The Tale of Two Sisters and a Hound

by LadyTP

Summary

What if Arya and Sandor's bond would have started to develop already in Winterfell? How things might have changed, and what impact it might have had on Sandor and Sansa's relationship?

“I know who you are; you are the Hound. I know your name too, it is Sandor Clegane.”

“Hmmph. So it is. Don't wear it out.”

AU deviating from the start of GoT.

Notes

'Tis the season to be jolly - and for another holiday exchange story... This time this is a gift to fabulous starbird1, written for her prompt: "Sandor and Arya strike up a friendship either in WF or KL. How does this help/hinder Sandor's feelings for Sansa and/or Sansa's feelings for Sandor?"

This will be a multi-chapter story, but as for how long, we'll see. This also incorporates a few new challenges for me; young and naive Sansa and a bit of a new writing style trial. Please note that this is not beta'ed, so any grammar and other mistakes are unfortunately a result of my failings...

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Anything But a Good Start

Sandor & Arya

“The bloody hells you think you are doing?!”

“I was…just looking.”

“Just looking you say. For what? Get off before I smack your arse.”

“I didn’t touch anything, I swear! I only wanted to have a closer look…”

“Of what, my sword? Why in the seven hells a scrawny lad as yourself would want to fiddle with my sword? It is not for the likes of you. Bleeding hells, a man leaves his weapons unattended to take a piss and some no-good stable boy is already sniffing around them. A fine order the old wolf has in his household.”
“I am not a boy! Or no-good! Besides, you are a guest here but this keep is ours; I can go where-ever I want!”

“Well, at closer look, I can see that. Still, too bloody many freedoms up here in the North, even for wet-nosed little girls.”

“I am not wet-nosed either! This is my father’s keep and you better remember it.”

“So you are the younger Stark girl? The one they say is a wild one? I should have guessed. Even so, scoot away. You have no business with me or my things.”

“You are mean. I will tell my father.”

“Go on, run to him then. I am guarding the future king and I have no time to care about what little wolflings think of me. Hurry!”

Sansa

Sansa could never forget the first time she saw him.

First she had eyes only for Prince Joffrey, recognising him immediately among the column of riders both from his magnificent outfit and his position immediately following King Robert and the Kingsguard with their pillowing white cloaks. He was so beautiful, so noble!

Next her attention was drawn to the man riding only a few steps behind the prince. He was one of the largest men Sansa had ever seen, and that he was prince’s shield was obvious from his stance, the huge broadsword strapped onto his back and the menacing helmet in the shape of a snarling dog covering his head. A warrior worthy of guarding such a fine prince for sure! Only the most gallant and brave were assigned to an exceptional task like that; all the songs said so, Sansa knew.

Her heart raced and her palms felt clammy when she impatiently waited for the greetings and introductions to reach her. She wanted her father and King Robert to hurry, but they only laughed and japed like only old friends can. Glancing around Sansa noticed that the tall warrior had also dismounted. He was as impressive on foot as on horseback, and standing behind the royals he slowly removed his helmet to reveal the ruin that was his face.

Only years under the stern tutelage of Septa Mordane prevented Sansa gasping at the sight – how could such ugliness exist so close to the beautiful prince? The man’s features were hard, his jaw square and nose prominent, but it was the hideously scarred side that caught her eyes. Uneven, deeply crevassed skin, pulled tightly across his cheek and jaw bones and looking so horribly red and raw… His other ear was missing, leaving behind only a black hole, and his mouth looked as if it was eternally drawn into a tight scowl.

Sansa knew it was impolite to stare but she couldn’t help herself. She had never seen anything so ugly and not even the man’s dark hair, pulled on that side in a futile attempt to cover the affronting sight, could improve the ugliness that manifested itself in the middle of the main yard of Winterfell. Sansa shivered.
The man’s gaze travelled around the yard taking in the sight of Winterfell men guarding the palisades and controlling the curious smallfolk gawking at the royal entourage, the welcoming group consisting of all members of House Stark and other officials of the keep and the many buildings surrounding the enclosure. He seemed to take it all in with intensity and concentration, his gaze not wavering from its set course. In turn it swept past Sansa and despite quickly lowering her eyes Sansa was not fast enough and she got caught. A flash from his piercing grey eyes held her for a second before it moved on.

Sansa sighed in relief and turned to look at her Lord Father, when from the corner of her eye she saw that ugly man turning his head fully back in her direction and staring right at her. For how long, she couldn’t say, because for her immense relief her father finally beckoned her to approach the royals.

“And here is my oldest daughter Sansa, Your Grace…"
“Not you again?!”

“I am not anywhere near your things!”

“I can see you. That is bad enough.”

“I know who you are; you are the Hound. I know your name too, it is Sandor Clegane.”

“Hmmph. So it is. Don’t wear it out.”

“Why do you have to be such a grouch? Everyone says that you are the vilest person in King Robert’s household. You don’t have any friends and all you do is practice or drink.”

“Is that what they say? Well, they are right. Except that I am not drinking here – much. I have to keep my wits about me with the Northerners. Rebels the lot of you.”

“That is not true!”

“So it wasn’t Lord Eddard who raised his banners against his lawful king and rode all the way to King’s Landing to get rid of the mad king?”

“Well, it was him, but he had to do it. Besides, so did King Robert and Lord Tywin. You are a Lannister man; are you a rebel too?”
“I don’t care enough of the highborns quarrels to rebel. I do what Lord Tywin tells me…wait, why am I arguing with a stupid girl? Run away and leave me alone.”

“I am not stupid. And I can be here if I want.”

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“Fine, fine, I am leaving – let go of my arm! Ouch!”

Sansa

"The ornament of the court, that you shall be, my lady!"

"The beautiful blossom of the North, so fresh and bright among the faded flowers of the South!"

Sansa knew that the knights paying her those honeyed compliments were only polite, but it didn’t diminish her enjoyment of hearing them. At home she had always been considered as a child, but these young men of the court saw in her a young woman, and a beautiful one, even. The attention she received went straight into her head like a sweet summer wine she had sometimes tasted in the celebrations and she let herself get intoxicated by it.

She smiled at the youths but only demurely, as a lady should – especially a lady who was betrothed to another. Sometimes Sansa still had to pinch herself to make sure that it was not a dream – but angry red marks on her arm told her that it wasn’t. *I am betrothed to a prince and one day I will be a queen. We will have little princes and princesses and we will be so happy together…* 

She swirled around on her spot turning her attention back to Joffrey, whom she had mostly come to see. Before she could catch his attention a shadow fell on her.

The Hound.

Sansa’s mood darkened immediately. What kind of a name was that for a knight anyway? Not that he even was a real knight, she had heard. Of course Joffrey needed to be protected, but couldn’t the task had been given to a more worthy warrior?

There he was, standing between her and Joffrey and looking at her with his usual intensity. A slight sneer and piercing eyes that missed nothing when he let his gaze travel down her body, making Sansa squirm. No honeyed words from this one - a brute he was, if the stories she had heard were anything to go by. Maidens whispered about him in hushed tones and grown men shook their heads when talk turned to the prince’s sworn shield. He didn’t even look the part, besides his size. His armour was dented and his studded jerkin shabby – surely the court could dress him more appropriately?

Sansa felt a stab of anger at the man who was a complete opposite to what she thought he should be; a gallant noble knight, handsomely attired and ready to lay down his life in protection of his charge. Besides, shouldn’t he show more deference to her now that she was Joffrey’s betrothed? Sansa had an uncomfortable feeling that unlike other men who gazed at her with appreciation this man was looking down his nose at her. At her! How did he dare?!
“Isn’t it too cold for flowers in here?” he rasped. “I hear they grow only in glass houses, and when you take one out it soon wilts and dies.”

“Our glass houses are famous for our blue roses, which are rarest of all flowers. Not that I would compare myself to one though; you must know it was just a figure of speech, good ser.”

“I am no ser. And you are not a blue rose; that I can see. And yet you will as surely suffer if uprooted from your safe soil.”

“I am sure I don’t know what you mean. Now if you please excuse me, I need to talk with my betrothed.” Sansa elbowed past that horrible man who chuckled a mirthless laugh before stepping aside.

Anger that was quite out of proportion with the incident didn’t leave Sansa for a long time. That horrible man!
This story is slowly picking up pace - preparing for a gradual turn-around for both sisters in their views about the notorious Hound... Thank you for following and for the comments!

Sandor & Arya

“That was amazing! How did you do that?”

“Did what?”

“The move in the end and how you disarmed Jory – I have never seen anyone doing anything like that! For such a big man I imagined you being much too clumsy to move so fast!”

“Careful girl, when talking to a man still holding a sword.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it in a bad way. Quite the opposite.”

“I have a trick or two in my sleeve. I have had to learn. But why would you care? Young noble girls are not supposed to be watching men fighting, even if just for practice.”

“I am sick and tired of what young noble girls are supposed to do. It is all so dull. Sewing, singing,
practicing reading and writing, bleh.”

“Your pretty sister seems to like that sort of things.”

“Sansa? Yeah, she is the perfect lady. Perfectly boring too.”

“She is just doing as she is told, like a proper lady should.”

“I don’t want to do as I am told. Septa Mordane always wants me to do so stupid things.”

“Why am I not surprised? Nonetheless, now it is ME telling you what to do. And that is; go away.”

“Why am I not surprised to hear that. What harm is it to you if I am here?”

“GO AWAY!”

Sansa

Sansa hurried through the quiet corridors of Winterfell, her steps energised by the audacity of her own actions. This was not the coy and obedient Sansa – this was a new her, a young woman stepping out of the shadows of her parents and making her own decisions. She felt older and more sure of herself just thinking about it.

Suddenly a dark figure detached itself from the darkness and grabbed a tight hold of her elbow.

“What’s the hurry, little lady?”

Dear me!

Although there could be no mistaking of who it was – not only was his low growl immediately recognisable, but who else would be lurking in the shadows like that?

“Ser, you startled me!”

“Haven’t I told you I am no ser? And anyone running towards the royal chambers like that may count themselves lucky if it is only a fright they have to worry about. I could have taken your head off, or tackled you on the ground. Just so you know.”

“I was not running! And I have a right to be here – Queen Cersei told me I am welcome to join the royal family any evening after they retire to their rooms after the meal. King Robert still being with my Lord Father I thought this a good opportunity to take up the Queens kind invitation.” Sansa felt ridiculous having to explain herself to this man, but he was right; he was only doing his duty.

Sansa had been tempted to make the visit already earlier, but when she had mentioned about it to her mother she had advised against it. ‘The Queen was only being polite. Evening is a family time for royals too.’ Well, Sansa was soon going to be part of that family, and so after gathering her courage she had decided that this night was going to be it; her visit to her soon-to-be good mother – and Joffrey. She was curious to see how Joffrey behaved in a less formal setting, hoping it would help her to have a glimpse into their future life together.

The Hound didn’t let go his grip but he slackened it. He was very close, so close that Sansa could smell him; leather, horse, sweat, a whiff of wine. She took a better look at him and realised that he
was still dressed in his usual attire of light armour, his sword strapped onto his back as always. Another glance at where he had emerged, and in the flickering light of the lantern she was holding Sansa saw a low stool propped against the stone wall. A half-empty wine skin lay on the floor beside it.

“You may have been invited, but a wise guest chooses the timing of his visit with care.” The Hound docked his head towards the large door behind which were the rooms assigned to royal visitors. In silence that followed Sansa could hear muffled sounds behind it. Shouts – someone was shouting.

“You were a disgrace! Letting that boy to beat you like that. We should be feared, not laughed at. These Starks already believe they are better than us.”

“But Bran is much bigger than I. I don’t mind that I lost.”

“That is not a point, you fool!”

“Now now Joffrey, don’t be so hard on your brother – although it was foolish, dear Tommen. Remember the dignity of the crown.”

“I can’t wait until we leave this godforsaken place!”

“Me too, my darling. Only a little while longer.”

Sansa felt her cheeks getting hot of embarrassment and she knew it showed on her face. Could it be… could it be Joffrey speaking so ill of his hosts? And Cersei agreeing with him?

The Hound still hadn’t moved but he had removed his hand. He leaned against the wall and his fingers played with the ends of his sword belt. He seemed completely relaxed, as if there was nothing more natural than to eavesdrop the royal family and hold their future good-daughter at bay. Sansa knew he was looking at her but she was too humiliated to look back.

When he spoke it was so sudden that Sansa jumped.

“The prince is in a bad mood. You may want to consider your visit.”

_Oh. Of course._ All Sansa wanted to do was to run back to her room and try to make sense of what she had heard. Yet she couldn’t bolt out just like that, without a word. Luckily the scene in front of her gave her something to say.

“But why are you still here? Surely if the family has retired for the night you could be relieved of your duties?”

