing he couldn’t follow her twisted deep in his belly.

‘Cat,” Ned called out at the spur of the moment.

His wife turned to her, beautiful and regal, her face a mask of politeness but lacking warmth. “Yes?”

“Cat… will things ever be right between us?” Ned said softly. His rage had left him and all he felt was fatigue and loneliness, and longing for his wife.

Catelyn stared at him for a long time, and for one fleeting moment Ned thought he saw her hesitating. There was sadness in her eyes, and tiredness that went beyond the lateness of the hour. Ned took one step closer so they were only a hand’s width apart. He wanted to reach out to her, but was afraid to do so. He, afraid of her – he’d never imagined to see the day.

Finally, Catelyn drew in a shaky breath. “I don’t know, Ned. I truly don’t know.”

Then she walked away, leaving Ned staring at her retreating back.

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“You know why you’re here, don’t you?” Ned asked Gendry. He had called for the boy first thing the next morning, and Gendry had appeared almost immediately, likely having been waiting near the main door for the inevitable call.

Gendry stood straight, staring ahead of him. He had made eye contact when he had first walked in,
but now seemed to be bracing himself to receive whatever was coming his way.

“Yes, my lord. I want to apologise. It was wrong and I shouldn’t have done it.”

“Why did you, then? Why did I find my daughter in your room, at that time, practically in your lap?”

“I have no excuse for my behaviour, my lord. I did wrong. I should have never presumed,” Gendry repeated stubbornly, his eyes focussed on some invisible spot above Ned’s head. His expression was sombre but Ned didn’t detect any signs of cockiness.

It would have been a perfect opportunity for him to bring up that it had been Arya who had approached him, as Catelyn assumed. Why didn’t he say that? Ned was curious – and not just a little impressed. Maybe he thought Arya would get in trouble if he blamed her? If so, that meant that Gendry cared about Arya’s wellbeing more than his own – which was a worry in itself.

Ned sighed. “I have reason to believe that Arya was not entirely innocent in this matter, either. Hence I can’t punish you too harshly for it. But surely you know that such behaviour with a noble maiden is unthinkable? For anyone, and for someone in your position, even moreso.”

Gendry pursed his lips tight but said nothing.

“Arya is a daughter of a great house and she has been betrothed to a son of another noble house. I know you have noble blood in your veins as well, but it amounts to nothing because you were not born in wedlock. Stannis Baratheon will never pronounce you as his kin and you have no chances to be legitimised, be it King Joffrey or King Stannis on the throne.”

“What about King Jon?”

As soon as the words let his mouth, Gendry grimaced as if wanting to take them back. For the first time during the meeting he showed signs of uncertainty, glancing down at the floor and shuffling his feet.

Ned was taken aback. Sansa’s greendreams were supposed to be a family secret but Arya seemed have ignored it. It was important that this particular matter should stay secret until he was ready to announce it himself. Ned inhaled deeply and chose his next words carefully.

“King Jon? I see Arya has told you something she shouldn’t have.”

“She told me in highest secrecy, and I haven’t told anyone. I swear it, my lord! She only told me because she was so excited about it,” Gendry exclaimed, sweating visibly.

“You’d better keep it to yourself, then. Besides, we don’t know for sure that any of that is going to happen. Greendreams don’t work with certainty. So I would advise you not to get any foolish notions into your head, as they may never happen.”

“Yes, my lord,” Gendry muttered, lowering his gaze again.

Not wanting to keep the boy on tenterhooks any longer than necessary, Ned informed him about his new assignment, due to start the very next day. Gendry accepted it with a stoic countenance, only asking if he was supposed to take his tools with him, which Ned advised him to do.

“You first stop is the inn at the crossroads. Once you get there, you will store all the food you have collected there to wait for our arrival. Some of the men in the party will be changed then, and then you will start again towards the North. This arrangement will continue until we reach Winterfell – and after that, we’ll see.”
“Yes, my lord.”

“I hope you don’t see this as a punishment, and it will not be portrayed as such. I just have to make sure that you and Arya have some time to adapt back to the real world. This is not your private adventure anymore, and I have to do what is best for my daughter. You can understand that, can you?”

“Yes, I can, my lord. Arya is a lady, as I have told her many times. I know my place and won’t give you any more trouble on that account, I promise.”

“I appreciate that, Gendry. We all have to do our duty in our respective positions.”

Gendry bowed stiffly and Ned sent him on his way to talk to the man who had been appointed to lead the purveyor party. Ned sat alone for a moment, wondering how the women in his family could give him so much grief, before shaking his head and turning his attention to the next of the many tasks waiting for his attention.

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Unusually for him, Ned was drinking alone. Everyone had gone to bed and he was the only one awake at that part of the keep, sitting in Hoster Tully's solar that had been assigned first to Robb and then to Ned himself as a field office. He nursed a goblet of wine in his hand, fine vintage from Dorne, but it might as well have been piss-poor ale, so little attention did he pay to its taste.

Ned knew he should be in bed, resting and gaining strength for another busy day ahead. Yet he dreaded to go to his room and the cold and lonely bed within it. For decades he had shared his bed with Catelyn, and although there had been times when they had been separated, this time it was different. She was right there and he saw her every day, saw her smile when she spoke with her brother and uncle, her gentleness when she nursed her ailing father. Showing her love for everyone else but him.

Ned knew himself to be pathetic with that kind of thinking, but he missed her so much it hurt. And so he sat there, in the near-darkness, with only a half-empty flask of wine for company.

Just as he reached to fill his goblet once more he saw movement at the periphery of his vision. He turned – and saw Catelyn hovering at the door.

“Cat?”

She didn’t say anything, only looked at him oddly.

“Cat, please come in,” Ned said, dropping the flask on the table as if it burned his fingers. He tried to think of something to say, anything that would see her stay for a bit. “Arya… did you speak to her?”

Catelyn nodded. “I did.”

“What did she say? Did she have any excuses for her behaviour? Did she understand how wrong it was?”

*Please, stay.*

Catelyn wrapped the shawl around her shoulder tighter and Ned noticed she was clad only in her nightshift. Had she heard him? Their separate rooms, previously belonging to Hoster and Minisa Tully, were not far, but surely not within the earshot? Had she – could she have – come to look for him? Ned pulled out a chair and after a moment Catelyn accepted the invitation and sat. Ned
gestured towards the wine flask, but she shook her head.

“She understood it was wrong and she apologised. For some reason she seemed horrified at the thought what you might do to Gendry. She kept on talking about Mycah and how it was all her fault and how she should have learned her lesson.” Catelyn observed him closely as she spoke. “Do you know what all that was about?”

“I think I do. Do you remember I wrote to you about that sorry incident on the Kingsroad? The poor butcher’s boy entangled in Joffrey and Arya’s quarrel, paying dearly for it.”

Catelyn’s eyes widened. “I do. He was such a nice boy, I remember him always following his father in the kitchens and the butcher’s shed.” She shuddered. “You wrote that the Hound rode him down and Cersei made you kill Lady. Is that what Arya believes you might do to Gendry?”

Ned sighed. “I hope not. I trust you told him of our intentions regarding him?”

“I did, and she seemed to calm down.”

The silence stretched on and Ned felt he needed to fill it with something to keep her there for longer. He coughed to clear his throat.

“It was a sorry mess. I should have never agreed to it, to what I did to Lady…” He rolled the goblet between his fingers, remembering the anger and frustration he had felt at the time. “I thought I did the right thing. I thought Robert would come to his senses if I only had some more time with him in the capital. I wanted to believe the best of him.”

“You always did what you thought was best – but you were not always right.”

Ned winced. Catelyn was not talking about the incident at the Kingsroad, he knew. She was talking about the biggest mistake of his life.

“You are right. I have been so wrong and made many poor choices. And doing that, I’ve hurt the people I love the most.” Ned set his mouth to a grim line. “However, I have learned from them and I shall make it right – or at least I’ll try.”

“What will you do?” Catelyn’s tone conveyed mild curiosity.

“I’ve already sent a raven to Jon to tell him come to Winterfell as soon as he can. I hope it reaches him before he gives his vows, but in any case, I can ask him to visit, at least. I have to wait until we are safely out of the Riverlands and back in Winterfell, but then I shall send messages to all noble houses and announce in front of all my bannermen and lieges that Jon is the true son of my sister Lyanna and Rhaegar Targaryen. The time of lies is over.”

Catelyn’s mouth twitched slightly. “You would be willing to tell the whole world that the honourable Eddard Stark has been lying to everyone all these years?”

“Yes.” Ned didn’t flinch under her scrutiny. “It’s the right thing to do, and an honourable act for the sake of your honour. For everyone to know that your husband never betrayed you… that way,” he added, seeing Catelyn’s raised eyebrow.

She contemplated on Ned’s words for a while, then raised her eyes to his face, her lips slightly upturned. “If you thought it was not safe to declare Jon’s true origins then, surely it’s even less safe now. For now, it is possible that Tywin Lannister and Stannis Baratheon in their scruples may leave the North in peace, but if you tell them that you harbour yet another claimant to the throne under your banner, it would be like raising a red flag to a bull. No, Ned, I suggest you do no such thing.”
Ned stared at her as she spoke: her lips, the curve of her collarbone showing under the shawl that had slipped from her shoulder, the ruddy glow of her hair... he wanted her more than he needed air to breathe.

He had to try one more time.

“Cat, I know I did an unforgivable thing and I will always regret it – but is there truly no way forward for us? I promise I’ll do anything, anything at all you ask, to make this right if I can.” His throat constricted and his voice was only a whisper. “You have forgiven me as your lord and the father of your children, as we have to work together in those roles – but can you ever forgive me as a man – and as your husband?”