The Hound laughed at that, not a nasty snarling laugh she had heard a few times, but one that sounded genuinely amused although it too carried menace in it.

“Joffrey wants his dog around. And so does Cersei.”

“But…” Had he been sitting here all alone, in almost full darkness with only a distant torch in the lower bailey filtering its dim light to his post? Only a wine-skin as his company? Suddenly Sansa realised that there had hardly ever been a time when the Hound was not at Joffrey’s side.

Already earlier she had made an unsettling realisation that Joffrey revelled in parading his sworn shield in front of others, enjoying that such man of great renown was at his peck and call. The first time Sansa had heard Joffrey calling him ‘dog’ in front of everyone she had been embarrassed on his behalf and had discreetly glanced at the object of the taunt to gauge his reaction. Yet the man’s
cragged face had showed no emotion as he had stared in front of him without blinking.

Despite her unease about the man’s unsettling presence unexpectedly Sansa felt sorry for him. Maybe it was no wonder that he was always in a bad mood? Why would anyone treat a man in one’s service like that? All Winterfell men worked hard but Lord Eddard made it his matter to give them back too; time to spend with their families or friends when the duties allowed it.

“Why even here? Winterfell is safe. And other men could take their turn as well, couldn’t they?”

He laughed again. “Cersei doesn’t think so. She doesn’t trust anyone with her precious offspring. And what Cersei wants, Cersei gets.”

His use of the Queen’s first name bordered on insolence to Sansa. Somehow it was…too familiar.

The Hound was still propping himself against the wall. He had stopped his fiddling and had tucked his thumbs under the other belt he kept on his waist for his dagger. He was like a wild animal, relaxed and yet oddly tense as if ready to bounce at the slightest provocation. Yes, as unsuitable as the comparison might have been for the Hound, the prince’s dog, he was like a lazy big cat hiding its intentions behind an unperturbed facade.

Sansa turned around and inadvertently brushed her hand against him. He said nothing.

“If you excuse me,” Sansa cut ‘ser’ out at the last moment, “I will go back to my room. I bid you good night.”

“Lady Sansa,” he growled and for a change his use of her formal title didn’t sound like an affront.
Chapter Notes

Just a short dribble to keep this going...

Also, I have neglected to mention it before, but this is (obviously) deviation from the canon, as far as also in regards to Sansa’s age. It is not specified, and she is young, but not quite as young as in the canon. Maybe somewhere in the vicinity as to what the TV-series portrayed her.

Sandor & Arya

“Can I hold it?”

“Gods, is there no way to get rid of you? I saw you gawking out there while we were training, but I thought by now you had enough good sense not to follow me. And what do you mean anyway; hold what?”

“Your sword – can I hold it?”

“The girl wants to hold a sword that is taller than she is! You probably couldn’t even keep it upright without falling down.”
“You never know if you don’t let me try.”

“Why would I care? But if you are keen to humiliate yourself, there you go. Don’t let it fall, I don’t want any more nicks in the blade.”

“Look, I can hold it fine!”

“Hmmph!”

“Will you teach me? To fight with a sword?”

“All right, but I don’t want to waste any more time. Even if you could actually lift that sword – which I doubt very much – there is no way I would teach a highborn’s get. I have better things to do. And you hold it all wrong anyway – it is not a bloody spear.”

“But what if I would use a wooden practice sword? Bran and Rickon started that way when they were young.”

“A wooden sword? You expect the Hound to practice with a wooden sword?”

“Nothing wrong with that. It’s not like you were practicing. And surely you did that with Prince Joffrey when he was young?”

“With Joffrey? Do you think he cares to practice himself when he can order other men to fight his battles?”

“He is a coward! And stupid!”

“No argument from me there. It doesn’t mean that I’d start training with you with a wooden sword.”

“But what if I would get a real sword of my own size?”

“I can bloody well imagine Lord Eddard giving you a sword! Just what a fine little lady needs.”

“Don’t laugh!”

“Bloody hells, this is too good! That’ll be the day when a lady like you would even need to know anything about swordplay. Cosseted and protected, you or your pretty sister never have to worry about anything. Life is too easy for you and your kind.”

“Ladies of the Bear Island have swords and know how to use them.”

“Aye, the she-bears. You fancy to be one of them? You look ugly enough.”

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“Girl, no need to sulk. Looks are overrated. I should know.”

“I am not sulking. I just…”

“Very well, if you by some fucking miracle get a sword of your own size, I may show you some moves. If you promise to get hell out of my back.”

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++
The next morning when Sansa met Prince Joffrey and Queen Cersei at breakfast she was able to act quite normally. The Queen was as lovely as always in her cool and somewhat detached way, but Sansa didn’t begrudge her for it. It must be lonely work to be the first lady of the realm, especially by the side of a king like King Robert. Sansa knew him to be one of her father’s closest friends but it didn’t make her blind to his obvious shortcomings as a husband and a father.

And they were right. The crown has to think of its dignity.

After exchanging pleasantries Sansa would have been almost ready to forget the whole sorry incident hadn’t it been for the Hound.

He didn’t say anything – of course not, that would have been too forward. He didn’t have to. Sansa could feel his scorn across from where he was standing behind Joffrey’s seat. And curiously for the very first time Sansa thought she could understand him a bit.

She didn’t let any of that show. It had been bad enough that the Hound had been there to witness her humiliation, there was no point in making the incident any bigger.

Later that evening when the big hall was emptying from diners, Sansa too started to make her way to her mother’s solar. She had taken a habit to sit and sew and talk with her mother about the preparations of the upcoming journey. Without even realising that she was not alone she heard a too familiar voice behind her.

“Planning a visit to your future good-family tonight?”

Sansa tensed but didn’t halt her progress.

“As it happens I will not. I have other things to do,” she said in a low voice without turning to look at him. That he followed her, with long languid strides, she knew already.

“That’s a shame. I was almost looking forward to catch you again.”

Sansa gasped. Had it been anyone else she might have thought it to be a flirtatious throw-away, a flattering remark with a purpose of complimenting the lady to whom it was said – but with the Hound it was none of those things. His tone was sombre and the thought of being caught by him again, in that dark corridor, nobody knowing that she was there with him, was frightening. And yet also… oddly exciting.

Sansa increased her pace almost to a run and stopped only when she was in the safety of her mother’s rooms. Her breathing was more laboured than the short distance would have warranted but she didn’t stop to wonder why.
Here we are, one more chapter... I know this must seem going slower than a snail in glue, but I do enjoy taking my time with them. After all, what there is to cover is quite big; the complete change of perceptions and attitudes for the both of them!

In case I haven't mentioned this before, this is not betaed and hence I apologise beforehand for any crimes against English language...

Sandor & Arya

“Look, here it is!”

“Seven hells, don’t poke that stick into my face!”

“This is not a stick, it is my very own sword! I call it the Needle. Isn’t it gorgeous?”

“Needle? What a stupid name for a sword, even for such a flimsy twig as yours. What kind of a cunt gives a name to a sword?”

“Many people do – all the finest swords have names. Ice, Longclaw, Dark Sister... Does your sword have a name?”
“Nah, this is just a piece of good steel I got from the Street of Steel. Only the best for the prince’s dog.”

“It should definitively have a name. What about Fangs or Claws? You being the Hound. Why does he call you a dog anyway, can’t he call you Hound?”

“’Dog’ has only three letters. Easier. Anyway, whatever you say; Fangs, Claws, fucking Balls if you want. I don’t care.”

“You can’t call a sword Balls!”

“Why not? Man as sure as hells needs some if he is about the swing this tough bastard.”

“If Septa Mordane would hear such talk…she would be horrified! Or Sansa! She would get so red, it would be fun to see.”

“Aye, I have noticed. She gets flushed easily.”

“Tell me about it. Every time when that stupid prince gets near her, she gets all flustered and silly. Oh sorry, I should not have called your master stupid, again.”

“Not hair off my arse. And he is not my master. I only guard him.”

“Well, then I shall call him stupid as much as I want. He is an arrogant jerk. I don’t like him at all.”

“Your sister seems to like him well enough for the both of you. Tell me, is it only a mummer’s farce she is playing? Being all so polite and chirpy and happy about being betrothed to Joffrey?”

“No, that’s how she really is. What can I say? She is really dull like that. I suppose we Northerners are not very good at lying.”

“All the worse for her.”

“Worse? What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Nevermind. Now, do you want to me show how to use that stick or not?”

Sansa

Sansa was beyond surprised when she noticed Arya starting to spend time with the Hound. First she believed it to be just a coincidence, the two of them seen together near the training yard or exchanging words in the corner of the Great Hall. Yet the more often it happened, the more baffled she became.

This particular morning she saw them again, Arya talking to him near the Sept of Winterfell waving her hands animatedly in the air. It was astonishing to see the big man responding to her uncouth little sister. Sansa frowned and tried to make sense of it. Yes, Arya had always been quick to make friends and consorted with most unlikely people – people Sansa felt were not truly suitable company for a noble maiden. But the Hound?!
She watched them and noticed how unperturbed Arya seemed to be in the presence of her unlikely companion. She had to crane her neck when she talked to him but under Sansa’s observant eyes the Hound bent down, putting his large hands on his knees and addressing Arya from that semi-crouched position. He wore the same garb he always did; a light armour with a studded jerkin, brown breeches, heavy boots and a dark grey cloak on his shoulders. His armour wasn’t polished and even Sansa’s inexperienced eye could see that it was a soldier’s attire, dented and scratched. She knew she was being unfair but she wondered why he had to look so…crude!

The Hound pointed towards the South Gate at the back of the yard and after Arya followed his gesture she turned back to him and smiled broadly. Then Hound stretched up to his full height and nodded at her, as serious as he would have addressed King Robert himself. Whatever they had been discussing, it was clear that it was over, as Arya turned around and started towards the direction of Sansa.

As her sister approached her Sansa couldn’t help herself.

“What was that?”

“What?” Arya was genuinely taken aback by Sansa’s sudden appearance.

“That. You talking to the Hound. I thought he doesn’t like anyone, least of all a little girl like you.”

“Well that’s what you think. He likes me a lot, so you know.” Arya continued walking and Sansa had to hurry to stay with her. Unladylike running steps and impractical satin shoes were not a good combination and she felt ridiculous. Contrary to her situation, her little sister had a new spring in her steps and carried a certain novel confidence. It irritated Sansa although she was not proud it. She was the one betrothed to a prince, she was to become the next queen of the realm. What was Arya’s new friendship – if that was what it was – with the Hound compared to that?

Sansa glanced one last time behind her shoulder and saw that the man in question had turned towards them and stared straight at her. His eyes were as cool as ever and something in his gaze and its intensity made her shiver. Nobody had ever looked at her thus – even the admiring looks of the young men of the court were always courteous and seeking her approval for taking such liberties. A glance, a quick look away, a sudden turn of a head and finally a shy smile – she had learned how to respond to those wordless appeals.

With the Hound anything of the sort was impossible – even had she wanted to. And she most certainly didn’t. Sansa felt as if she was a doe and he was a hunter, assessing coldly whether she was worth the arrow and a kill.

Sansa shook the feeling away and turned back to Arya.

“What do you talk about? I have never seen him giving the time of the day to others – so why you?”

Arya smiled that irritating smile of hers, as if she knew something she didn’t.

“Oh, this and that. Fighting, rebellions, that kind of things. Nothing you need to worry yourself about.”

“Does he talk about Prince Joffrey? What does he say about him?”

At that Arya finally stopped and looked at Sansa. The expression of uncertainty clouded her features.

“Nothing much. He is his sworn shield, after all. Though…he didn’t protest when I called Joffrey stupid.”
Sansa felt her anger rising. It was quite ridiculous, really, after what she had learned of her golden betrothed just a few days ago. Yet, he was her betrothed and not for Arya to scold. “He is the prince of the Seven Kingdoms and our future king! He is not stupid!”

“Whatever you say – if it makes you happier to think so, who am I to prevent that?” A mischievous smile on her face Arya made an exaggerated bow and without waiting for her reply turned and ran away.

Sansa was left seething to look at her retreating back. She hated the idea of her bright future being dismissed by her family or anyone. And if she was totally honest with herself, she hated the idea of others too seeing what she had been so slow to learn. She wrapped the shawl tighter around her shoulders and started towards the Great Hall deep in thought. She considered visiting the sept but as she turned around the corner towards its entrance she walked against the wall that shouldn’t have been there.

Alarmed she raised her eyes and following the hard lines of cold metal she realised to her horror that she had walked straight into the very man she had just argued about with Arya. Gods, how he can stand so still! Any other man would have backed away instantly and offered his apologies for the intrusion, irrespective of whether the collision had been her fault or not. But not the Hound. He just stood there looking down at her, the corner of his burned mouth ticking but Sansa couldn’t tell whether it was anger or amusement.