He stared at the table and its grain of old wood, smoothed out and tarnished by centuries of use. Slowly, he raised his eyes and saw Catelyn looking at him. Her expression was soft, but pained.

“Why didn’t you tell me, then? You still haven’t told me that,” she said, softly.

“I was wrong, I know. At first I didn’t know you, or if I could trust you. It was foolish, but we were thrown together so unexpectedly and the loyalties at that time were still shifting and in motion. And after a while, you stopped asking about it, and I thought you might have… settled with the matter. I didn’t want to wake the sleeping dogs.”

“I stopped asking as you told me to, and quite rudely at that!” Cat almost hissed. “That was the first and last time I have ever been afraid of you.”

Ned flinched, remembering his other huge mistake of speaking to his wife so harshly. He hadn’t intended to, but her innocent question about Ashara Dayne – a woman who couldn’t have been further away from his mind – and knowing that people still gossiped about such old things had seen him losing his patience. He had regretted his outburst as soon as it was over, but by that time, wide-eyed Catelyn had already fled and he hadn’t known what to do or how to apologise to her.

“When Jon started talking about the Night’s Watch, I thought that would ease your mind of any worries in regards to inheritance…” he tried to continue his excuses for the inexcusable.

“You stupid man!” Catelyn huffed and paused, seemingly at a loss for words. She found them soon enough, though. “It was never only about the inheritance. Yes, I was worried about it, Jon looking so much more like you than our children and at an age with Robb – but it was not the only thing.”

All of a sudden, Catelyn appeared to be on the verge of tears.

“How do you think it made me feel to see you looking at him with such love and longing, imagining that it was not he you saw, but his mother, whom you still loved? Who was so dear to you that you refused to send her son away from you, even if it was for his own good, as if you wanted to be reminded of your lover through him?”

Ned was taken aback. That Catelyn could have ever envisioned there to be room in his heart for any other woman but her, was unbelievable to him. Then again, maybe he had given such an impression, even without intention. He groaned.

“Cat, how could I have loved any other but you? You are the light of my life!”

“How was I supposed to know that? I thought there was someone else. What was even worse is that Jon, who was innocent to any of it, suffered from it. I tried not to let my emotions influence my thoughts of him, but I was weak, and it did. I was awful to him, and I regret it but I can’t take it back. It is too late, now!”
Catelyn had started sobbing, silently, and Ned was torn between wanting to wrap his arms around her and respecting her wishes of not to be touched by him. In the end, his overwhelming urge to comfort her won, and he got up and knelt in front of Catelyn. He took her hands into his own, pressing them between his calloused palms.

“Cat, Cat, please… I am sorrier than I can ever say. It was all my fault. I have never loved anyone but you, and I never will. Even if you banish me from your heart forever, I will never stop loving you.”

Ned turned Catelyn’s hands in his own, admiring how soft they were, how delicate. He continued, opening his heart and revealing all there was, in the faint hope of being able to convey to her how much she meant to him.

“It is not too late for you and Jon, either. Jon will understand. I will tell him myself, I will take the blame that rightly belongs to me. It is just that –” Ned swallowed. “– I never imagined you could love me that much. I know I was not like Brandon and that I must have been a disappointment to you when we first married. When you did tell me you loved me, I thought – I am not sure what I thought. That you had settled with the inevitable and adjusted the best you could. I was so happy, and grateful.”

Ned raised his eyes to meet hers – they were still wet and red-rimmed, but she had stopped crying.

“Oh, Ned,” Catelyn whispered. He recognised the tone – the tone of intimacy. Catelyn turned her hands that Ned was still holding and took hold of his fingers, stroking her thumbs over them. Her touch was gentle and soothing and it was Ned’s turn to want to cry – but he held himself back.

Eventually, Catelyn shifted. “Thank you for telling me this. I will never understand why you did it, but you’re right, we have to move forward.”

Ned peered under his brows, trying to ascertain whether Catelyn was falling back to her Lady of Winterfell stance, inspired by the words of her house ‘Family, Duty, Honour’ – with no mention of ‘Love’. However, it didn’t seem so: her expression was soft and her smile the most beautiful thing he had seen for a long time.

“Will you forgive me, your husband and a man who loves you?” He had to make sure.

Catelyn sighed. “I don’t see that I have any other choice. I have missed you, too. Missed you dearly.”

Her words made Ned’s heart soar. He jumped up to his feet and raised his wife from her shoulders, gently, into a fierce embrace. For a while, nothing mattered but that he was holding her, she was holding him, and the kiss they shared – still tentative and fragile.

“Can I ask you to do one thing?” Catelyn pulled back from his clasp and Ned let her go.

“What? Anything!”

“Will you promise to always tell me the truth and keep no secrets from me?” Catelyn studied Ned and her eyes saw straight through to his core. He had nothing to hide and he swore he never would.

They embraced once again, and once again Catelyn pulled way.

“Is there anything you need to tell me since we last talked to each other properly, before you were arrested?”
Ned wracked his brain. There hadn’t been much he wouldn’t have already revealed about the events of that time, except…

“Well, Cersei Lannister might have tried to seduce me, one time,” he offered, recalling the time when he had warned Cersei to save her children, and her suggestive touch on his thigh, his face, his hair.

To Ned’s surprise, Catelyn smiled. “Might have? What did she do, climb into your bed naked as on her nameday in the middle of the night? As I think it would take as much for you to notice.”

Affronted, Ned told her about the incident before realising that Catelyn had only teased him. In the end he joined her, smiling as he pulled her on her feet. “I think it’s time we retire for the night…” leaving it open and up to Catelyn where she wanted to retire: in her own room, alone, or in his – or take him to her room with her.

“Yes, it is. My mother’s bed is cold and lonely and I would rather not sleep a single night in it on my own.” Catelyn took his hand and led him away from the solar, towards her room – and didn’t let go.

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The next day Ned saw to the departure of his purveying party, Gendry among them. He had let out the word that he had asked Gendry to join the group as a special task, giving no more reasons for it, letting people think of it what they would. It was a feeble explanation, perhaps, but one that was accepted without question. Catelyn had taken great care to ensure that nobody knew the real reason, as she didn’t want the incident to cast any shadows on Arya’s reputation.

Arya moped, but didn’t challenge the decision. Maybe Catelyn was right, maybe Arya was indeed growing up and leaving behind her childish ways. She stood beside her parents now, flanked by Nymeria. Ned glanced at her worriedly, hoping she wouldn’t make a scene seeing her friend truly leaving. Yet he shouldn’t have worried. Arya bade Gendry farewell with a few words and a small nod, and Gendry bowed at her, throwing a sideways look at Ned while doing so.

Ned exchanged some last words with their leader, Ronn from Barrowton, and the group of ten men mounted their horses and started towards the gate in a single file. Gendry rode in the rear of the line, after the horse and cart intended for the goods.

Arya knelt on the ground and ruffled Nymeria’s thick fur, saying something to the direwolf. The animal looked up at her mistress, got onto her feet and galloped towards the riders, almost lazily. Ned followed her progress, wondering if she was going to say her own goodbyes to the man whose company she seemed to like almost as well as Arya’s.

Nymeria reached the last riders and when Gendry noticed her, he leant down in his saddle – he didn’t even have to crouch very low as Nymeria’s head was level with the horse’s flank. The horse didn’t like the experience, whites of its eyes showing, but like other horses in the Stark camp, it too had gotten more-or-less used to the direwolves presence and didn’t shy away too much.

Ned expected Nymeria to return after the goodbyes, but instead, she settled a bit further back and trotted alongside the carts, all the way until the group passed the gate and the wall hid the riders from the view. Still Ned expected her to bounce back at any moment, but time went by and she didn’t return. The small crowd of well-wishers started to disperse and Catelyn turned to go, flashing a brilliant smile towards Ned.

The previous night had been all he could have wished, Catelyn as loving as before, with an added fire and hunger that had matched his own, after having been separated for so long. Afterwards, they had lain in each other’s arms, just listening to each other’s heartbeats and letting the world settle into
its familiar shape once again. He had kissed her eyelids and ears and lips and the pulse of her neck, never happier.

Ned’s heart swelled at the sight of Catelyn’s smile and he could hardly wait until he was back again where he belonged: in his wife’s arms. It had to wait, though, as first he wanted to make sure Arya was fine before he left her.

“Will you stay here to wait for Nymeria?” he asked Arya, who had stayed where she stood, still looking towards the gate. Ned hoped Nymeria would come back soon, for her sake.

“She’s not coming back – for now,” Arya informed him calmly.

Ned raised his eyebrow. How could she know? And if true, how would she cope with being deprived of the company of her friend and her direwolf on the very same day? Ned eyed Arya worriedly, expecting tears or a tantrum or both, but neither were forthcoming. He would have expected Arya to be devastated, but all he could see was a faint smile curving her lips.

“Why do you think that? Why would she leave you?”

“I just know.” Arya smiled. “That is fine, it truly is.” Then she turned to follow her mother.

Ned swiped his hand across his face and sighed.

Women. I will never understand them, not in my lifetime.

Chapter End Notes

What does Nymeria have in mind? Or should we say Arya? Before we find that out, we shall however return to Sansa and to the cat-and-mouse-game she has going on with the Elder Brother…

Any comments, guesses and also concrit are welcomed!
The Diary

Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter:
Ned catching Arya kissing Gendry brings him and Catelyn together as parents and spouses despite the chasm between them. Finally, after a heartfelt discussion, he and Catelyn reconcile. They also conclude that the only way to prevent the budding but inappropriate relationship between Arya and Gendry is to send Gendry away— not as a punishment but only for a special task. Gendry and Arya accept his fate stoically. To Ned’s surprise, Arya even seems to encourage Nymeria to go with Gendry when he departs Riverrun.

Chapter Notes

Well, this chapter packs in a lot— and for Sansa, quite important stuff, and some surprises too! So I hope I’m forgiven for the delay. (Well, still only 2 weeks since last update…)

Thank you again, Hardlyfatal, for sticking with this story and betaing it like a boss!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

The game of cat and mouse in the Elder Brother’s solar continued, neither Sansa nor the Elder Brother giving or gaining ground. Sansa was determined not to let her opponent get away with the vague statements he had offered so far, pressing the matter further.

“What you say about the visiting maester sounds very intriguing. Was he trained in Oldtown?”

“Why do you want to know, dear child? It was a while ago, I don’t remember that much of it anymore, to be honest.”

There. Classical avoidance tactic. However, it wouldn’t work, not this time.

“What do you remember, then? I would be most interested in hearing all you can.” Sansa clasped her hands demurely and leaned back in her chair, shooting an enquiring look at the Elder Brother. He had to understand that Sansa was not going to let the matter drop.

“He came to us already sick. He did come from Oldtown, I recall now, but he had been expelled from the Citadel and had spent a long time in the countryside, wandering from village to village
offering his services to anyone who needed them. A solitary man.”

The Elder Brother leaned over his desk and spoke in a confidential tone. “A somewhat delusional man, too. His mind had started to wander. But he was still a man of learning, and while I cared for him, we had many discussions about wisdom and knowledge. It was then that he told me about this matter, too.”

Sansa’s heart was bounding. A learned man thought to be crazy, ostracised by the society, choosing to live on his own… It must have been yet another time-traveller! How much had he told the Elder Brother, did he know about it?

Did she dare to raise the topic?

Sansa considered her options. If the Elder Brother knew something more, maybe he could tell her, too? It was worth the risk to push on.

“Did he by any chance talk about…the future? About time, and…” she stopped, not sure how to formulate her question in a way that wouldn’t raise suspicions if the Elder Brother was unaware of the matter – if the maester had indeed been just someone with a wandering mind.

The Elder Brother stiffened, his posture becoming as rigid as steel. He frowned and studied Sansa intently. She wanted to squirm under that hard gaze, but instead, firmed her resolve and stared right back at him.

“Now I really have to ask – why do you want to know? Why would you ask such a thing?”

Sansa was sure, then. She took a deep breath.

“I may know something about those things too. If I tell you what I know, will you tell me all about this man and his wisdom?”

The Elder Brother didn’t look convinced, the deep furrows on his forehead a telling sign of his doubts. “What do you know? Pray tell, what could you know about such matters as the future and time?”

Sansa took the gamble and dived straight in.

“Because I am from the future. I have travelled through time to be here – just as I suspect this maester had. And I suspect he told you about it and you know more than what you have divulged so far. Please, it is important for me to know all there is – I need it.”

The Elder Brother’s mouth fell open and he stared at Sansa, this time in astonishment. He shook his head slowly from side to side as if denying what he had just heard.

“You?”

“Yes.”

The Elder Brother stood up suddenly, pushing the table forward. He walked to the sideboard where he kept a jug of ale and poured a drink. His hands trembled slightly, Sansa noticed.

After downing his drink in a few big gulps, he came back to stand next to Sansa.

“Is this really true, my lady?” He was in control of himself again, his tone calm.

Sansa craned her neck to look up to him and nodded. “It is. I came here a few months ago from a
time far ahead in the future; seven hundred years and some. I have hidden it, of course, and with success, it seems. But if there is something you can tell me about this man, something that could explain why this happened and what it means, and if I can ever get back to my own time, I would surely appreciate it very much.”

“To have met one such person… for a long time, I thought he was only rambling. A part of me may still think so, and yet here you are now, another proof that life may not be as we think it is.” He was almost talking to himself now, staring at a point above Sansa’s head. Then he shook his head, slowly, and walked around the desk to fall heavily on his chair.

“Very well, my lady. I will tell you all I can. If you would do me the honour of sharing your experiences, I promise I shall treat your secrets with utmost confidence – as I have done his.” He smiled at Sansa, bashfully. “That was what I was trying to do when you started asking questions. Maybe I have now betrayed his trust –but he has been dead for many years, by now, and will not be hurt by these revelations. Nonetheless, if they can help you, I am sure he wouldn’t mind. He was a good man.”

“Tell me about him, please.” Sansa settled in comfortably, excitement starting to bubble inside her. This man’s story was going to be different than Pod’s, she knew. Pod had been only a child when he had come over and didn’t seem overly concerned about whys and wherefores, whereas this man had been older, and seemingly a learned person too.

During their stay, Sansa had had a few more opportunities to talk with Pod, and they had established where and when exactly both of them had lived in their own time. They had spoken longingly of the things they missed and of people and connections they grieved for. It turned out that one of Pod’s cousins lived in White Harbour and ran a popular restaurant there, one that Sansa and her family had frequented. Yes, Westeros was a small place, after all.

Yet Pod hadn’t sounded as if he desperately wanted to get back. With Lord Tyrion, he had a better position than before and a reasonably good life for someone from his humble origins, and from some of the things he said, Sansa gathered that he truly liked his witty master.

“He came to me, as I said, already a sick man. This was more than five years ago, on a warm and sunny day,” the Elder Brother started his tale.

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Later that evening Sansa was still trying to process what she had heard, working to fit the pieces together using her own knowledge and the Elder Brother’s story to make sense of it all.

The man, Rufus Hightower was his name, had almost certainly been a professor of physiology at the University of Oldtown, she had gathered from the specifics of the story. He had arrived some eight years earlier, and just like her and Pods, his transformation had also taken place in the Red Keep. He, however, had ended up in the Citadel in Oldtown, finding himself as one of the senior maesters teaching there.

Apparently, Rufus hadn’t taken the transition too well, baulking at it and causing all kinds of trouble by insisting to tell his story to the disbelieving Conclave. The confused archmaesters had listened to him politely but then declared that such a thing was not possible and Rufus must have gone mad. He had been offered a small pension and a chance to live quietly in retirement alongside other retired maesters, but he had refused, choosing to leave instead.

As the Elder Brother had already attested, Rufus had then spent several years travelling, serving under one minor lord or the other, or anyone who offered him food and board and some coin.
Eventually, he had become ill and had sought out the Elder Brother, having heard of him in his previous life.

At that point Sansa had interrupted the Elder Brother and declared that she, too, had read about him and had been his avid fan for a long time, that being the reason why she had insisted on visiting him in the first place. The Elder Brother had been embarrassed but also pleased, not to mention astonished, how it was possible that his modest legacy had endured so well when that of many kings had not.

Rufus had spent the last months of his life on the island, eventually succumbing to an illness he had called ‘cancer’, the meaning of which Sansa fully understood.

Sansa had then told her own story, all the way from that fateful day at the Red Keep to the present day. She had tried to describe how it had felt to be more or less ‘inhabited’ by another person – the other Sansa – and how confusing it had been to sense the boundaries of her own self to be so changing. According to the Elder Brother, Rufus hadn’t spoken of similar experiences, and Sansa wondered if that might have been because of his older age, and his previous life experiences already having taken so much room in his soul, leaving less space for the ‘real’ Rufus.

She hadn’t said anything about Pod to Elder Brother, having decided she couldn’t do that without his approval.

At the end of the meeting, the Elder Brother had gone to a heavy trunk stored in the small room next to his study, unlocked its formidable padlock and from among the books and papers inside it, dug up an old journal. Its pages had been sewn together with pieces of string, the handwriting in it was small and compacted, and its pages were littered with side notes, crossed-over lines and additions. He had handed it to Sansa.

“This is Rufus’s journal that he kept when he was here. It is a fascinating read, but I’ll admit I didn’t understand all he wrote. Maybe you will do better, and maybe it will help you to understand your situation more.”

Sansa had held the piece in her hands marvelling the chance to connect with a fellow time-traveller even if in such a one-sided way. She had carried it back to his hut with reverence, hardly being able to wait to devour it, page by page.

She traced her fingers across the first page and the heading it contained.

“Notes and observations from the longest travel, by Prof. Rufus Hightower”.

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If Sansa’s days had been busy before, after the Elder Brother’s surprising revelations they were even more so. Her sessions with Shae continued, as did her rounds to attend the sick and injured, followed by discussions with the Elder Brother afterwards. She told him all she could remember about modern medicine, and although some concepts and cures were beyond their reach due to lack of suitable equipment, analysis methods and medication, he took note of all she said with great interest.

They discussed Jaime’s case especially, and Sansa shared her belief that it might have been only swelling of muscles and tissue around Jaime’s spine that had pressed on the nerves and caused the paralysis, and now that the swelling was decreasing, the nerves had a chance to start work again. She couldn’t be sure, of course, not being a real doctor – but she had read about it and heard some cases of it mentioned when she had worked at White Harbour Central Hospital during summers.
She drew a rudimentary map of spine and nerves and how the site of damage affected how badly the person’s limbs were affected. Jaime’s damage had happened relatively low in the spine, thus allowing his hands and bodily functions to work unencumbered. The Elder Brother was fascinated, and although his diagnosis of Jaime had been more or less the same, he hadn’t known exactly the physiology behind it. His treatment advice of making sure that Jaime exercised with caution to improve his chances of full recovery made sense to Sansa, and excited by the prospect she chose to share the news with Brienne – all, of course, presented as the Elder Brother’s wisdom.