“Pardon me, ser.” Sansa withdrew and despite her fluster, years of lessons in good manners kicked in.

“You know better than that, girl.” His voice was low and gravelly but he didn’t move. Sansa was uncertain for a moment; should she just move past him or should she wait for him to move? Good manners favoured the latter but there he just stood, staring at her. The moment was absurd; none of it fitted with the way how things were supposed to be. Sansa’s head was suddenly empty and none of the usual courtesies she so readily offered to others seemed suitable for this occasion.

She refused to look at his face and instead studied his gorget and its leather fasteners. The end of one was not bent under the buckle and she stared at it, the leather strap dangling free. It irritated her. She didn’t truly like the man although she felt a twinge of sorry for him. Yet she was disturbed by him – and she didn’t like to see him so shabby.

Finally she muttered, lacking anything else and conditioned to always find something pleasant to say, “Thank you for being so kind to my sister. Not many men have patience with her. She can be quite testing.”

“Aye, that she can be. A pain the arse.” Still the man hadn’t moved and next Sansa found herself staring at his throat, the sliver that was visible above his gorget. It was covered with coarse hair that blended smoothly with his beard. There was something obscene in that sight and his unnaturally still stance; he was truly like his name sake the hound, spotting its prey and with eternal patience of nature waiting for his chance. Sansa followed the line of the coarse bristles all the way until they abruptly ended where the deep undulations, tightly pulled hard skin and fibrous knotted mass of his scars started. The display of that horror so close up still made her shiver.

Sansa forced her gaze away and coughed nervously, hoping that he hadn’t noticed her odd behaviour. None of the hundred things she might have expressed to any other man came to her mind; not a light query about how he found Winterfell and the North, not a question about his own house and family, not a comment about his armament – she had noticed men getting ridiculously pleased when someone asked them about those things. Yet her mind was completely blank.
Eventually she took a step away as if to turn around and at that the Hound finally seemed to summon up basic teachings of courtesy, as he turned sideways and pointed her to continue her path. She took the chance and slipped past him, a sense of being pinned down between him and the wall of the sept momentarily suffocating her. Then she had walked past him and was free.

Sansa didn’t turn around to look at him but she felt his eyes on her back all the way until she finally ducked under the low door on the side of the hall. The feeling made her skin prickle under her dress and she had an instinct to reach and brush her back. Yet she realised she wouldn’t get rid of that feeling quite as easily.

Whether the sensation was completely unpleasant was a different thing, but she refused to even let her mind wander in that direction.
This is where this little tale starts to deviate from the canon more drastically - changing some of the subsequent events, but not all...

**Sandor & Arya**

“I hate you! How *could* you! I should have believed when everyone said you were no good and a monster!”

“Seven hells! What’s gotten into you, wolf girl? You could have hurt me with that flagon!”

“I *meant* to! I wanted to crush it into your thick skull but of course you had to duck!”

“Did you expect me just to sit quietly while you hammer me, then? Is that the way I have been teaching you, to let the attackers get you that easily?”

“I expected you to *suffer*, that’s what I expected!”

“Well I am, if that makes you any happier. That flagon was full of good Dornish red and now I have to go back to the kitchens for more. Bloody hells! Why in such a bad mood anyway?”

“Do you even have to ask? You know why. He was my *friend!*”
“Who?”

“Mycah.”

“Who the hells is Mycah?”

“The butcher’s boy, the one you slaughtered in cold blood although he had done nothing wrong! How could you?!”

“Oh, that boy.”

“Yes, that boy. I heard what you said to the king, and when I went to the common room afterwards I saw his clothes and the wooden sword there on the floor, bloody.”

“Are you crying, girl?”

“No… *snif*… No I am not. I am just so angry I can’t speak…”

“That’ll be the first time.”

“Come on girl. Stop it.”

“Fuck it. If I tell you something, do you promise not to tell anyone? Not a soul, as it can get me in deep trouble.”

“I will certainly tell to everyone then. I wish you hanged!”

“Oh, look who is back. That’s not a very good way to make me tell you anything – even though it is about that butcher’s boy. Something you might want to hear.”

“Something I want to hear? Tell me then.”

“Only if you promise to keep your big mouth shut.”

“Very well, I promise.”

“I didn’t kill your friend.”

“What…? But you said so, and the blood…”

“I never said I killed him. I said that I took care of him. That’s different.”

“And his clothes and the blood on them? And the sword?”

“I took a squire’s clothes with me and told the lad to take them and give me his. And that stupid sword. Trapped a hare on the way back.”

“What did you do to Mycah, then?”

“Gave him a few coppers and told him to get his fat arse as far away from here as possible and never come to bother the royals again. Told him to try his luck in Winterfell. Your lot seemed the kind who
could take in a wanderer.”

“But… why?”

“I don’t mind killing in a battle or when it is a fair fight. Or even an unfair fight as long as the opponent is worth it. My duty is to look after the safety of the prince. Somehow I don’t see that lad coming back and threatening to slit Joffrey’s throat – do you?”

“No, of course not!”

“So there. I did my duty, case over and closed. Yet I don’t want the king or worse, the queen, to know about it. So you see why you have to hold your trap shut?”

“Yes. I…thank you for saving him. He was innocent to all of this.”

“Innocents are the ones who usually suffer the most. That’s the way of the world. Like that wolf of your sister.”

“Lady… it was terrible. Poor Sansa has been crying her eyes out ever since.”

“It’s a shame that the king didn’t hand the killing of that beast to me. I would have taken care of her a bit differently than your father, the noble and honourable Lord Eddark Stark.”

“That is not fair! Father had to do it, he didn’t want Ser Ilyn to kill her.”

“Your sister was very fond of that wolf, wasn’t she? Deserved better, did she?”

“Yes….”

“Well, if you have given up trying to crack my skull with that flagon, can I have it back to get some more? The day has been bad enough without letting it end with a dry throat.”

“No, let me. I…am sorry I shouted at you and tried to hit you.”

“Nevermind. I doubt the kitchen wenches would give young daughter of Lord Eddard wine without wondering why she needs it. Your likes have your own servants to do these things. I go.”

“I am still sorry.”

“Not as sorry as you will be if you don’t scoot away. Go and see your sister, she just lost her wolf. Maybe a wolf girl can console her.”

“She hates me! She thinks it is my fault Lady is dead.”

“Mayhap it is. It doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try.”

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Sansa

Sansa could still feel the soft fur of her beloved companion under her fingertips. Only a little bit of imagination and she could close her eyes, take a deep breath and imagine that all was well and Lady
was lying next to her in bed within an arm’s reach. Sansa knew how distressed she would be to hear her cry as she did, muffling her sobs to her blanket lest everyone hear her. The walls of the room were thin and she felt exposed – she couldn’t let her whimpers reach the ears of the rest of the company. Her grief was too raw and her wounds too fresh and she wouldn’t even be able to raise her usual armour of courtesy for her protection.

So she cried in silence, and every time when her tears momentarily dried, she thought of Lady and fell back into a quivering heap. Sansa knew some people thought it odd to grief so much for a pet – but her wolf had been so much more than that. Their relationship had always been special; nothing like when a few years ago she had adopted a kitten from a stable cat’s litter and kept it in her rooms as her own. She had loved the little cat, its silken paws and cute whiskers and the way it had purred against her – but in time the kitten had started to spend more and more time in the stables where its duty lie in chasing rats and mice. Sansa had let it go and although she had missed her friend, it had been nothing like the hollowness left behind by Lady. It was as if a part of herself had been torn out of her soul and Sansa felt the new emptiness acutely.

She regretted siding with Joffrey, she regretted setting to the woods with him, she regretted feeling relieved when Joffrey had ordered the Hound to stay behind… Had he been with them, things might not have escalated as badly. Yes, she regretted everything.

Sansa longed for her mother’s embrace to soothe her pains away. Her father was too awkward to approach her, probably not knowing what to do with a distressed girl, and Arya she had shooed away with angry words. Hateful words, blaming her for Lady’s fate, for attacking Joffrey and for being the reason for the whole incidence in the first place.

The sisters had wrought a careful balance of mutual tolerance on the road, silly squabbles of the past having been put aside. Both of them had escaped the confines of their childhood and both had found new interests. Sansa had new friends and thus was hardly in a position to grudge Arya’s, no matter how unsuitable they were, be it the butchers boy with whom she had ran around since the beginning of the journey or even the Hound. Yet what had happened had destroyed it all. Sansa hated her sister for causing her wolf’s death and Arya returned that feeling with a vengeance, blaming Sansa for all that had transpired.

They had not shared a single word that evening and undoubtedly would have preferred not to even see each other, had they not been forced to share a room. To Sansa’s relief Arya had however soon left – where, she didn’t care – and she didn’t have to endure her hateful presence.

Sansa knew that Arya was upset as well, especially after they had heard about the fate of her little friend. Passingly she felt a pang of guilt about not caring about the boy as much as she did about Lady – but then she felt her wolf’s trusting eyes peering at her from darkness and it was as if the fresh wound had been prodded open and a new river of tears broke free of all restraints.

The worst was that it had all gone so well until then. Traveling in the royal procession had been exciting; so many new people around her, so much to see, so much to talk about with the ladies of the court. During the evening meals she had sat in the high table with the royals and had felt immensely proud to be in that position.

She didn’t see the Hound often, but instead of making her pleased she for some curious reason found herself trying to find him whenever she passed the prince’s entourage. Usually he was easy enough to spot, towering over other men, but as she never had anything to say to him they never interacted. Nonetheless, at the end of the day when the royal party gathered into the biggest room of one inn or another her eyes wandered down the tables towards the furthest corner where most valued soldiers and captains sat, and more often than not she found him staring at her.
Later, as even Sansa got tired of sitting inside the stuffy wheelhouse and ventured to join some of the ladies on a horseback, she noticed him glowering at her intently whenever he was near. It should have frightened her or at least made her nervous, but to her surprise she didn’t mind. Why the man should pay such attention to a mere girl she wondered, until it dawned on her that since her betrothal to Joffrey it was probably his duty. Yes, the sworn shield protected first and foremost the prince, but surely he also had to guard his future bride? Yes, that’s it. He watches over me because I am soon to be Joffrey’s wife, she concluded and that made her oddly disappointed.

The next time Sansa caught his eyes she met them squarely and even forced a little smile on her lips. The Hound looked surprised at first but then his usual sneer returned and he turned away, however giving Sansa a momentary satisfaction of unsettling such a rough warrior.

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The darkness had sneaked in a long time ago but Sansa had still not undressed, not caring about such things in her sorrow. Suddenly she heard the door creak and saw a beam of light entering from the torches burning in the hallway. She heard soft steps and in the shadows she recognised Arya’s thin form.

Sansa pretended to sleep. Arya shuffled to her own cot, where the sound of rustling mattress indicated that she had sat down, followed by a deep sigh. Yet she didn’t lay down but shifted back and forth. Another deep sigh and she got up. Sansa hoped she would go again and leave her alone. No such luck; Arya’s footsteps neared her.

“Sansa?”

Sansa was quiet, but Arya had never been fooled by such tactics.

“Sansa, I know you are awake. I can hear it from your breathing.”

“So what?”

“I…am sorry. I truly am.”

Had Arya said that she had decided to give up her unladylike pursuits and become a septa, Sansa couldn’t have been more surprised. Arya never apologised!

Yet she didn’t react, not wanting to let Arya see how much she was hurting. The next thing she knew was Arya propping herself in the foot of her cot.

“I really am. Please forgive me. I never meant any harm. Had I known that Lady would suffer from something I did… I thought only I will come to harm.”

“I doubt you thought of anything. You never do. And even if you had, you know that it’s not the nobles who suffer – it is always the innocents. Like my Lady.” The tears threatened to break free again but Sansa forced them back.

“I know. The Hound said the same. I didn’t know but I should have.”

Arya was surprisingly subdued, the anger and frustrated rage she had shown earlier having left her.

“Innocents, like your friend,” Sansa repeated, wanting to rub the salt in Arya’s wound and expecting a reaction. Yet none came.

Sansa couldn’t understand this Arya; her sister putting aside her own anger and behaving almost as
she wanted to comfort her. She turned on her side, propping an elbow to support her head and eyed Arya suspiciously.

“Why do you talk to me this way? I thought you blamed me for his death.”

Arya sat there, worrying her lower lip but saying nothing. Unusual uncertainty showed on her face, but after a while she pursed her lips together and leaned closer to Sansa.

“If I tell you something really, really big, can you keep it a secret?”

Sansa looked at her apprehensively. “What kind of a secret?”

“A big one. So big that it could get another person killed if you told it. And then it would be on your head.”

“What do I care?”

“Maybe nothing, but I do. Promise?”

“Very well. I will keep your confidence, although I don’t know what good is your crappy little secret anyway.”