Brienne didn’t say much to that, but Sansa could see from the determined set of her jaw that if she was going to be able to aid Jaime’s recovery, by the Seven, she was going to give it her best shot.

From the little snippets Brienne shared with her about what went on between her and Jaime, Sansa concluded things to be as well as they could be. She still rued the rigidity of times that prevented two people so clearly in love with each other to truly be together – but at the same time, she didn’t fool herself thinking that love could conquer all. This was not a fairy tale, after all, but real life, in real times, with real ties and obligations pressing heavily on both of them. Life simply wasn’t fair.

When Sansa observed the Elder Brother’s child-like excitement and the way he wrote down notes after every little thing she could share with him from the future, going back to his old cases and studying them anew, she was glad she had been able to pay him back in some form, at least.

Sansa even suggested the Elder Brother to start cultivating different molds in a hope of discovering penicillin a few centuries earlier than it had happened. From there on, increasingly confused brothers brought every rotten piece of bread, meat or vegetable they could find to the Elder Brother, and the windowsill of his solar transformed into a makeshift fermentation unit.

As for Sandor, Sansa told him everything and even showed him Rufus Hightower’s journal. He was interested, naturally, but Sansa suspected it had more to do about seeing how excited she was about the discovery than the merits of the case itself.

It was just as well, as Sansa deliberately wanted to divert focus away from her and her origins in order to delve deeper into the mystery of who he was and what had made him the way he was, and to finally get behind that impenetrable wall he had built around himself. Sansa relished the opportunity, and on many evenings she asked Sandor to tell more about his life. She started with small, inconsequential things, only practical matters and straightforward enquiries. After he answered – and he mostly did, only a few times refusing to be drawn into the topic – Sansa asked some more, bit by bit. It was slow progress, but after every session, she thought she had discovered something new of her lover.

Yet a big chunk of her time was taken by trying to decipher Rufus Hightower’s text. It was hard to read, not only due to the small size of the writing but because of all the references, side notes and text being crossed over and replaced with another, that were scattered throughout the pages. Through it all, she started to feel kinship and affection towards that intelligent but ultimately traumatised man, who had never been able to quite accept his fate. It was slow going, but the more she laboured, the more she was rewarded with new fascinating insights.

Rufus had developed many theories about the nature of time-travel, aided by his earlier research at the university and his study of old scrolls in the Citadel. As Sansa discovered through his writing, his speciality had been the physiology of out-of-body experience, induced by various traumatic events such as brain injury, near-death, drugs, and artificial stimulation of the brain. He had drawn his theories from his vast research and now, to her relief and delight, Sansa was the beneficiary of his wisdom.

Rufus had also studied the phenomenon of White Walkers and their companions, wights, aided by
the Citadel’s rich library, which had held many volumes of learning about those peculiar phenomena. Combining his modern knowledge with ancient texts and eyewitness accounts, Rufus had concluded that the modern theory for especially the existence of wights – a result of a devastating viral infection and physical colonisation of a body by unusual cold-metabolising bacteria – was the only plausible explanation. A terrifying disease, which, if allowed to spread, had no cure and no recovery and presented a great danger to mankind. The only thing that could kill the beings was fire.

Rufus hadn’t found anything new about the origins of the White Walkers, and there, too, tended to rely on his modern belief that they were indeed an earlier form of humans, diverted from the phylogenetic tree a long, long time ago. Interestingly, he had discovered that they could be killed by dragon steel, also called Valyrian steel, and dragonglass, also called obsidian, but not by normal steel. He hadn’t been able to make sense of the reasons for it and had put it down as only one more of the many mysterious things he had discovered in his studies.

After reading that particular section, Sansa had to put the book down for a long time and think. The threat was still present, up in the North where she was going. What should she do?

In the end, any notions or doubts she might have harboured earlier about how she should react in regards to the Others solidified to a firm belief that she had to do whatever she could to help to eradicate such terrible pestilence... no matter the cost. The loss of a possibly ancient race of humans would be an unfortunate side-effect, but couldn’t be helped. The threat to humankind was just too great.

Yet even more of interest to Sansa were Rufus’s notes about historical events pertaining to the War of the Five Kings. Besides expertise in his own area, Rufus had apparently had a fascination for history as well. His arrival in times of such upheaval had inspired him to jot down as much as he remembered about the events as they had been recorded later: who were the players and who allied with whom; which events led to what outcomes, who were the winners, who the losers – as much as there ever could be winners in any kind of war.

Sansa was captivated by what she read. She already knew the broad outlines of general events, and a bit more about the history of House Stark, but to learn more details could only help her in her current position. Sometimes she read Sandor choice quotes from Rufus’s notes, who listened in awe how the events, whose beginnings he had witnessed, had turned out later. Might have turned out, as Sansa reminded him. By then, they had already changed too many things for events to unfold exactly as they had before, and Sansa was determined to change them even more.

None of those topics, however, meant as much to Sansa as Rufus’s notes about time-travel. It seemed that the concept of it had been heard in Westeros even at that time, but only by few, and stories of it had been buried deep and lying dormant in the libraries of Citadel until Rufus had started to investigate them.

It took several weeks for Sansa to decipher that treasure trove of wisdom, going through the thick book page by page and making notes as she went. Sometimes, after Sandor had left, she stayed up late in the night, reading by candlelight until her eyes grew heavy from the strenuous effort, but she just couldn’t stop.

In the end, after re-reading and organising her notes, she concluded that although all of it was just theories, none of them proven, it seemed that time-travel was not quite as easy as she had started to suspect after first meeting Pod, then learning about Rufus. It required several conditions to be aligned perfectly for it to occur, something Rufus referred to as ‘The Vale cheese model’. Sansa had heard of it in the context of assessing risks in the modern world, where multiple slices of cheese with their distinctive big holes had to be stacked one after another with holes aligned perfectly for anything to
Rufus attested what Sansa had also construed, namely that time-travel was not the actual travel of the body but of a mind only, to inhabit the mind of the same person’s previous incarnation. *Cohabiting,* to be precise, although from his writing Sansa discerned that indeed, Rufus had been struggling with getting into terms with the real Maester Rufus, whose body his modern mind had inhabited.

Receptivity of the person was one thing, in both dimensions. The time of the year played a role too, Rufus speculated, times near the change of seasons being more susceptible. Then there were the magnetospheric conditions in the upper atmosphere of Planetos, needing to be just right to allow the mind to make the jump. He speculated there to be circularity in those times, some conditions and times being more suitable for individual people and being presented to them at regular intervals, likely happening once every calendar year.

Another unexpected factor was something concrete needed to bind the past and future self together at that precise moment: something tangible and real, an ‘anchor’ grounding metaphysical to the physical. It could be a piece of jewellery or any object, even wooden or fabric, as long as that same precise object had travelled through time in a conventional manner and was in the possession of the person at the same time in the past and in the future when the jump occurred.

After reading that part, Sansa put the journal down and stared at the ring in her left index finger. It was unremarkable enough: a wide silver ring with a stylised wolf’s head with crudely formed ears, eyes and nose. When she circled it around her finger she realised she had never questioned its presence even though all her other belongings, including clothes and the earrings she had been wearing that day in the Red Keep, had vanished.

All but this ring… She had received it as a birthday present from her parents not long after their visit to Winterfell, where Sansa had first experienced that strange feeling in Sansa’s chamber, and after which she had become interested in the history of her family. Her parents told her they had bought the ring from an antique shop in Wintertown, and the owner had assured them that it was a genuine article: the kind of ring typical to the members of House Stark as a recognition of the sigil of their house, a direwolf.

Sansa had loved the ring at first sight and had sworn never to remove it from her finger – and it seemed she hadn’t.

Sansa touched the slanted eyes of the wolf with the tip of her finger. Had the real Sansa been allowed to wear a symbol of her traitor house even in the court of its enemies? As unlikely as it sounded, it must have been so, she wearing that very same ring at that very same moment – and that being one more thing in the string of events that had seen her whisked through the time.

Sansa shared all her findings with Pod, whom he introduced – with his approval – to the Elder Brother. She also asked if Pod remembered any item he might have had in his possession both at the modern time and at the time of his jump. After much pondering and rubbing of his brow, Pod recalled that he had found a small coin in the cellars of the Red Keep, buried in the dirt. He remembered picking it up and admiring its worn features, not recognising the image of the king in it, but surmising it must have been old, mysteriously laying there without being discovered by anyone else before him. And when finding himself as Podrick Payne, he had found a coin in a little pocket of his jerkin, never thinking much of it before Sansa told him about Rufus Hightower’s conclusions.

Pod had lost the coin since then, using it for buying food after his benefactor had been hanged. After hearing from how, with such a little thing, his whole fate had so drastically changed, he had been quiet and subdued for the rest of their meeting. Sansa felt sorry for him, she truly did. However, she hoped that understanding a little bit more about the phenomenon that had seen them there would give
him, too, some comfort.

Even more excitedly – and that was the part where Sansa’s heart started pounding and she had to take several deep breaths before continuing – Rufus had also developed a theory how a person could return to his or her future form. It was pure conjecture, he not having found any examples of it actually having happened, but it sounded plausible enough to Sansa, and the manner of it explained why no successful cases had been discovered.