Arya pressed her hand next to her mouth and whispered into Sansa’s ear. “Mycah is not dead.”

Sansa threw her head back in surprise. She had been in the hall of the castle herself when the Hound had brought the news. She had felt nauseated at the sight of bloody clothes and any comfort she might have once felt about the Hound’s presence had disappeared in an instant.

“What do you mean he is not dead? The Hound killed her, I heard him say so myself.”

“No, he said that he ‘took care of him’. That’s different.”

Sansa’s head span and she stared wide-eyed at Arya.

“He gave him different clothes and a few coppers and told him to run away, to Winterfell. And then he killed a hare and bloodied his clothes and wooden sword in its blood.”

“Why did he do such a thing? The king and Joffrey ordered him to kill the boy.”

“He doesn’t care about killing those who don’t deserve it. He also said that Mycah is unlikely to be a threat to Joffrey – which is true, of course.”

Sansa stayed silent for a long time. That explained Arya’s calmness and lack of anger.

“Why did he do it? Did he do it for you? Are you such good friends?” The word tasted strange in her mouth. Friends. The little girl and the brute.

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t have even told me about it if I hadn’t whacked him in the head with a flagon of wine. So he certainly didn’t do it as a favour or trying to impress me.” Arya spoke matter-of-factly but her tone betrayed her bafflement.

Unbidden the image of the fierce Hound yielding in front of Arya’s attack with a flagon came to Sansa’s mind and despite her distress she couldn’t prevent a nervous laugh.

“He also said that the king should have given Lady for him to kill rather than to Father. I think he would have done the same to her, he would have ‘taken care of her’. Released her into the woods
where she could have joined Nymeria. At least they would have had each other.” Arya stared blankly ahead of her and Sansa remembered that she too had lost her wolf.

“It is not fair. Father had to do it.”

“He didn’t have to do anything. He chose to do it, just to please that stupid fat man and that evil queen!” Previously Sansa would have stepped up to defend King Robert, Queen Cersei and their father, but now she was too tired. The thought of the Hound taking Lady… he could have saved her life.

“I wish… I too wish that Lady would have been given to him.” Sansa started sobbing again and when Arya curled her arms around her she let her. She still missed her mother but having Arya comfort her felt surprisingly good. Embracing each other the sisters sat there for a long time without speaking – and eventually Arya climbed into a cot with Sansa and they slept together as they had only done when they had been little, years and years ago.

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The next day Sansa’s head was heavy and eyes swollen, but luckily most people left her alone. She was in no mood to talk to anyone, not even to her father. And so she froze her expression and blanketed herself with an impenetrable armour of polite indifference and moved amongst others inside her own little bubble. She deliberately avoided the Queen’s and Joffrey’s company and rode a small distance away from everyone and when they stopped for a midday break, she sat alone.

When their procession got ready to move again and Sansa walked towards her docile mount, she saw the Hound saddling his black beast not far away from her.

He worked methodically, first throwing a saddle blanket on the shiny back of the horse, followed by a heavy saddle. A few adjustments, and he reached for the saddle strap and fastened the many buckles, working remarkably fast for such a nimble task. Sansa knew everything in him was big, but when he rested his left hand against the neck of the horse she could see how huge his hands really were. A trail of dark hair up to his first digits, his fingers were yet long and slender rather than short and stubby as Hodor’s were. As Sansa observed him he scratched the mane of his beast and the animal turned to its master, its soft muzzle seeking for something.

Sansa felt like an intruder watching something she didn’t have a right to see when the man angled a piece of dried bread from his pouch and offered it to the horse. It disappeared quickly, but even after the Hound’s palm was empty, the horse nibbled at the few remaining crumbs, earning another pat and a few soft-spoken words. She was too far to hear what he said, but his tone was soothing. She knew it was ridiculous to see herself as an eavesdropper; they were in a public place and what of a man giving a treat to his horse? Yet to see those gestures of kindness he extended to his horse felt… out of place. Just like what she had heard from Arya the previous night.

Sansa couldn’t stop staring at the man and the horse, still slightly stunned by the news how this man, the epitome of loyalty, had so blatantly gone against the specific orders given to him by his masters. Then he turned and his grey eyes caught hers and this time neither of them gave in. Sansa didn’t have the strength to pull away and although normally she would have been embarrassed to be caught with a puffed face and red-rimmed eyes, somehow it didn’t seem to matter now.

The Hound didn’t say anything but cocked his head as if trying to figure Sansa out. Gods! Sansa was still in no mood to talk with anyone, but she couldn’t shake away the knowledge what this man had done. For no reason whatsoever, he had done kindness to her sister and might have done one for her as well had he been given a chance.
“I thank you…” she started and too late realised that she was not supposed to know. Would Arya get into trouble? At the last moment she tried to change the topic.

“I thank you for looking after the prince so well. I regret you were not accompanying us into the woods, as I believe much harm could have been avoided if you had.” Sansa was proud of herself, having so nimbly avoided breaking Arya’s trust on her.

“You do?” was all he said. His eyes burned Sansa and once again she was bewildered by the effect this man had on her. She felt exposed, as if he saw right through her courtesies, her position as the noble lady and the future queen, all the way into her core. His intensity was disturbing but she still hadn’t figured out if what hid behind it.

Seeing him face to face Sansa noticed his beard had grown longer and his hair looked unkempt. There were dark shadows under his eyes and not for the first time she wondered how difficult it must be to serve as Prince Joffrey’s sworn shield, to be at his beck and call at all times. Joffrey could be quite…difficult, she had realised, although due to loyalty she felt she owed to her betrothed she still tried to explain it by the heavy burden placed on him as the heir of the realm.

Hastily excusing herself in case she should otherwise reveal even more, Sansa retreated and left the Hound standing there, next to his monstrous horse. Two beast, two monsters, and yet both capable of unexpected tenderness as she had just witnessed.
Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

Some calm before the storm...the last carefree moments for the Stark sisters. Or are they completely care-free?

And thank you to all who follow this tale! I shrink in shame when I remember that this was supposed to be holiday season gift and ideally completed and posted around Christmas time, but as usual, the story ran away with a me a bit. Oh well, we'll get there...

Sandor & Arya

“So you couldn’t keep one bloody secret for one bloody day!”

“What do you mean?”

“Hells girl, don’t play dumb with me. You told your sister, didn’t you?”

“What if I did? I swore her to secrecy, and she promised.”

“What next – you are going to rattle it to Lord Ned himself? He would be too bloody honourable not to let King Robert know, and there will be a hell to pay for me then.”

“No! I will not tell my father. He will be better off not knowing. I am not stupid, and neither is
Sansa.”

“Well, what did she say?”

“About what?”

“About how well do I play fucking harp. About that big bloody secret, of course.”

“Oh. She was surprised. She said she hoped that Lady would have been given to you.”

“Hmmmphh.”

“How did you find out? That she knew?”

“Easy. One look at her and it was clear; that girl’s mind is as easy to guess as a whore’s plans on the soldier’s payday. Bloody hells, she almost thanked me! That would have been all I needed.”

“She was grateful, even if it was just an intent. To save Lady, I mean.”

“I don’t need her chirping.”

“She is not chirping - I know she means it.”

“You do, now?”

“I do. She is… she is not quit as stupid as she was. I think she is starting to see what Joffrey is.”

“That is her misfortune.”

“What do you mean?

“Nothing. Now, can I trust you not to go spilling my secrets to anyone else?”

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Sansa

Sansa yawned and stretched herself in her soft feather bed. One of the advantages of being the royal bride was that she could take her lessons with Princess Myrcella – and those lessons started much later than those in Winterfell with Maester Luwin had. That meant that she could sleep in, an unprecedented luxury.

She didn’t hurry to get up, preferring to lie there and evoke the memories of all the wonderful colours, sights and excitement of the tourney held in the honour of Lord Eddard, the Hand of the King. It had been the first tourney she had ever participated in and it had been wonderful!

Things had been all around better since they had finally arrived to King’s Landing. Sansa still felt the hollowness left behind by Lady and she missed her terribly, but their new rooms in the Tower of the Hand were the most luxurious she had ever lived in, she had found even more new friends among the young ladies of the court, and every day brought in new adventures. She and Arya got along well after their shared secrets, although there were always bound to be some tensions between them simply because of their differing preferences. Life overall was harmonious and good.
Sansa had almost succeeded in burying her disappointment at Joffrey’s and Queen Cersei’s behaviour. Joffrey was afraid and simply lost his temper, she had told herself. Why the prince of the realm would be afraid of a little girl and a peasant boy, she however refused to consider in too much detail.

Yes, she had had to accept that Joffrey was not the golden prince she had thought him to be. Yet he was still her betrothed and it was up to her to make their marriage work. Her mother hadn’t known her father before their wedding and wouldn’t have picked him as her lord husband – and they were happy now. Surely she could do the same? So determined was Sansa to make sure that everything would be fine that she had been genuinely disappointed by her dismissal in the first evening of the tourney. Joffrey had flicked her away like a buzzing insect, ordering his sworn shield to see to her.

Sansa buried herself deeper under the covers, floating on a cloud of softest down and feather. The Hound.

He had been very drunk and despite Sansa’s renewed trust in him after Arya’s confessions she had felt herself woefully out of depth with the seething man walking silently beside her. And then, completely out of the blue, he had spilled the story of his scars to her, leaving Sansa shocked, sad and uncertain. Why had he done it? She had been utterly at loss of what to say and finally she had simply voiced what she really thought; how his brother was not a true knight. A true knight would not do such a horrid thing.

Sansa squirmed when the Hound’s face, contorted into an even more grotesque sneer than usually, formed in front of her mind’s eye. He had laughed at knightly values, a hollow bitter laugh, but in the depth of his eyes Sansa had seen pain that burned him from the inside. Not only physical pain, although it must have been excruciating for a young boy, but a pain of betrayal, a pain of rejection, a pain of being forced to become an object of scorn and horror in people’s eyes. For a brief moment when her hand had rested on his broad shoulder Sansa had felt true sympathy for that broken man.

And then he had spoiled everything by threatening to kill her if she told anyone. As if she would! Yet Sansa couldn’t help thinking that it was not only about his scars, but also about the other secret. Arya had told her that the Hound knew she had told Sansa - maybe the threat had been his way to ensure that she would indeed keep all his secrets to herself?

Sansa wiggled her toes and yawned once more, knowing it was time to get up. Why was she thinking about the Hound anyway? On the last days of their journey he had become an odd sort of beacon to her, she always making sure that he was nearby when she discoursed with Joffrey. His presence, previously so unsettling and unwelcome, had instead become reassuring and comforting.

Something else had changed too. Previously Sansa had been interested in young boys near her own age, back in the days when she had giggled and shared girlish fancies with Jeyne Poole. Joffrey had been a perfect epitome of her fantasies – but he had lost his lustre for her a long time ago. Since then she had seen more; she had seen real men, knights and lords and full-grown men who looked at her in a completely different way than the youths she had liked before – and that had woken something new inside her. And of all the men she had observed, nobody was as strong and masculine as the Hound…

Sansa huffed, irritated at the direction her mind was going. The whole notion was ludicrous. Ridiculous. Laughable.

Besides, she hardly saw him anymore in King’s Landing, not with Winterfell men looking after Lord Eddard and his family, and the members of the Kingsguard and gold cloaks ensuring the safety of the royal family. Only once had their paths crossed, when she had been on her way to the Godswood and he had materialised seemingly from thin air to her side. He had not offered to walk her there – of
course he hadn’t, that would have been bizarre – but they had walked there side by side nonetheless. If that had been unusual, even stranger had been how restrained he had been. They hadn’t discoursed about anything too controversial, but the Hound had told her about the Red Keep and the secret tunnels on top of which it was built, and for once his tone hadn’t carried its customary mockery or ire. Sansa had been so fascinated by the tales that she, too, had forgotten her usual apprehension in his presence. When they had reached their destination she had genuinely thanked him for his company and had been rewarded by a rare sight of a slight turn of his lips – almost like a smile. Then he had spoiled it though by growling her to run to see her tree-gods – but she hadn’t really minded.

Sighing Sansa got up and dressed in a simple morning dress. It was new, soft fabric of the colour of bluebells that attenuated her developing curves. She had grown into a young woman’s shape and she knew that others had noticed that too. Sometimes the looks she received made her uneasy but she would have lied to herself had she not admitted that sometimes she revelled in appreciation they conveyed.

The last twist of the fabric to make it settle nicely on her hips and she was ready to face the world.

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When she entered the Hand’s solar she saw Arya stuffing last pieces of bread into her mouth, halfway out of the chair in readiness to get out her merry way.

“Good morrow to you, Arya. Have you seen Father?” Sansa sat down and took a small honeyed cake which she proceeded to break into dainty pieces in her fingers.

“No, he has already been up since before the dawn and left to his business,” Arya declared.