Firstly, the person in the past and in the future had to carry an ‘anchor’ that linked them between their times. Not necessarily the exact same thing that had linked them during the initial transition, but something that existed both in the past and in the future and was being worn by both incarnations of the physical person at the same time.

Secondly, the person to return had to be in a place that was conducive to such a jump, a ‘shallow’ place, where the veil of time was at its weakest. It was usually a place that held a big significance for that particular person, but sometimes places that had been significant to the fates of many people became so worn out that even people with no substantial links to that place could get through. However, one could enter in one direction only from one place, and for a mind to return back to the future, the person had to find another shallow place for the transition.

Sansa thought about Winterfell and Sansa’s room, and then her room in the Red Keep. Yes, it all made sense – as did her instinctive hunch that to find a way to get back to her own time, she needed to get to Winterfell.

Thirdly, the time had to be right. Rufus speculated that the most likely time for the jump to being successful was at the anniversary of the original transition. Whether it happened in the first, second or twentieth, that didn’t matter – but it all tied up with the original timing of the event.

Fourthly –and this was the most likely explanation why successful returns had not been recorded – the physical body of the person in the future had to still exist in viable condition. Once the mind left the body, it stayed behind, but still needed sustenance to keep it going. If none were provided, the body of the person suffered as a human body is wont to, dying of thirst and starvation within days. If that happened, there was nothing for the mind to get back to.

It all sounded far-fetched and impossible, the whole thing about mind travelling back through time, but Sansa herself was living proof that it did happen, as were Pod and Rufus. So maybe the rest of it could happen too? Sansa was cautious about not getting her hopes up, but she spent many hours contemplating what she had read. Could she… would that even be possible…?

The last thing was the hardest. Her body had surely been found in the Red Keep soon enough by the staff, and likely been taken to a hospital. Sansa cried thinking of the distress of her parents after being told that their daughter had been found unconscious and unresponsive. They had likely flown to the capital that same day and had probably kept vigil at her bedside, pleading for an explanation for her state from the doctors. Her father might have demanded her to be examined by the best doctors in the country, and her mother and brother would have undoubtedly spent hours in the internet searching information about what could cause such sudden loss of consciousness and coma.

Yes, they would have stayed by her side for a time – but for how long? At what stage they would have made a heart-wrenching decision to say their goodbyes and turn off her life support? Sansa couldn’t even imagine if there would have been any brain activity detectable during that stage – and if not, what reason would they have had to keep her hovering between life and death?

Had they perhaps even buried her body – did her real self now lay rotting in the family plot in the White Harbour, or would they have had adhered to her casually expressed wishes to be cremated?
Had her mortal body already turned to ash and dust?

It was macabre to think of those things but think Sansa did, on long nights after Sandor had left and she lay on her bed, following the traverse of the moon from a small sliver of light beaming in through the smoke hole.

Then, even if her mortal body was still kept alive in a hospital somewhere, would she still be wearing her ring? Hospitals were strict about removing any jewellery from the patients, lest they interfere with the sensitive equipment used to study and monitor them.

Even so, was Sansa’s room in Winterfell truly the shallow place she suspected it to be? Would she be there at the right time, exactly one year after her arrival? It was still over 6 months away – would everything go well and would they reach Winterfell – and stay there?

One more thought niggled at the back of her mind, no matter how hard she tried to ignore it. Having found her family, having inhabited Sansa of this time more and more, having fallen in love with Sandor and found happiness with him…

…would she want to go back?

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As much as Sansa hoped that time could have stayed still, allowing her to enjoy those intensive days of learning, companionship and love in the Quiet Isle, much too soon time for their departure approached. She had, after all, given her word that she would return to the inn by the time the Northern host with her parents and her siblings would be back on their way to Winterfell.

Only a few days from the agreed date of departure, she was breaking her fast in the guest hall alongside most of her companions. Brothers not being much of a company due to their vow of silence, the accord gained during the journey had persisted, the Lannister and the Stark troops mingling freely with each other.

Just as Sansa was about to comment to Brienne about her plans to go and collect herbs from the seaside of the island, the big doors of the hall opened with a bang. All heads turned towards it and to the group of soldiers walking in good order, two abreast, only to break apart after entering and continuing at a brisk walk along the wall. Before the diners had time to react, the hall was surrounded at all sides, the men then stopping and turning towards the middle of the room.

The soldiers wore the red and gold of Lannister, and Sansa’s hair raised on her arms and nape. She glanced at Tyrion, who was sitting two seats away from her. Was this something to do with him? Yet he looked as surprised as the others.

The Elder Brother got up from his seat but before he had taken a step, one more figure entered the hall. A tall, slender, broad-shouldered man in his fifties. His head was bald but he had golden side-whiskers. He, too, was dressed in red and gold, his magnificent cloak speckled with mud.

Yet it was not his looks or attire that caught Sansa’s attention the most, but the way he carried himself. He was clearly someone who was used to lead, looking around the room exceedingly confident with a commanding presence.

She glanced at Tyrion again, and from the loud intake of breath of both Tyrion and Jaime, she knew who the man was even before his words confirmed it without a doubt.

“Jaime, Tyrion – is this a way to greet your lord father?” Lord Tywin Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport, Warden of the West, the head of House Lannister and Hand of the King,
queried in the booming voice that carried across the room.

Chapter End Notes

Yikes! What now? Eeek! And what about all that new information Sansa now has, will all that go to waste? In the next chapter we see how things pan out for Tyrion, who is as surprised as anyone about his father’s sudden arrival. As for the ring in this chapter, the image is from a Finnish company Taigakoru, the ring being appropriately called Wolf Head ring.

Don’t be shy about leaving comments, questions, theories, or constructive criticism, if you feel it is warranted! You can also find me in Tumblr as ladytp!
Tyrion's Choice

Chapter Summary

In the previous chapter: The Elder Brother tells Sansa about another time-traveller, Professor Rufus Hightower, and gives her his journal. In it Sansa finds valuable information about Rufus’s theories about mind’s travels back to its previous incarnation, including speculation about how one might be able to reverse it, as well as more details about the events of the time. It keeps her busy, as does the time she spends with the Elder Brother, Shae and Sandor. Just before their planned departure, however, they are surprised by the unexpected arrival of Lord Tywin Lannister and his troops.

Chapter Notes

Firstly, I want to thank from the bottom of my heart my wonderful beta Hardlyfatal, who has so skillfully betaed this story almost from the very beginning, but who is now moving on with so many other things taking her time - THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Secondly, I want to warmly welcome my new beta, Gefionne, who has graciously agreed to share this story and its struggles with me and you going forward, this chapter being the first one she has betaed - THANK YOU!

The journey continues...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tyrion

Tyrion jumped to his feet as the door opened and Lord Tywin stepped in. Tyion had been sitting and waiting, increasingly impatient, for him in one of the rooms reserved for silent prayers and contemplation. One of his father’s men had directed him there after announcing that his father wanted to speak with him.

“Why did you ask me to come if you weren’t even going to be here?” he asked. The glare he received from Tywin told him his father was not going to dignify him with an answer to such a stupid question. Lord Tywin was a busy man, after all.

He had taken control of the situation fast and efficiently after storming into the hall, ordering Sansa and her entourage to be disarmed and detained and for him and his men to be housed and fed. The Elder Brother had protested at such rude interruption, but after a brief discussion with Lord Tywin, those instructions had been followed to the letter.

Tywin had then perfunctorily greeted his sons and told them to get back to their rooms to wait until
he had time to talk to them privately. Tyrion had felt like a child of ten all over again, and as much as he wanted to stand against his father, he had swallowed his annoyance and done as he was bid. And now he wanted to know what the hells was going on.

Tyrion had felt Sansa’s accusing stare on him when they had been escorted out, but all he had been able to do was to shrug his shoulders apologetically. He hadn’t known of his father’s arrival, so he could hardly be blamed for it, could he? Jaime’s nursemaid, the woman warrior, had glared daggers at Jaime, who had seemed as if he wanted to be swallowed by the ground.

Tywin walked to the small table where some food and drink waited for him, poured himself some ale and gestured Tyrion to sit down with him. He did.

“Would you care to explain why Ned Stark is not in your custody?” Tywin asked. “And what you are doing here when you were instructed to go the capital?” His tone was calm, but Tyrion was not fooled; he recognised the steel in it.

“Stark is not in my custody because I exchanged him for your son Jaime. Surely he is more valuable to you?”

“I hear that you met Stark and his daughter on the road when you had the numbers, but you escorted them to the inn where more Stark troops were waiting, instead of detaining them.”

“I did – but I had an opportunity to free Jaime and I judged that to be the wiser course of action.” Tyrion was not going to mention the Hound’s ruse, which had blindsided him at first, and he hoped that Tywin wouldn’t hear about it from anyone else.

It seemed it was too late.

“I hear that the Hound fooled you into believing he was on the king’s official business. The Hound. I thought you were smarter than that.” Tywin leaned back, frowning, his drink temporarily forgotten.

Tyrion winced. Who had told him that? Must have been one of his men; Bronn, perhaps? No, he would have waited for a while to see whether it would be to his advantage to tell all to Tywin, rather than rush to it. It must have been Myles Lannet. Tyrion had always suspected he was too ambitious for his own good, and seeing an opportunity to ingratiate himself with the patriarch of the Lannister family, he must have jumped at it.

“It mattered not. I still needed to get Jaime back when I had a chance, so I took it. Especially after your plan for his release failed so spectacularly.” He couldn’t resist the last jab at Tywin’s expense. To his father’s credit, he seemed nonplussed.

“I should have never trusted those foreign sellswords with such an important task. It was their incompetence that allowed the Stark troops to get them.”

“The Stark troops? It was not them who stole Jaime back, but one person alone. A woman. How you chose such unworthy men, I don’t understand.” Another jab. Somehow it made Tyrion feel better, in a petty sort of way.

“A woman?” Tywin’s eyebrows rose. “Not that monstrosity I saw here?”

Tyrion regretted opening his mouth. He had nothing against Brienne of Tarth, she having taken such good care of Jaime – but he consoled himself with the knowledge that the story would have been told by someone else soon enough anyway.

“Yes, the very same,” he admitted.
“Hmmm. Brienne of Tarth, they told me. Well, she is getting her comeuppance; I am handing her to the Tyrells once we get to King’s Landing. Ser Loras has been calling for her head ever since she killed Renly, and this gesture will go some way to appease the Tyrells.” Tywin tapped his fingers against the table. “A shame she did it; it would have been better to have Stannis and Renly quarrel with each other rather than have Stannis focussing his attention on us.”

“Why would you need to appease the Tyrells?” Tyrion poured himself some ale and sipped it, curious about the first real news he had heard for a while about the situation in the capital.

“Because we need them. We need their army to defeat Stannis, and I am doing whatever it takes to get it.”

“And you think that by handing Brienne of Tarth to them you’ll get it?”

“No, but having Jaime marry Renly’s widow, the Tyrell girl, will.”

It was Tyrion’s turn to arch his eyebrows, contemplating. Jaime had proposed to Sansa Stark and would be unlikely to settle for another, judging by his earlier earnestness.

“What about Sansa Stark?” he asked, mildly.

“Sansa Stark will marry Joffrey as planned.”

“Joffrey might not want her back, thinking that the Hound has spoiled her.” As far as Tyrion knew, that hadn’t happened, having heard more of the story of who had abducted whom – but Joffrey might not care.

“Joffrey will do as he is told. I’ll hand the Hound to him as a wedding present – that should make him happy enough.” Tywin dismissed his grandson - the king of the realm – with a nonchalant hand wave.

“Why not marry Margaery Tyrell to Joffrey and Sansa Stark to Jaime? Both would still stay within the family.” Tyrion didn’t want to see his brother suffer more than he already had. Neither did he like the idea of Sansa becoming a Lannister prisoner once more, especially after all his assurances to her that neither he nor Jaime would be false with her. They hadn’t, as Lord Tywin’s unexpected arrival and acts couldn’t be laid at their feet. Yet, if Sansa reciprocated any of Jaime’s feelings – as Shae’s story about the moon tea might suggest – at least the experience didn’t have to be altogether horrible for her.

Lord Tywin looked at him with disdain and started to explain slowly, as if Tyrion was a particularly slow and dim-witted child. “House Tyrell is for the short term; I need their forces immediately to thwart the threat from Stannis. After that, they matter less. Sansa Stark I need for the long term. Once the realm has been settled and Joffrey gets her with one or more children, they can be used to bring the North under our control again. Especially should any unfortunate events transpire to rid House Stark of its lord and heirs.”

He shrugged. “An added advantage of my plan is that it keeps that buffoon Mace Tyrell and his shrew of a mother, Lady Olenna, out of the court. As the Starks will not be there either, trying to influence the king, we will have less troublesome courtiers breathing down our necks.”

Tyrion had to admit that the plan was brilliant and worthy of that old and ruthless statesman. He had to try again, though.

“Lady Sansa would surely be as much under your control as Jaime’s wife as she would be as Joffrey’s. And Joffrey could simply banish Lord Mace and Lady Olenna from the court should he
“Wish to. He is the king, after all.”

“What is it to you to be so invested in her marriage?” Tywin had resumed eating, focussing on it and displaying only mild interest to what Tyrion had to say.

“I believe they have feelings for each other, and what harm would there be in making happy matches rather than those that the participants would fight tooth and nail?”

“Feelings don’t matter,” Tywin answered coldly. Looking at his rigid posture, Tyrion saw it would be impossible to persuade him in this.

“Have you seen Jaime, then, and told him about this plan of yours?”

“I have. The Elder Brother assures me he can be a husband and sire children, and that’s what matters now.”

“His condition has improved much since we came here. The Elder Brother’s treatment of him looks promising, and if he can stay here for longer, he might even—”

Tywin cut into Tyrion’s speech. “We leave tomorrow morning. I have no time to wait. Stannis’s troops are getting ready to sail to Kings Landing as we speak,“

“He could stay behind and go to Casterly Rock later. I could—” Once again Tyrion was interrupted.

“I will not leave him here any longer than necessary. The maesters in Casterly Rock will take over his care. You will come with me as well—no more idling the countryside, bumbling from one mistake to another.”

Tyrion gritted his teeth together. Of course, what else had he imagined? Then, with a sudden clarity he saw what was happening, and a cold band squeezed around his chest.

Lord Tywin didn’t care about Jaime, not as father should care for his son.

Jaime had lost his usefulness as a warrior due to his accident, and Tywin had written him off as easily as he might a lame horse. Maybe even worse than that: he might even be secretly pleased about the circumstances that saw Jaime released from the Kingsguard, finally allowing Tywin’s long-held dream of reinstating him as the heir to Casterly Rock to become reality. His ability to sire children was all Tywin needed, and whether Jaime got better or not, was of no consequence.

The thought was so callous, so cold, that for a moment Tyrion wondered whether even his famously emotionless father would sink that low. Yet the dismissive way Tywin had brushed away the prospects of Jaime’s improvement were enough to convince him.

“What plans do you have for me, then, if I may enquire? Am I to marry some unsuspecting daughter of yet another house you want to secure as Lannister supporters?” Tyrion asked. If Tywin had written off one son, did he have plans for the other?

Tywin eyed at him thoughtfully. “The notion has its merits, but I am not in a hurry. In the meantime, I just want you somewhere where I can keep my eye on you. I’ll be sure to find something for you to do in the capital. If I recall correctly, you did a decent work with the sewers of Casterly Rock – I’m sure King’s Landing would benefit from a better sewerage system as well. We’ll see. Just be ready to leave in the morning.” He patted his mouth with a cloth and waved Tyrion away.

As Tyrion reached the door, Tywin spoke once more. “While I remember; that whore of yours... I take a generous view that she was only keeping you company on your travels, and once you reached
the King’s Landing, you meant to send her on her way – isn’t that so?”

Tyrion spun around, his hand still on the latch. Tywin stared at him and his eyes were ice-cold. “As such, I shall only hasten the process and send her on her way tomorrow. If you insist on her staying with you, I shall hand her to my troops to do with what they will. Is this understood?”

The simmering rage building up in Tyrion had almost reached its boiling point by then, and it was only with extreme willpower that he kept it from exploding right then and there. He had to think things over, but for now he just had to swallow all the bitter pills his father was serving him.

“Yes, Father,” he muttered, before turning and walking out of the room. Fast.

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“So he told you what he planned to do?” Tyrion asked Jaime, fidgeting in his chair. He had been so angry after seeing his father, it had required a long walk around the perimeter of the main building to calm him down. He had seen Lannister soldiers everywhere: standing guard, sharpening their weapons, haggling with the brothers about the food they wanted to buy. Although this was by no means the main bulk of the Lannister army, there were still enough men to easily take over both his and the Stark forces, if it came to that.

Come to think of it, his men were part of the Lannister forces.

Tyrion’s next port of call had been to see Jaime, whom he had found in his room in an agitated state.

“He most certainly did, with not so much as a single enquiry about what I would like to do!” Jaime seethed, his frustration of not being able to stand up and defend himself obvious.

However, there was something different in him, this time. Tyrion couldn’t put his finger on it, but this wasn’t how Jaime normally behaved when angered. The way he spoke - almost unnaturally calm - was something else altogether. His words were weighed, his expression grave.

“What can you do? What can we do?” Tyrion shrugged. He didn’t like the way things were progressing any more than Jaime did. To be given some menial task in King’s Landing – for the Seven’s sake, the sewerage system there was a disaster, and the notion of being reduced to toil in the filth made him shudder. And Shae – if she was evicted here and now, she wouldn’t even get the rewards he had promised were waiting for her in the capital. She had honoured her part of their deal admirably and Tyrion hated to be the one who didn’t.

Jaime didn’t answer and the brothers sat deep in their thoughts for a while. Finally Jaime broke the silence.

“Tyrion, if I asked you to do me a big favour—an enormous favour—would you do it?”

“I already tried to talk to him. I suggested that Joffrey could marry the Tyrell girl, but he had none of it. Long-term planning and all that; he might have mentioned it.”

“I thank you for that, but the time for talk is over. What I would ask you to is”—Jaime took a deep breath—“to help me escape.”

Tyrion stared at him. *Escape?* It didn’t make any sense.
“Not only me, as obviously I couldn’t get far as I am. Hence I ask you to help the whole Stark party to escape.” Jaime observed Tyrion, his expression closed up, waiting for his reply.

“You want me to release the enemies of our house so that they could steal you back, after all the hard work I just did to set you free?” Tyrion said slowly, hoping to make sure that he understood what Jaime was suggesting. And that Jaime, too, understood how silly it sounded.

“Yes. They may be our enemies, but you know yourself that the Starks are unlikely to contest Joffrey’s kingship after all that has transpired and only want to be left alone. Besides, we gave our word not to betray them.”

“We did, but I don’t recall our father being there to make that promise,” Tyrion tried, weakly.