“He works too hard. I hardly see him anymore.” Sansa frowned remembering the deep bags under their father’s eyes.

“Not only that, he is really, really stressed too. I have never seen him this unhappy.” Arya wrinkled her nose in distaste. “He should have never accepted this task. King Robert is just a lazy fat man who wants Father to run his kingdom for him. It is unfair!”

Sansa didn’t have wherewith to deny Arya’s harsh statement, mainly because it was true. Their father spent most evenings in his study until late and during the day hurried from one meeting to another, never having time with his daughters anymore. And not only that, lately he had also started to look more and more troubled and deep lines had appeared on his face. Sansa was worried about him, but what could she do?

“What are you going to do today?” she asked out of politeness. She wasn’t truly interested in what Arya was up to; it was going to be something uninteresting in any case.

“I am having more dancing lessons with Syrio Forell,” Arya announced excitedly. Sansa couldn’t help rolling her eyes. Dancing! Arya! What had father thought when he had appointed somebody for such ungrateful task?

“I am glad to hear that you are finally getting into more ladylike pursuits. Do you still practice swordplay with the Hound?” Arya had told her about their lessons – ran mostly in secret because the Hound didn’t want anyone to find out that he spent his time in such undignified manner.

Sansa hadn’t shared with her what the Hound had told her – although Arya had spilled his secret to her earlier, it was not only the Hound’s threat that had stayed her. No, his confession had seemed altogether too personal – if he wanted Arya to know, he surely had enough chances to tell her
himself. What she had shared with her sister though was her new appreciation of the man who had so disturbed her before.

“Yeah, whenever he has time. He has been busy as well with that stupid Joffrey demanding him to follow him everywhere.”

Sansa didn’t even rise to the bait anymore, simply ignoring Arya’s insults.

“Well, enjoy your lessons. I’ll see you at the dinner then.”

“I will, don’t worry.” Arya ran away humming to herself happily. Sansa stared after her for a long time, envying her for her happy disposition and carefree life without worries. Suddenly she felt older than her years and her shoulders sank at the weight of the future that had seemed so bright just such a short time ago.

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On her way to her lessons through the quiet corridors of the Red Keep she spotted the Hound walking towards her. It was the first time she saw him since the memorable meeting during the tourney.

Sansa’s first reaction was to stiffen; she was unsure whether she was seeing the angry Hound threatening to kill her, or the calm and collected Hound, surprisingly genial when he wanted to, no matter how hard he might reject the notion.

Yet she had no option. Turning away and walking in another direction now that he had seen her was out of the question. So was just passing him without an acknowledgment.

Her decision was made for her when it was he who spoke first. He slowed his progress and the sound of the clank of his armour subsided.

“Lady Sansa.” Had Sansa blinked her eyes she would have almost certainly missed it, his almost imperceptible nod in her direction.

“My lord.” Sansa’s throat was dry and the sound of her voice weak and feeble.

Neither of them said a word for a while although both had now stopped. Sansa’s eyes flittered between the stone wall behind him, the span of his broad shoulders and the cruel looking dagger hanging from his sword belt. Then they spoke at the same time.

“I want to assure you that I will never reveal anyone what I have heard from you or from Arya.”

“I was drunk as a dog that night. I spoke harshly.”

Then there was silence again, so thick that it could have been cut through with a knife. Finally it was the Hound who cleared his throat.

“I believe you, girl. If nothing else, you Northerners are trustworthy they say.”

A relief washed over Sansa – much stronger she would have expected. What was it to her, the future queen, what one of the court retainers thought of her? Yet she realised that she desperately wanted him to think kindly of her – why, she couldn’t fathom.

“I am glad of that. I’d hate to think there was any mistrust between us. After all, you are one of the most valued members in my betrothed’s household.” The lines that normally would have sounded
perfectly fitting suddenly tasted hollow and fatuous in her mouth.

The Hound regarded her thoughtfully.

“Head still in the clouds, eh?”

“I am not sure I understand your meaning,” Sansa muttered.

“You’ll see one day when you hit the ground.” His expression changed and all of a sudden it was almost if he had become angry at something Sansa had said. His gaze turned cold and he shifted, raising his hand on the hilt of his sword. Sansa was transfixed at the sight of his fingers curling around it and squeezing until his knuckles turned white.

Then he walked away without a word, leaving Sansa standing in the middle of the corridor feeling stupid. It was her turn to follow his retreating back, wondering if she would ever understand that man and the demons that drove him.
“Wolf-girl – here!”

“The Hound! Did you come to see me practicing my water-dancing? Look!”

“All I see is you bouncing around waving that stick. Don’t waste my time - come here, now!”

“You’re in luck, Master Forell just slipped away for a second. But he’ll be back soon.”

“Fuck Master Forell, this is important.”

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“Well, what is it?”

“Listen to me and listen to me well. Things have gone from bad to worse, you are not safe here.”

“What, what do you mean? Where is father, and Sansa?”

“It is too late for your father, the gold cloaks have him already. As for your sister, she is with the Queen and I can’t get to her right now.”

“I am not doing anything without my father and sister! Where are you taking me?”

“Do you come voluntarily or do I have to knock some sense into you?”

“No! I am not coming! Let me go!”
“What the hells is wrong with you?”
“—”

“Do you think I am taking you to the Queen? Is that what you think?!”

“I… but… you are a Lannister man…”

“Mayhap I am, but that doesn’t mean that I jump to that bitch’s ever command. Even a dog can disobey sometimes.”

“But why? And what is happening?”

“I don’t have time for this nonsense, I am too busy trying to save your bloody neck. But if you insist: your father has been declared a traitor and Cersei has ordered him to be captured. All your northmen will be arrested or killed if they are foolish enough to resist. You and the little bird will be taken as hostages. Will you follow me now or do I have to carry you?”

“But… but… They can’t arrest father! He has done nothing wrong!”

“Maybe not but that is of little consequence.”

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“Where are we going? And what about Sansa?”

“I am taking you out of the keep, to the city. There is a house in the Street of Silk where I can hide you. Wait, stop.”

“Ouch, what are you doing?!”

“Stop squirming or I’ll cut your ear off.”

“You are cutting my hair?”

“You are better off if you pretend to be a boy. Good thing you are already wearing breeches. We’ll get you another tunic, something less fancy, and you will pass as an errand lad. I’ll tell them to assign you to their cook, who is mute - which is just as well.”

“The cook? Are you taking me to an inn?”

“Not exactly an inn but close enough. Inn full of wenches. Now shut up and let me cut the rest.”

“And Sansa?”

“I’ll try to get to her later. It will be difficult because she’ll be guarded better than septas cunt. But I try, and I will bring her to you.”

“Wait, she may not come with you if the Lannisters are behind this, you being Joffrey’s shield. Here, give this to her and she’ll believe you.”

“The fuck this is?”

“It’s my direwolf brooch. She’ll recognise it and trust you.”

“Fair enough. Now move, we have a long way to walk.”
Sansa

If Sansa had thought herself broken by the death of her beloved wolf, what she lived through next was a completely new kind of hell. More painful. Darker. More nightmarish. Nothing made sense and the whole world had turned upside down.

The death of King Robert, the attacks on Winterfell men, Arya’s disappearance, the arrests of everyone around her... She had at least still been able to function then and had gone to Prince – no, King Joffrey and Queen Cersei to plead mercy for her father.

And then that horrible day on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor.

The pain had cut through her like a knife and she had swam in it ever since, in the sea of sorrow that had pulled her under and tossed her this way and that with nothing to hold on to. No mother, no Arya, not even her old septa – only faces of enemies all around her. Joffrey’s laugh and the way how the wind had blown his golden tresses away from his perfect face on that day, and how sunlight had glinted in his gilded attire... How was it possible that someone whose heart was so dark could be so bright on the outside? How had she been so blind as to not see before what he truly was, a monster?

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The never-ending stream of tears flowed down Sansa’s face, finding their way to her pillow. She didn’t care. What she had experienced before had paled beside the horror of this very day; her father’s tarred head, his eye-sockets blindly staring towards the North as a final insult to his dignity. She had thought it had been bad enough to see him being executed with his own sword – but this. This.

Madness had overcome her and she had sought to kill the one who had caused this horror. She could have, she would have – but then the Hound had knelt in front of her and stopped her on her tracks. Sansa hadn’t even felt the sting on her lip after Ser Meryn’s blow but strangely she had registered the gentleness of his touch. Like he touches his horse, had flitted through her mind quite irrationally.

And then the moment was over, and she had squandered it.

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A soft scratch on her door alerted Sansa from her slumber. She hadn’t been sleeping but only staring blankly at the wall. Who can it be? The servants had already been to see her, bringing a tray of food which she had disregarded. She didn’t want to see anyone, she didn’t want to talk to anyone. I am not here.

The door opened and then closed silently. Of course she didn’t have the luxury of privacy, no more than any prisoner languishing in royal cells. She refused to look who it was and expected to hear a loud command or a stern order any moment.

“Lady Sansa.” She recognised him immediately – there was only one man who sounded so gravelly and hoarse, even when he spoke softly.

What does he want? Did Joffrey send him? Her mind raced. If Ser Meryn’s blow had made her see
stars, what would the Hound’s strike do? She wouldn’t survive it, for sure she wouldn’t!

“What do you want?” She hated the tremor in her voice but couldn’t help it.

“I’m not here at Joffrey’s bidding. I have something to you, from your sister.”

“Arya?” It didn’t make sense. If they had caught her, why was he telling her that – and where was she?

“Aye, the little wolf-girl. Here.” The Hound stepped closer as he spoke and extended his hand towards her. Sansa couldn’t help herself and jumped up in her bed at the mention of her sister, and now stared at his extended fist. He opened it slowly and in his huge palm rested a familiar brooch, a direwolf Sansa had seen on Arya many times.

“Arya! Where is she? How is she?”

“She is not here. And she is well enough.”

“Thank the gods,” Sansa whispered while picking up the precious object with shaking fingers. The Hound waited patiently, keeping his hand steady and only pulling it away after Sansa had clutched the brooch into her own hands. She had been worried sick about her headstrong sibling and feared the worst.

“I thank you kindly for the news – but how did you… I mean, how could you…?”

What does he mean, ‘she is not here’?

Luckily the Hound didn’t seem too dismayed. “Hid her in the city. She is safe there, biding her time.”

“Her time for what?” The relief she felt was immediately replaced by a new concern. How could a small girl survive on her own in the big capital with no family or friends to look after her?

“Time for you and her to leave. You’ll be going back to the North, as soon as I can get you out of here.”

The Hound stared at her almost challengingly. Only then Sansa realised that she was sitting on a bed clad merely in her nightshift, alone in the room with one of the most notorious men in the realm. She noticed how his eyes shifted from her face to her chest and lower. The feel of that gaze made her tingle all over. Dear gods! She pulled the covers higher, up to her chin.

“What…when? Do you mean now?”

He raised his head and despite her uneasiness Sansa felt strangely reassured by his calmness, just like earlier that very same day.

“No, not now. I need to find you a trusted escort. I have heard a man from the Night’s Watch has been in the court, seeking for new recruits to travel with him to the North. I need to find him and convince him that it is in his best interest to take a few extra travellers with him.”

Sansa shuddered thinking of what means he had in mind. If what he said was true, surely a man of the Watch could be persuaded by reason and by appealing to his loyalty to the Warden of the North? Yet it had to wait; there were things she had to understand first.

“My lord, if I may ask, why are you going into so much trouble to help us? You know that my family is declared as traitors.” Sansa was already aware that the Hound was not interested in what
other men wanted; honour, fame, land or titles. So why was he doing this?

“My reasons are my own. Isn’t it enough that I do this, do I also have to justify myself to you?”

Sansa was surprised at the vehemence of his statement but couldn’t give up so easily.

“But surely, whatever your reasons are, and I would not presume to enquire them any further, you will have to leave the court if you help me to escape? Would you join us and travel with us to Winterfell?”

Ha laughed, a mirthless laugh. “The dog’s place is with its masters. Not with pretty birds in the Northern woods. No, it will be enough that I get you both out of here.”

He turned away then. All throughout their discussion he had stood in front of her in his full armour, his boots still caked with mud from the yard. Sansa was discomfited by his presence but now she found herself distressed about his imminent departure.

“Wait, please… when do I know it is time?”

He turned to look at her over his shoulder, the good side of his face towards Sansa. He sneered.

“Don’t worry. I’ll let you know. Until then, don’t do anything differently. Forget this discussion ever happened. We can’t have anyone suspecting anything is amiss. And don’t talk to me. I am one of your jailors, remember. My King relies on me.”

Then he was gone, disappeared as silently as he had appeared. For a long time Sansa stared at the rough wooden door, her mind filled with a maelstrom of hope, doubt, disbelief - and through all that, still grief.
Whoa! Once again a short tale is turning out to be slow and cumbersome affair... Yet I can see the end in sight, maybe another 5-6 short chapters like this to go.