“Nonetheless. I will not bend to his will as easily as I did when I was younger.” Jaime looked abashed and Tyrion knew he was thinking of Tysha. His Tysha. “Besides, I can’t leave my future wife behind. Horrible things will befall on her if we don’t act.”

Tyrion didn’t doubt that. If Joffrey was forced to take Sansa back, his displeasure would almost certainly be targeted at her. As strong and clever as she was – and Tyrion had truly learned to appreciate Sansa’s quick wits and strength – she would be no match to Joffrey and Cersei.

He tried to think. He had heard that the men – the Hound, Jarwin the Archer and Beren – had been locked in the wine cellar under the dining hall, it being the only place with a lock and iron bars. It seemed that even the holy brothers could be tempted by the pleasures of drink.

The women had been herded into one of the huts, probably Sansa’s, to wait for the departure. All Tyrion needed to do was to sneak into the cellars and open the door and the released prisoners would do the rest – if they agreed to the plan of taking Jaime with them. And why wouldn’t they?

He frowned. It was a serious matter for a son to turn his back on his father. And not just any father, but the formidable Lord Tywin Lannister.

“Are you sure? You know what it would mean to you: you would be a Stark prisoner once more. They could trade you to Stannis Baratheon as they intended.”

Jaime grimaced. “I would have to make sure it wouldn’t come to that. I’d have my terms, naturally, for helping them escape.” He threw an apologetic look at Tyrion. “Or rather, you helping them escape.”

“Terms? How do you suggest to negotiate that? I doubt Father would allow us to see the prisoners,” Tyrion exclaimed, not seeing how Jaime could ever get the upper hand in such a crazy scheme.

“We could write to them. If you’d find a way to deliver a message to Lady Brienne and Lady Sansa, and get their acceptance to conditions in return, that would be good enough for me.”

“Lady Sansa would agree on anything to get away, I’m sure. Who is to say she wouldn’t rescind her word once you were out?” Tyrion couldn’t believe his ears. Was Jaime really that foolhardy?

“You obviously don’t know Lady Brienne, or the Starks, for that matter. As odd as it sounds, if Lady Sansa gives me her word that I will not be traded or held against my will as a prisoner, I’d believe her.” The finality with which Jaime spoke plucked a cord in Tyrion’s mind. Oh yes, the famous Stark honour.

Maybe Jaime was not quite as crazy as he had originally thought.
“What about your healing process?”

“I could continue it with Lady Brienne. I am getting better every day, I swear. It hurts like hells, but she is stubborn as a mule and won’t give up on me. She’ll see me through, I know. As far as I can go – and that could be far. Which is yet another reason for me to go with her.”

“You couldn’t get better in Casterly Rock?”

Jaime snorted. “Old Maester Wyler wouldn’t have any notion what to do with me. He would apply his patches and force me to drink his foul potions, but those would be unlikely to get me back on my feet. With the Elder Brother’s instructions, Brienne could. I know it.”

In the end, against all his instincts, Tyrion agreed to send a letter to Lady Sansa. He could ask Pod to deliver it, maybe with food – it was risky, but he had an inkling he could trust the boy. Pod liked Lady Sansa and had spent a lot of time with her, to Tyrion’s surprise. What the two of them had to talk about, boggled his mind, but he didn’t mind it as such.

“What about you? Would you come with us?”

Tyrion shook his head. “Where would I go and what would I do? I don’t have a lady-love waiting for me, nor do I need to avoid Maester Wyler’s dubious care. No, I will return to the capital with Father and see what undignified position he deigns to give me. Maybe I’ll get even as far as to be promoted to the overseer of the stables one day.” He had meant it as a jape, but still, it left a bad taste in his mouth. He tried to lighten the mood by tapping Jaime’s hand. “Besides, you need someone to look after your interests once you are gone. I suspect Father will not take your desertion well.”

Jaime smiled at him sadly and placed his own hand on top of Tyrion’s. Tyrion had a lump in his throat thinking that he might not see Jaime again for a long time – maybe never. To force it down, he got writing utensils and a piece of paper and started writing down their proposal. When he had finished the letter, he read it aloud to Jaime and made few additions as suggested by him, then folded it.

After promising to do his best to see that it was received and responded to, Tyrion left the room. He was still conflicted – could he stand against his own father and his family, even to help his brother? He would have to choose one or the other, it seemed. If he refused to help Jaime, he might never forgive him. If he did help him and got caught, his father would never forgive that.

Maybe he just had to be careful not to get caught, then.

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It all worked surprisingly well. Pod did as he was asked and Lady Sansa’s response was convincing – so convincing that even Tyrion’s sceptical mind, having read her response several times over and tried to detect any hidden meanings or almost invisible caveats, had to accept it. Tyrion had included a request for Sansa to take Shae with her as far as she wanted to go – that was the least he could do for her - to which Sansa had agreed, from the tone of her note dismayed that Tyrion could have even imagined anything else.

Tyrion did what little he could during the day, getting together the necessities Jaime needed on his journey. He couldn’t risk visiting the prisoners during daylight hours, but he made sure he knew exactly where they and their weapons were kept, and where the key to their prison door was stored. It was easy; nobody suspected him, and all his questions were readily answered. He steered clear of his father, who had barricaded himself in a room with maps and letters, his commanders going in and out as he barked his orders for the next leg of their journey.
It was well past midnight when Tyrion left his room and sneaked into the temporary solar his father had used earlier in the day to collect the prisoners’ arms. He wrapped them into a blanket to prevent noise, and carrying that heavy burden he made his way to the cellar. The building was dark and eerie, floorboards creaking ominously despite him treading as softly as he could. He couldn’t risk carrying too bright a light, covering the flickering flame of his lamp with a cloth to allow only the scantiest of beams to guide him on his way.

His heart pounded and cold sweat trickled down his spine. Tyrion knew what he was going to do was betrayal of the worst kind against his house – and yet, Jaime was his family too and he was doing all of this to help him. His growing respect for those damnable Starks helped too – at least he knew they were not going to fight against his family directly. Unless… Tyrion shook Sansa’s odd talk out of his mind. There were no Targaryen challengers to the throne; they were too weak, too poor, they had no support. Two orphans across the sea couldn’t amount to a real threat.

The prisoners were sleeping as he entered the cellar. The swordsman Beren had been injured in the short scuffle in the hall when he had tried to defend his lady against the insurmountable odds; a Lannister soldier had slashed his shoulder. He and Jarwin were sleeping next to each other, Beren’s head in Jarwin’s lap, his injured arm bound in a crude sling. Tyrion hoped the wound wouldn’t slow them down too much.

The Hound was curled in the opposite side of the cellar and was the first to wake.

“What the fuck are you doing here? Came to gloat, is that it?” If looks could kill, Tyrion would have been struck down on the spot, so hateful was the stare the Hound directed at him.

Tyrion was still smarting about the way he had played him for a fool, but a truce of some sort had formed between them and they had been at least civilised in each other’s company. However, it seemed all bets were off now.

“Before you get your smallclothes into a twist, hear me out,” he announced calmly. “I am here to help you escape, so you might watch that tone of yours. If you don’t believe me, read this.”

Tyrion handed him the note written by Sansa and passed the lamp closer, while unlocking the door to the iron cage. The Hound read it, frowned, then stepped out and turned back to Tyrion. Jarwin and Beren had also woken up and congregated around him, snatching the letter from his hand when he lowered it.

“Why are you doing this? What’s in it for you?” Tightness in his face had not relaxed; he was still suspicious. Tyrion couldn’t blame him.

“Because my brother asked me to. If this will help him find his happiness with the woman he loves —your lady—who am I to stand in the way of true love?” At the Hound’s increasing frown Tyrion realised he might not have been aware of it. Well, the matter was going to be out in the open soon enough on their travels.

That the Hound had a soft spot for Lady Sansa was plain to see, and Tyrion couldn’t resist a last jab at the man. He might be freeing him, but that still didn’t mean Tyrion liked him much.

“Oh, you didn’t know that, did you? My brother has asked her to marry him — and from the way things are going, it looks like Lady Sansa is not averse to it. So you may be serving a Lannister again soon, if you’ll keep on protecting your lady.” Tyrion smirked.

The Hound’s reaction was not, however, what he had expected. Instead of a scowl, he stared at Tyrion for a moment, then threw his head back and barked with laughter, thus earning a loud hiss
from Jarwin. He muffled himself after that, but his mirth was unmistakable. Tyrion was confused: what was so funny about what he had said?

“Jaime and Lady Sansa? What the fuck gave you that notion?” the Hound scoffed, still more amused than offended.

“My brother himself,” Tyrion answered rigidly. “He told me he has proposed to the lady and expects to get his answer soon. Now, I know he might not be the favourite son for House Stark, but the fact that he is ready—”

“Oh, shut the fuck up. It was not Lady Sansa he proposed to, but Lady Brienne, you dim-witted dwarf.” The Hound’s eyes narrowed and he leaned over Tyrion, making him increasingly uncomfortable. For a moment he wondered whether the Hound intended to punch him to make their escape look more authentic.

“You really don’t know your brother as well you pretend to, if you haven’t seen him mooning over that lady warrior all this time. Well, it matters not, as we are leaving nonetheless. And if he will find happiness with the woman he truly loves—”

The Hound straightened up and reached for the bundle of weapons Tyrion had dropped on the floor, snatching up his sword. “Now, if we are done with the chit-chat, I suggest we move, and quickly.”

Tyrion was flabbergasted but had no time to mull over the revelation – and it was too late to do anything differently anyway; he had released the men and they wouldn’t go back into their cage willingly. And he still had Jaime to think of.