Thank you for all the comments: I have truly enjoyed their depth and breadth, and they have made me really think and ponder more than once - what more can a writer wish for??

Sandor & Arya

“You took your time!”

“What of it? Didn't know I was supposed to follow some fucking plan.”

“I saw you riding along the alley already a long time ago.”

“Well, I had to take care of my cover story. Or do you think it to make sense for the shield of the King to visit some bloody cook’s help in a whorehouse?”

“I saw you. With her.”

“Oh?”
“With Aline. I sneaked into the storeroom above the main solar and saw how you demanded her, although Leya presented to you all her most beautiful girls. She probably wanted to please the member of the stupid Kingsguard.”

“So there is no hiding from your snooping even here? And what is it to you who I chose?”

“Nothing. It is just that she has a red hair and blue eyes, the only one of Leya’s girls. And she was already with another customer, the fat merchant. Why did you want her that bad? She is new here, came after I did. So you must not have seen her before.”

“I am not discussing my taste in whores with a little girl who should know better.”

“I know why you wanted her. She looks a bit like Sansa! You like her, don’t you? I saw the way you used to look at her, like a dog looks at a juicy bone.”

“Fucking hells! I didn’t come here to be interrogated or accused of moon eyeing some highborn’s get!”

“I am not accusing you! I just thought you should know that I know. And I don’t mind. Better you than that horrible Joffrey.”

“Shut up about it already!”

“Fine. If you are going to be so touchy about it I leave it be. Now, did you see her? What did she say?”

“I saw her and she knows the plan is to get you both out of here as soon as possible. I know how to get a hold of a recruiter for the Night’s Watch, Yoren is his name, and I will seek him out tomorrow. All going well you both can leave with him as soon as he gets his motley crew together. Lady Sansa is a good little lady and knows how to behave until then.”

“I know how to behave! The cook likes me and gives me sweets when I do my errands well.”

“That makes the only one…”

“What? What did you say?”

“Nothing that concerns you. Now, you stay put and wait for my further instructions.”

“Hey, what did you say – ‘you both? Aren’t you going to leave with us?”

“No, and I told as much to your sister. It is bad enough that I risk my neck for no reason whatsoever, when I think of it. I would be a bloody fool to leave my life here behind on behest of some wolflings. Why would I do that?”

“I know exactly why you would do that. I told you already.”

“Shut your mouth. The sooner you leave and are out of my hair, the better.”

“No it’s not. You should come with us.”

“I am leaving now. Anything you need? Do I need to have a word with cook?”

“No. I’ll be fine. Just come with us.”

“Forget it.”
Sansa

Since the Hounds visit Sansa’s nights were filled with hope and her days with despair. Every day under the crushing tyranny of Joffrey was agony when she thought of the freedom looming in front of her – if only the Hound was successful in his attempts.

She sought his eyes whenever she saw him in the court, but he looked away, ignored her or simply stood emotionless behind Joffrey with such hostile expression on his face that Sansa didn’t dare to seek his attention any more.

The news of the Young Wolf’s progress reached the court in regular intervals and Sansa was the one to suffer from them. Joffrey was not shy of using his Kingsguard to punish her for real and perceived transgressions and many evenings Sansa nursed a broken lip, a painful bruise or humiliation to her dignity. Was it all empty promises by him? Did he seek only to make me suffer more by first giving me hope and then denying it?

Sansa didn’t think so in truth, but she found it harder and harder to maintain her courage as time went by.

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The torches along the corridor had almost burned out by the time Sansa was escorted to her chambers. The king’s dinner had been tedious and boring but at least she hadn’t have to endure Joffrey’s wrath that evening, he being occupied with visitors from the Westerlands. Even more unusually he had waved his own shield to take Sansa away, seemingly determined to stay until late in the Great Hall.

Sansa walked fast in order to keep up with the Hound. Whether he was pleased or angry about the task was not obvious from his stance, passive as always.

Sansa burned to ask him how Arya fared and how their preparations were progressing, but she was wary about ears in the walls. Yet as they finally stopped in front of her room she couldn’t contain herself anymore. Once the door was open and her escort stepped aside to let her pass, she took a deep breath, glanced around the corridor for any signs of life and grabbed his arm and pulled him into the room with her.

It must have been his surprise that saw him follow her without resistance – it certainly was not her strength. Whatever it was, as she pushed the door closed there he was, standing stiffly just inside the room. His presence seemed to fill it thoroughly and Sansa’s heart started hammering loudly.

“Pardon me, but I have to know; how is my sister? Is there any news? When can I leave this horrid place?” The words gushed out in rapid succession when she couldn’t contain her anxiety anymore. Then she took a deep breath and stilled herself to wait for his reaction.

The Hound’s expression didn’t change. He was seemingly resigned to stay where he was but he didn’t look happy.

“The little wolf is fine. She has food and shelter and she knows that it is not easy to snatch one of the most valued hostages away from the crown.”
Sansa’s frustration and resentment grew in response to his dismissive reply. It is not easy to stay as the most valued hostage either! Hot tears of anger swelled in her eyes. What did this man know about her pain and suffering? He was not the one who was humiliated daily, if not always in deeds but in spirit. Joffrey’s cruel words, the beatings by his guard, simply the knowledge that she was held by her lord father’s killers and her house’s truest enemies...

For the first time since leaving behind her childhood tantrums Sansa Stark lost her self-control. In a moment of rashness something inside her broke, years of schooling and armour of courtesy disintegrating and leaving behind only a young maid, hurt beyond belief. She threw herself against the hard wall in front of her; against the man that had promised to help her and then denied it, thwarting her dearest desires and hopes after first raising them.

Her fists rained upon his chest when she threw herself against him sobbing loudly, releasing all her bent-up frustrations upon one unmovable object. She didn’t stop to think or care about the futility of her actions, nor that the man she was assaulting could swat her away as easily as a child does a buzzing insect. No, her mind was closed from everything else besides her grief, her exasperation and her distress.

“I want to go home! I want to leave! Take me home!” Sansa hiccupped and hated herself for that, fully aware how infantile her conduct must appear in the eyes of the cold killer, but helpless to control her actions nonetheless.

As she should have known, her outburst didn’t sway the Hound the least, he remaining standing rigid and unmoving. He remained as solid as a rock and Sansa’s feeble punches against him didn’t make him as much as flinch. Yet as Sansa’s rage started to wane and she felt the shame of her behaviour flooding her, she felt some movement. His arms, so strong and so capable of inflicting harm, rose and hovered unsurely in air for a moment before wrapping around her – initially hesitantly, but then more firmly. One large hand against her back, the other curving around her shoulder. His hold was stiff and to her immense surprise Sansa sensed him trembling, but there was no mistaking his intent to hold her true rather than only to restrain. That he was woefully inexperienced in holding another human being so close to him was clear to Sansa, who had grown up in a family where physical contact was a natural expression of affection – and the sadness of it stung her deeply.

Oh to be held by strong arms; to be embraced by someone – someone who must mean well for her… Sansa welcomed the gesture and nudged closer to him in her desperate hunger for kindness. She too wrapped her arms around the Hound, and in need of a real contact her fingers reached upward and found the plane of his powerful back and the ends of his long hair, relishing in their surprising softness.

For the longest time they stood still, wrapped against each other. Sansa twirled her fingers in his tresses and rested her cheek against his firm upper body, feeling the steady beat of his heart against her flushed skin. She felt good. For a moment it was almost as if she was held by her father – so safe and comfortable it was.

And suddenly it wasn’t.

The large hand on her waist started to move; first almost imperceptibly, but then with more assuredness, traveling down and sideways to reach the curve of her hip. Sansa jerked and her first reaction was to pull away, but something made her stay still, the hardly audible gasp being the only sign of her disquiet. He heard it of course – or maybe he simply sensed how her body stiffened, as he immediately stopped.

Sansa didn’t move away and neither did he, and after the moment that followed Sansa became
increasingly aware of not only the warmth of his palm against the small of her lower back, but of the other points where their bodies touched. Her breasts pressed against his chest, her shoulders and cheek likewise, her long legs so close to his that when he shifted his stance ever so slightly, she felt it. And how warm he was under her hands…

Although Sansa couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was that was so different in this embrace, she realised that when she had been held by her father she had been curled within herself and had drawn succour from him - but in the Hound’s arms instead of just him holding her, she was equally holding him. It was a weird and wonderful sensation. A stranger, a dangerous man, the two of them so intimately wrapped into each other. Her heart started to race again, but this time not from anger.

Gradually those powerful and tense muscles started to relax under her fingers - and Sansa felt it and her body responded to it on its own accord by instinctively pressing closer. The countless times she had caught him watching her rose to her mind and even her lids closed she remembered that look and finally understood what it had always held; a raw need, a longing for something real but unattainable. It had always been so much more than simple admiration by a gallant courtier.

Slowly she raised her head and looked up, meeting those grey eyes and the look exactly as she remembered it. The Hound’s jaw was clenched and his expression stern, but he didn’t let go his grip nor his gaze and she didn’t mind that at all.

Another eternity passed until he finally dropped his arms and cleared his throat.

“I’ll do my best, little bird. I have made contact with the man who can take you away. It will take some time but bugger me if I don’t get you out of this court as soon as possible.”

Sansa reluctantly let go of him and stepped away. Suddenly she felt ashamed of her ingratitude.

“I…I do apologise for my behaviour. I know you are doing as much as you can. I promise I will be more patient in the future.” She wringed her hands and feeling heat rising on her cheeks she refused to look at him, and so she heard more than saw him turning around and reaching for the door. A low “Lady Sansa”, a turn of a latch and he was gone.

For the rest of the evening Sansa oscillated between shame and embarrassment of her unladylike behaviour, and an odd feeling of flutter and excitement the Hound’s embrace had made her feel.
"Tis a fun journey this, trying to imagine alternatives to the way how things panned down in the books - and what a difference a few seemingly not big differences might have made... I am about 2/3rds through with this tale, I'd guess - thank you to all who are still hanging around!

Sandor & Arya

“Mmmmpphh!”

“It’s only me, you can let go that pitiful turnip peeling knife of yours. I really should find you a proper dagger.”

“Don’t! Sneak on me like that! I could have cut you!”

“With that? And with broken fingers?”

“I could have… But why are you here, why didn’t you come to the house?”

“Because I didn’t feel like it.”
“You could have gone with Aline again. She wouldn’t have minded. She told me it was not nearly as horrible as she thought - she said that there were compensations to your ugly face. I am not sure what she meant as she refused to say more, but she was giggling quite stupidly.”

“Bloody hells! Did you have to talk about me with that wench?!”

“We are friends, she is nice. She is of same age as Sansa and although she is not as smart as her, she is kind. Did you like her, was she ‘to your satisfaction’?”

“What would you know about any of it?”

“Oh, I know a lot. I am not stupid, and the girls like to talk with someone who is interested in them and not trying to get into their smallclothes for free. I know much about what goes on between men and women now. But I bet you liked her. Even though you wanted her only because she looks like…”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP! I didn’t come all the way to these bloody markets to talk about whores!”

“No need to shout! What did you come to tell then? When are we leaving? How is Sansa, have you seen her?”

“She could be better. That whoreson Joffrey has taken a liking to tormenting her. Nothing she couldn’t handle, but the sooner you leave, the better.”

“You’? So you haven’t changed your mind about coming with us? You really should. Robb would reward you well I’m sure. Maybe he would even give you Sansa’s hand if you asked?”

“For someone who says she is not stupid you talk remarkably stupidly at times. Lords and kings don’t give their sisters away to dogs. Even if I asked - not that I would.”

“How would you know? And Sansa wouldn’t mind.”

“What? Why would you say such a thing?”

“She likes you, I think. She didn’t use to, back in Winterfell and first on the road. But then you saved Mycah and would have saved Lady, and she saw that you are not so terrible after all.”

“Did she say something to you?”

“Oh, not with so many words. But he always defended you if someone said horrible things about you, and she told me she thought you were not a bad person. And I know many times she wanted to know where you were in the Red Keep, always asking me if I knew. Not that she actually tried to find you, I think. But she asked after you in any case.”

“She asked, did she? That doesn’t mean anything. Likely she only wanted to be sure I was there to protect her if need be, that’s all.”

“She never asked after Ser Meryn or Ser Boros, not even after Joffrey.”

“Hmph!”
The loud rip of a fabric torn echoed across the great hall, expounded by the complete silence that had fallen over the court. Sansa’s cheeks reddened and despite the throbbing pain on her belly and at the back of her thighs, the shame of being so indecently exposed in front of the crowd hurt even more. She tried to gather the pieces of the broken bodice to cover herself, but her hands were shaking uncontrollably and the flaps fell away from her grip. She prayed through her tears that her ordeal would be over soon.

“ENOUGH!”

Even through her despair she recognised the voice, and her heart jumped into her throat. If the Hound stood up for her so publicly, what would it mean to him? What impact would it have on their plans of escape? Joffrey hardly ever faced opposition to any of the sick acts he entertained himself with – how would he react to his own sworn shield trying to spoil his fun?

This was the first time he defended her in public, despite his clear distaste for the games Joffrey’s liked to play with Sansa. He had never struck her – Joffrey had never asked him to – but every time when a gauntlet or an open fist of one of his Kingsguard brothers made contact with Sansa, it was as if he himself had been hit. A flinch, a slight recoil. It had taken Sansa a while to notice that, focussed as she had been in her own pain, but when she eventually did, it gave her odd sort of comfort.

She had prayed silently that he wouldn’t show it too openly, as any suspicions could only harm their plans. Every now and then she had tried to capture the Hound’s grey eyes, but her only reward had been a stony glance, a slight burrowing of his brow and a quick turn of his head. Yet it made all the difference and Sansa drew strength from him and the knowledge of his discomfort - and from that moment when he had relaxed under her arms and pulled her closer… Yes, those things had carried her through her ordeals.

Now she dared to steal a glance towards the dais and Joffrey, who was sitting in the Iron Throne. His face expressed anger but also confusion, and he looked around the hall and at Sansa before turning back to the man standing tall next to him.

“Enough, you say?”

The Hound didn’t reply but stared ahead, not looking at Sansa nor his king. Joffrey waited for his reply a little while longer before completely unexpectedly bursting out laughing.

“Enough indeed! The traitor’s daughter deserves more than this petty show. I have a mind to make it a public spectacle, to show everyone how those who defy the crown will be treated! Maybe I’ll have her finger cut off and send it as a gift to her king-imposter brother? And whatever is left of their father’s head.” Joffrey turned to face the crowd, his lips curled into a mockery of a smile.

“Take her away! I will think later what to do with her. My dog is right, this doesn’t send the right message to my enemies, as much fun as this is.”

One more wave and Sansa was brusquely pulled to her feet by Ser Meryn, who hardly waited until she was up before pushing her forward. Sansa stumbled but luckily didn’t fall, and after gathering her dignity along with her tattered clothing, she walked away with a bowed head, ignoring the snickering that had erupted after the King’s announcement. Just as they left the hall she chanced a quick peek behind her shoulder and saw Joffrey talking animatedly with the men nearest to him. Only the Hound stood still, silently staring at the back of the hall.
A soft scratch on her door alerted Sansa just as she was about to succumb to a restless sleep. The indignity of the evening’s proceedings had been swept away by worries for the future. Had Joffrey been serious? He often made threats which he failed to execute, either because he forgot, it was too much work or because he thought of something else to replace the original peril. Would this be one of those – or was she truly going to be publicly humiliated and mutilated?

“Enter,” she called in low voice, knowing that only one person could be at her door at that time of the night. She hadn’t seen the Hound privately since the time when he had embraced her – or had it been the other way around? Yet he hadn’t been far from her mind at any given moment. Sansa hadn’t been able to shake away the feeling that something had changed then, something subtle and yet important.

A large figure entered through the door and slipped in quietly. That he could move so silently still unnerved Sansa, but mostly she was grateful for it.

Instead of staying at the back of the room he walked purposely straight towards the bed and soon hovered above her. Sansa had gotten up to a semi-seated position and craned her neck to look up at the tall shadow.

“We have to leave, and soon. Joffrey is determined to do as he said, even Cersei can’t change his mind this time.” The Hound’s voice was hoarse and tense.

Despite her shock at the news Sansa’s mind attached itself to the first word he had uttered.

“Was he angry at you for defying him so openly? Will it have consequences to you?”

“Aye, he wasn’t too pleased. I knew that right away but he had to save his face and hence he pretended to agree with me. He is not completely stupid – unfortunately.” They had spoken in whispered voices and in order to hear her better the Hound leaned over her. Instinctively Sansa moved aside and it was maybe also an unintentional reflex on his part that saw him sitting down. Deep furrows on his forehead spoke of his unease.

Sansa slid her hand along the blanket towards him and stopped just before she reached his thigh, torn between wanting to reach across the space that separated them to lend him some comfort, and terrible uncertainty of whether her gesture would be well received.

“You did say ‘we’. Does it mean that you’ll be leaving too? Is it your only choice now that you challenged him so publicly?”

The Hound stared at her hand and in the dim light filtrating through the window Sansa saw him blinking, as if he didn’t know how he had ended up on her bed, being almost touched by her.

“I’ll be leaving. I have had enough. King Robert was a drunkard and a lecher, but there was still some sense in the court when he was around. Now it is all…” he shrugged his broad shoulders.

Joy started to bubble inside Sansa at his words. He is coming with us! The prospects of their escape looked immediately brighter. And not only that – now that she knew he was to join them, Sansa admitted to herself how much she had hoped for it. It made sense, of course; better to have a capable warrior protecting two defenceless girls on the road…and yet there was more to it than that. Much more. She wanted it to be him rather than anyone else, more than even a small company of trained soldiers.

Sansa’s fingers acted almost as on their own and touched his knee, and she was suddenly startled by
her own audacity. The Hound almost jumped up and turned to look at her, sharply. Sansa averted her eyes but didn’t remove her hand. She searched for something to say and settled for the truth.

“\nI am truly glad to hear it. I wished you could come with us but I understood I couldn’t ask you that after all you have already done.”

He didn’t reply, only scrutinising her silently. Sans took a deep breath. “When do you think we shall leave?”

“It has to be tomorrow. We won’t have time to wait for the recruiter to the Wall as I had planned, it has to be just you and me and the little she-wolf. I’ll make the arrangements first thing in the morrow.”

He hadn’t shaken her hand away and encouraged by that Sansa inched a bit closer. Why she felt so compelled she didn’t know. All she knew was that he was breaking his bond with the house he had served loyally since his youth – and why? For the sake of the Northern cause? For the friendship he felt towards her wild little sister? Sansa had had plenty of time to think about this strange man and she had started to wonder if it had something to do with her. The notion felt a bit scary – and yet more exhilarating than frightening.

With a jolt Sansa realised then something she hadn’t dared to admit even to herself; she cared about the Hound. She truly cared. He was strong and brave and gentle – in his own kind. He would never hurt her or the ones she loved. Even his appearance had stopped perturbing her. Yes, his burned face was a ruin but his eyes were beautiful in their grey intensity and the rest of his face and his hooked nose were striking more than ugly - and he was tall and broad and muscular. He reminded her of the men of the North; not pretty and charming in a superficial way, but men who were true to their word and who could protect their own.

The full realisation of the truth that had been lurking under the surface for a while now made her speechless. She really liked the Hound…no, Sandor. She had never called him by his name, even after… everything. She decided that at least she should fix that omission.

“Sandor…” He flinched and looked up. Sansa swallowed.

“I am happy that you are coming with us, I truly am. You have my gratitude for all your help – and for your kindness.”

The Hound – Sandor – stared at her as if she had sprouted another head. Then his expression softened and Sansa smiled, encouraged by his reaction. Suddenly she felt extremely comfortable just sitting there, not the least worried about being clad only in her shift, in the middle of the night, with a full-grown man sharing her bed. This time his gaze hadn’t even wandered down her body as the last time, his focus being on her face and her words. Emboldened Sansa let her hand travel higher to reach his arm, feeling his firm muscles tense as she reached his shoulder and squeezed it lightly.

“I’ll make sure that you will be well rewarded once we reach my family. My brother will make certain you have no reason to regret your decision to leave the Lannisters.”

As soon as the words left her mouth she realised her mistake. The Hound – Sandor - tensed and withdrew from her.

“Not doing this for a reward.” He stood up abruptly and turned to leave. Sansa stared at his back in despair.

“No, I didn’t mean that you would! Please, you must believe me!”
He was almost at the door when he turned. “Be ready to leave at a moment’s notice. Don’t know yet when and how but keep your eyes open. Pack anything you absolutely have to take with you, but keep it light.” His tone was neutral and Sansa found herself missing even his mocking, his ire, anything but this cold tone.

The door closed behind him and Sansa was left alone to face the implications of her new and unexpected discovery.
As you must have noticed, I have taken some creative liberties and changed the timeline of some events from the canon. So for example Sansa’s public humiliation was not the result of the battle of Oxcross despite similarities it bore to that, but rather because of some other unnamed displeasure of Joffrey’s. Also, clearly Yoren is still in King’s Landing, rather than having left soon after Ned’s execution as in the books. Overall the timeline from Ned’s arrest and execution to Sandor rescuing Sansa is only a few months and happens during the lull when Rob is in Riverrun after having sent Theo to the Pyke and Catelyn to Renly to seek alliances. I hope you forgive me these minor deviations!

_Sandor & Arya_

“Wake up!”

“Mmmmm?”

“Quiet now, little wolf. If I take my hand away, promise you won’t scream murder.”

“Uh?”

“We are leaving. Now.”
“We? Hey, does it mean you’ll be coming as well?”

“Aye, I will. We don’t have much time though. Here, take this coin, get up and go to the last stables just inside the King’s Gate. Ask for Donnay, he should have the horses and supplies ready. Take them and ride out, and we’ll meet outside the tourney grounds.”

“You’ll get Sansa out safely?”

“I am not lying to you. I can’t say it will be safe and I can’t say I will definitively bring her. Hells, I can’t even be sure I’ll be coming with her. If I – if we – don’t show up, just take the horses back to the stable, keep the supplies or sell them, and come back here. Then go find a man called Yoren in the Golden Stag Inn, tell him who you are and he’ll take you to the North.”

“No, don’t act as it will not happen! You will find her and you both will come to the meeting place!”

“I’ll be sure to do my damnest, believe that.”

“Not only for me, but for her.”

“Just be where I told you to be – but remember the name. Yoren, in the Golden Stag.”

Sansa

Sansa hardly slept a wink that night – not only the promise of an immediate escape, but also her startling new discovery robbing her sleep. The Hound. I like him. She tasted the sound of his true name on her lips. Sandor. The first syllable as soft as her own, the second so hard and masculine. ‘-dor’. As the man himself.

Sansa stared at the ceiling, unblinking. Her mind sprouted a series of images in her head, all the way from the first moment she had seen him until that very same evening. She remembered her shock of seeing his horrible face and her anger about his uncouth behaviour, then how her curiosity had been awakened when she had learned more about that mysterious man. The unexpected gentleness she had witnessed in him a few times. Her realisation that he had been so deprived of human compassion that a simple touch and some kind words had made him tremble – him, the strongest warrior of them all!?

Sansa sighed and turned to her side. She wasn’t sure what she should think. She had thought herself to be in love with Joffrey, but that had been only a foolish girl’s infatuation. After it had worn off, and especially after she had seen his true colours, she had thought she would never make the same mistake again.

The notion made her smile despite her anxiety, summoning a small curve of her lips she couldn’t prevent. Sandor Clegane couldn’t be further away from Joffrey by looks, stature, character, prospects or by any other imaginable trait. The smile continued and for the briefest of moments she was not the wretched captive of the crown but a young maid contemplating one of the oldest emotions in the world: The one that is reborn anew in the mind of every youth who experiences it for the first time. Then she very nearly giggled, remembering Sandor’s bewilderment and uncertainty when she had touched him, the way how his broad shoulder had tensed under her fingers.
Nonetheless, the moment of gaiety passed almost as soon as it had arrived and she sighed deeply, burying her head under the pillow and willing herself to fall asleep. Tomorrow was going to be a big day.

Yet sleep didn’t come.

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It was almost midday when he finally came. Sansa had broken her fast in the Great Hall but pleading feeling unwell she had excused herself and returned to her room. Cersei had looked at her sharply but nodded her head in acquiescence. Joffrey was nowhere to be seen and for that Sansa was grateful.

The familiar soft rasp at the door and her heart stated hammering so hard that she had to take several deep breaths to steady herself.

“Yes?” she whispered.

The Hound – Sandor - looked focussed and hard, clad in his full armour, his white Kingsguard cloak pillowing behind him when he slipped in through the door, closing it quietly behind him before turning to look at her. No greetings, no acknowledgment that this was probably one of the most important days of her life; her escape from King’s Landing.

“Ready?” he rasped.

Sansa had rushed to the door and now found herself facing him, hardly half a step separating them. He was so close that she could feel his imposing presence with every fibre of her body. It made her skin shiver in prickles and raised the fine hairs on her arms. Her thoughts from the previous night came back to her and she found herself tongue-tied, unable to think or say anything. Sandor.

“Yes,” she finally whispered and picked up her meagre belongings packed into a bundle from the floor.