_This is what he wanted._

Tyrion warned them to be careful about the noise before continuing to address the Hound. He knew he had visited Jaime several times in his room during their time on the island. The odd friendship between them, which had started when the Hound had still been in Cersei’s service, had survived, which made him feel better. The Hound might not like him much, but he would do the right thing by Jaime.

“You know the way to Jaime’s room. Can you get there in the dark? We’ll wait here— the fewer of us moving about, the better.”

The Hound nodded, seemingly having already adapted to the unlikely situation, and sprang up the stairs.

The waiting was always the worst part: waiting for time to tick by, listening to every sound with heightened intensity, watching silhouettes on the walls, expecting the returning footsteps. Luckily it didn’t take long until the Hound was back, Jaime slung over one shoulder, his belongings over the other.

It was time to go. While Beren fumbled with the cellar entry leading to the outside, Tyrion knelt next to Jaime, whom the Hound had lowered by the door.

“Jaime, this is it, then. Are you absolutely sure? It is not too late for you to turn back,” he said.

“I am, Tyrion. I know you think me a fool, and maybe I am—but what’s new in that?” Jaime smirked weakly.

“Is it… Lady Brienne you have been talking about all this time?” Tyrion studied Jaime, whose features were serene and determined – the same conviction he had detected in him earlier was still
Jaime knit his brows together in confusion. “Who else? She is the finest woman I have ever met, and if she’ll have me, that’s more than I deserve.” Then his eyes widened. “Who else could it be? Did you think… surely you didn’t think I meant Lady Sansa? She is a lovely young woman, I grant you that, but couldn’t hold a candle to Brienne, I’m sorry to say.”

Tyrion felt a hot flush on his cheeks. That damned Shae! He should have never believed her gossip!

“Never mind. We are here now.”

“No, wait, you really did think so?” Jaime became serious. “Would you have done this to me had you known all along it was about Brienne?” He grabbed Tyrion by the arm and held it so tight it started to hurt.

Tyrion was abashed—not only that his brother might think him capable of such judgment, but that for the briefest of moments he had actually wondered whether Brienne was worth all the trouble he was getting himself into. That disappeared soon enough, though. He was doing this for Jaime – whatever he wanted.

He squeezed Jaime’s hand on his arm. “Of course I would have. I was only surprised. And maybe it hurt my pride to be so wrong about it. I like to think of myself as passing clever, but obviously in this I was a fool.”

Jaime smiled. “Never a fool, little brother.” He reached out to pull Tyrion down for an embrace, and once again Tyrion’s throat constricted. His big brother, his brave big brother - he was going to miss him.

“We'll meet again. I know we will. Until then, take care of yourself.”

“You too, little brother.”

The Hound coughed and the farewell was over.

Tyrion stepped out first to make sure their route was clear. The plan Sansa had suggested included meeting at the boathouse, Jaime’s condition making escape by boat the easiest option. She had also suggested a diversion where half of them would escape by road, which made sense to Tyrion. He didn’t know the details, but likely Sansa herself, Jaime and possibly Brienne would take the boat, the men leading possible pursuers by road.

They hurried ahead, Tyrion having found out earlier how to get the boathouse and leading the way. A half moon cast its eerie light over the landscape, making the shadows look like living things, the slightest sway of tree branches appearing as approaching men and making Tyrion almost jump out of his skin. Yet they saw nobody and proceeded in good order over the crest of the hill, after which the path took a sharp turn and started to descend.

Tyrion didn’t plan to go all the way – that would have been too risky – but once he was sure the men could find their way on their own, he stopped. No time for dramatic goodbyes, he simply squeezed Jaime’s hand one more time and nodded curtly at the Hound, who returned his nod.

“Good luck - I mean it,” the Hound grumbled. “I owe you a debt for this.”

“I'll collect it later,” Tyrion quipped. “Good luck to you too. Take care of my brother.”

He watched the men’s retreating backs for a moment before turning back. The sooner he was back in
his room, the better. He would wake up in the morning to the uproar and chaos caused by the prisoners’ escape, pretending to be as horrified as the others.

Lord Tywin would be fuming and would probably suspect one of the brothers of helping the escapees – but the Quiet Isle was well-known to be neutral in the squabbles of the lords, so Tyrion hoped Tywin wouldn’t do anything drastic. Besides, he was in a hurry to get to the capital, so that should help too. He would send men after the escapees, but he couldn’t send all of his troops, giving them at least a chance.

Tyrion was deep in thought as he approached the main entrance, and so didn’t see the man standing in front of it.

“Where have you been?”

Tyrion gasped at his father’s voice. He stood in the shadows but stepped out and walked towards Tyrion.

“An odd time to go for a walk.”

“I could say the same to you. Why are you not in your bed?” Tyrion tried to deflect, furiously thinking of a good excuse.

“I have no time to sleep, too many important matters requiring my attention.” Tywin had reached Tyrion and stared at him, stony-faced. “The same can’t be said about you, so I ask again: where have you been?”

“Just for a walk. Many things to think about. But it’s time to get some rest, so if you’d excuse me…” Tyrion tried to walk past Tywin, who laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Something tells me it is never that simple with you.” He narrowed his eyes. “If I were to go see our prisoners, would I find them sound asleep where I left them? You seem to have taken an unusual approach to treating with the enemies of your house: consorting with them as if they were your friends.”

“I can’t vouch for their sleep, but undoubtedly they are where you left them. I haven’t seen any of the Stark entourage since this morning.” Tyrion knew he was walking on thin ice, but there was still a chance to play innocent.

“Good. Then you’d have no objections if we go and check on them right now. Maybe there is something you would like to say to them.” Tywin’s grip on Tyrion’s shoulder hardened and he turned and practically dragged Tyrion with him back towards the main building.

Tyrion cursed. If they went to the cellars and found them empty… His game would be over. Lord Tywin didn’t take kindly to those who betrayed him, and being his own son was no protection. His head might not be chopped off, but at the minimum he would be kept under house arrest for the rest of his life—a prisoner even. His father had no love for him as it was, nor trust in his abilities, and Tyrion saw his life flashing in front of his eyes: empty, lonely, deprived of all opportunities to forge a role for himself in the world. He closed his eyes and felt despair.

But what could he do? Lord Tywin had him in a tight grip, and if he somehow wrenched himself free and ran, how far could he go before he had soldiers chasing after him and bringing him back?

While they walked, first into the building and then to the cellars, Tyrion frantically ran different possible scenarios of how to save his skin through his head. He could blame one of the brothers, perhaps, even the Elder Brother himself? That lie would be discovered soon enough, though, so no
good. Maybe he could bribe Pod to take the blame and reward him so handsomely he would never again have to earn his wages as a squire? However, unfortunately men without their heads were unlikely to enjoy such rewards, and Lord Tywin had executed men for less.

They reached the cellar door and Lord Tywin opened it and stepped inside, dragging Tyrion behind him and releasing him only once they reached the stairs leading down.

“I had better find the prisoners sound asleep down there,” he stated as he started to descend the steps. His voice was cold, and the realisation that there simply was no way out of the situation hit Tyrion so hard he recoiled. Even had he been innocent of the deed, his father might see fit to accuse him of it as a convenient way to lock him up once and for all.

Reeling from the recognition that there was no way out, Tyrion stopped, swaying on his feet. Catching his breath, he glanced at the wall and noticed a rack of the barrel lids lined up against it. They were made for the big grain barrels and were sturdy and solid…

Without a fully formed comprehensive thought in his head Tyrion acted instinctively: he grabbed the closest lid, lifted it with both hands and bore it down at the back of his father’s head. He had descended just enough to give Tyrion a good angle for the hit.

A loud thwack and Lord Tywin, the Hand of the King and the Warden of the West, keeled down, first on his knees, then the inexorable pull of gravity hurled his body down the steps, first slower, then faster, in a tangle of arms and legs, until he landed on the floor with a shuddering thud. And didn’t move.

Tyrion’s heart thumped in his chest so loudly his ribcage felt like exploding and cold sweat ran down his forehead in rivulets.

_Is he dead?_

He couldn’t see a tell-tale pool of blood spreading under his father’s head – but he was terribly motionless. He should really go down to see for himself.

_And then what?_ a voice inside his head asked. If he wasn’t dead, Tyrion would be in the same situation soon enough again – unless he killed his father. And Tyrion wasn’t sure if he could kill him in cold blood.

No, better just run - and right away.

The next moments were a blur that Tyrion couldn’t remember in detail later. All he knew was that he had to get away, so he shut the cellar door and turned the big key in the keyhole to lock it so that even if Tywin woke up, he couldn’t get away. Then he went to his room and collected all the coin and valuables he had, throwing some warm clothes into his bag as well. Finally he rummaged through his father’s belongings in his makeshift solar, grabbing more coin and a small box full of letters. The last things Tyrion picked up were a dagger and a crossbow, and after slinging the latter over his shoulder, he sneaked out of the building through the back door and broke into a sprint.

It had been a while since the group going by boat had left, and they must have slipped away already – but he might still reach the other group travelling by land.

He veered towards the mainland and ran faster, ignoring the tall grass and bushes scraping his skin and the uneven surface of the ground threatening to twist his ankles.

Tyrion ran for his life.
Chapter End Notes

So, things didn't go quite as Tyrion planned... but when do they ever? Where will he go? Will he be welcomed by Sansa's group?

The next chapter follows the previous events from Brienne's point of view, so we will have a better insight into what happened with Sansa and her friends after Lord Tywin's surprise arrival...

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