“Here. Put this on.” He handed her a bundled cloak of dark green and made of coarse weave. She took it from his hands and threw it around her, realising in the process that it must be one of his. It smelled of him and was much too big for her, but that only meant that it covered her well.

Without waiting Sandor turned and opened the door again and so they left; Sandor first, Sansa following behind, tugging desperately the too large cloak to settle over her shoulders.

He offered no explanations and Sansa asked no questions as they hurried along the quiet corridors, turning right here and left there. Soon enough Sansa had lost all sense of direction. Whether they were heading deeper into the keep or towards the outer keep she didn’t know and didn’t care. As long as he led the way, she followed.

Sandor seemed to know his way around the castle as he never wavered and the passageways they took were mostly deserted and only a few hurried servants passed them by, cowering when they saw the formidable Hound. Sansa wore the simplest dress she owned and had tied her hair back in a tight braid. Her head being now also covered with the large hood she hoped nobody would recognise her, at least easily.

Eventually they reached a low corridor and at the end of it, a door that led into an empty room with only a small slit window giving light into it. For a moment she was worried that they had reached a dead end, but Sandor walked straight into the middle of the room, to a wooden trap door on the floor. He had grabbed a burning torch from its sconce a while back, when the corridors had started to get
deeper and darker, and now he handed it to Sansa.

While she looked on, he cranked the trap door open and gestured her to go first. Approaching it she saw a ladder leading into darkness and for a moment she shivered, reluctant to go into unknown. Then she looked up at her companion and the slight bow of his head encouraged her. Gathering up her skirts Sansa lowered herself on the first step.

Soon they were racing through ancient tunnels, Sansa following the light of the torch and the tall man carrying it. Those passageways must be the ones he had told her about a lifetime ago – when she could have never dreamed of needing to escape through them. On and on they went, finally to arrive in front of a gate of iron bars, through which she could see a grassy meadow and an outline of trees.

The lock in it looked rusty and unused but operated well enough when Sandor slid it open, making her wonder how long ago he had planned this escape route and made sure it was passable. It must have been earlier than the day before – so he had told it true about preparing for it. Not that she had really doubted him.

Sunlight blinded Sansa at first after a long time in darkness, but she had hardly adjusted to it when Sandor called for her. He was standing next to his horse and loading him with saddle bags from the ground. These preparations he must have done only this morning, as isolated and well hidden as the little clearing appeared.

“Where are we?”

“Outside the Red Keep, not far from the River Row. It is just behind those shrubs, and that’s where we are going. Here, put these on, so that your maiden’s thighs don’t chafe so badly.” He angled something out of one of the bags and held it out to her. A pair of breeches, Sansa realised when she grabbed them. Her brow furrowed.

“What…"

“Just put them on, under your skirts. I’ll turn my back if you are so bloody precious about it,” he grumbled and true to his word, turned away.

Nervously Sansa rotated on her spot and pulled the unusual garment on. They were surely not his – they would have been much too large for sure – but were almost her size although still too loose. She tied the cord on the waist tight, dropped her skirts and turned towards the horse and his master.

“Come, let us waste no more time.”

Sandor mounted his stallion first and then pulled her up by her arm as if she weighed nothing, positioning her to sit behind him. First Sansa was nervous about the prospect of being so close to that terrifying horse, but then she concluded that its back was probably the safest place to be.

“Hold on tightly. I better have my hands free – just in case.”

Sansa nodded against his broad back and so they started their journey.

“Arya!”

“Sansa!”
Hardly had Sandor halted their pace when Sansa squirmed in her excitement to get down and meet her sister. Only the firm arm that gripped her prevented her falling head down, and still her dismounting was anything but graceful. And she couldn’t have cared less.

Only after hugging her wild sibling fiercely to convince her that she really was here, alive and well, Sansa took a better look at her.

“Arya, your hair! And what are you wearing?”

The face that almost painfully reminded Sansa of their father broke into a wide grin. “I like it! No need to comb it or braid it and it never gets on the way. And didn’t you know I was supposed to be a boy?”

Sansa glanced at her companion who had also dismounted and gone to examine the wares next to where Arya had sat propped against a large tree. They were right outside the tourney grounds where Sansa had enjoyed her first tourney – in another time, in another life.

“No, he only said that you are safe and that you have food and shelter. Where were you?”

Before either of them had a chance to say more, an irate voice boomed behind them.

“Where the hells is the other horse? I told him two, two fucking horses! Can’t he count?”

Arya turned to him and explained almost unnaturally calmly, “Donnay only had one for now. He said you wanted them ready for next week, and he had one in mind for then. I asked for a replacement, of course, but he had none to give.”

Sandor huffed and cursed for a while, then seemingly accepted the situation from the way he pursed his lips together.

“You girls can share. Now let’s get the fuck out of here before the Gold Cloaks get us.”

Sansa’s heart jumped. She was a passable rider at best, and even on the King’s Road she had only dared to ride because the pace had been so leisurely. The idea of galloping across the countryside being pursued by soldiers was daunting, even if Arya was a better rider than she. On their way to the meeting place she had enjoyed the safety and security Sandor’s big bulk afforded her, and the thought of clinging to her slip of a sister scared her. Before she could stop herself she called out loud what she really wanted.

“Can I ride with you? We could move all the supplies to Arya’s mount to lessen Stranger’s burden.”

Arya seemed surprised but not nearly so as Sandor, whose eyes widened and who stopped what he was doing just to stare at her.

“With me?”

“Yes.” Sansa’s courage grew as she spoke. “I am not a very good rider and I am afraid how well I could stay in the saddle with Arya. And I know you wouldn’t let me fall. And we need to be sure we can make a good time. And…” Her voice wavered when she ran out of reasons, wondering if she had just made a fool of herself.

He looked at her again, long and hard, and then shrugged his shoulders.

“Well then, let’s load your nag. Move him closer,” he addressed Arya and started to unbblec Stranger’s load. Sansa sighed in relief, but didn’t miss a queer look Arya threw in her direction. So
what?

Soon enough they were ready to go and she was lifted on the horse again. The sensation of those large hands on her waist was much too intense for what it should have been, and Sansa blushed at the intimacy of it, and what she knew was to follow. She only hoped that he didn’t notice it.

They were still too close to the city to relax their guard and so Sansa rode behind as before. She didn’t mind; she could lean against Sandor and wrap her arms around his middle. Despite cold armour covering his upper body and making it impossible for her to feel him truly, she could discern the way he tensed his thighs when giving directions to his horse. There was something decidedly improper in the way she sat here, her legs spread, so close to a man who was not her lord husband… However, she had stopped caring about the propriety so she only leaned closer and held him tighter. Among her struggles to keep her balance she once again wondered what made her now feel so comfortable with the man who had scared her so much before.

Their pace was indeed anything like the pleasant walk along the Kingsroad. Sansa held on for her dear life, but after a while she learned to adjust to Strangers gait and found out that by allowing her body to relax, rather than staying rigid, made the whole experience much more tolerable – not only to her but probably also to her companion and the poor horse carrying them both.

They travelled straight up the River Road first – the fact Sansa knew only because that’s what he told her – riding fast for a good while, but eventually the snorting of their horses indicated that they had reached their limits. They left the road then and ducked into the woods.

Soon Sandor grudgingly announced that it was time for a break and so they halted and dismounted. Sansa was breathless and tired, her muscles aching from the tension of holding on. Silently she blessed the breeches she was wearing – she shuddered to think how badly her thighs would indeed have suffered without them.

Sandor and Arya walked the horses to the stream next to which they had stopped while Sansa almost fell on the ground, her legs buckling under her. She adjusted her back against a small boulder, letting the mild breeze to cool her flushed face and enjoying the first taste of freedom for a long time. She sighed deeply and smiled, closing her eyes for a moment – and then opening them to have a good look at her companions.

Sandor stood by the water holding Stranger’s reins loosely in his hands. He had shoved his white cloak into his saddle bag and was now clad in the same shade of green as what Sansa wore. For a moment it appeared as despite his huge size he somehow blended with the landscape and became one with it. A giant of the forest.

The thought of being in the woods with him, the fate of both her and her sister in his hands, could have terrified Sansa at one time. It still scared her – but for completely different reason. Yes, she was nervous and her hands were clammy and there were butterflies on her stomach – but not because of fear.
Sansa's Choice

Chapter Summary

And here it comes, one more iteration of the well-exhausted theme of camping in the woods, sorry! Yet I simply can’t think of another way to do this – unless they would buy tickets and fly from KL to Riverrun comfortably with Air Westeros. So camping in the woods it is… :-) 

Also, I aim to wrap this baby up in about 4-5 chapters, before this gets too convoluted, and I hope to do it sooner rather than later.

Sandor & Arya

“You didn’t tell me what happened - why did we have to leave in such a hurry.”

“I didn’t.”

“Come on, tell me why! Was it something that Joffrey did? Or Sansa?”

“Joffrey was being an even bigger prick than usual. It wasn’t safe for her to stay.”

“I knew it! You came with us because of her, not because of me.”

“What the hells are you talking about?”
“I know, don’t you even try to deny it. She needed saving and so you came, like a knight in a shining armour in a song.”

“Do you need a smack in the head? Or a swim? It seems to me your head needs a good cooling down to make you stop sputtering nonsense.”

“Aaaawwwh, that water is COLD!”

“Don’t make me throw you into it, then.”

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“So these are the rules: We are going to Riverrun, but we have to go by the woods, not by the road. Our advantage is not in speed but in stealth. We have to stay unnoticed, and we have to tread carefully. Riding in the forest can be dangerous as the terrain is uneven, full of burrows and fallen trees and branches.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And that means that when I say ‘quiet’, you shut your trap. When I say ‘stop’, you stop. When I say ‘run’, you run. And when I say ‘jump’, you ask how high. Is that understood?”

“Aye, m’lord!”

“I know these parts; I have ridden in enough godsfordesaken campaigns to know my way, so we should be fine.”

“You see, that is already something that is going to be useful to Robb. He doesn’t know the South as well as you do. If you’d help him, he would give you anything you ask.”

“Well, I better get something for my troubles and for leaving everything behind to save the two of you. All I have is my horse, my armour and my tourney winnings. And my name is mud after it becomes known where I went. Oathbreaker is the least they will come up with.”

“It is good then that you don’t care what other people think, is it not?”

“A nice fat purse would go a long way soothing it.”

“It is not a purse you want. You could get much more if you just asked, Robb would give you Sansa’s…”

“QUIET!”

“What’s stopping you? I think she wouldn’t mind. I wouldn’t. I’d like it much better if she married you rather than some lord or knight, as she otherwise would have to. I knew nothing good would come of Joffrey but nobody cared what I thought.”

“And nobody will care about your thoughts this time either.”

“She likes you.”

“Aye, she likes me now, when I am saving your necks. She needs me, you both do. But that doesn’t mean that she wouldn’t be ready to drop me like an old boot when we reach Riverrun. That’s just the way how it is. And after I get my reward I’ll be leaving, going across the sea. They need sellswords in Essos I hear.”
“You can’t just leave us! Besides, she asked to ride with you today, didn’t she?”

“It only made sense. She was better off with me in high speed, you being such a small thing that you both would have fallen to the ground had she held onto you as hard as onto me. We were riding fast.”

“She held you tight, eh?”

“She had to.”

“Well what about now, after the break? You said yourself that our pace will be slower. And she is not quite as hopeless rider as she makes it out to be, Father made sure of that. She would manage easily with me – so if she still asks to ride with you, you’ll have your answer.”

“She will use her common sense and choose you. That’s your answer.”

“So you say. Just wait and see.”

Sansa

After Arya and Sandor came back from watering the horses they had a bite to eat; some cold cuts and a piece of bread. Sansa settled next to her sister between gnarly roots of an old tree while Sandor sat a bit further away, attacking his piece of bread as if it had done something particularly grievous to him. He threw dark looks in their direction and Sansa wondered what Arya had done to raise his ire. She decided to ignore it, keen to hear Arya’s tale.

“So where were you? Somewhere in the city?”

Arya chew his meat and shrugged. “In an inn – kind of. On the Street of Silk. I was working for a cook as an errand boy and slept in an alcove in the kitchen.”

“How was it? Did she treat you well?”

“It was not bad. As a matter of fact it was pretty good, almost better than in the Red Keep.”

“Arya!” Sansa was scandalised at the thought, but Arya only grinned.

“I didn’t have to take lessons and I got to go around the city when running my errands. I ate well and I took care of the two pigs they kept at the back of the inn – I named them Meryn and Boros. And some chicken – I fed them all every morning. And the girls were very nice too, they had so many stories.”

“Oh, were there serving maids in the inn? I hope nobody knew anything about you, though.”

Arya seemed to struggle to control her expression for a moment but then shook her head.

“Nobody knew who I was. I don’t know what the Hound told them, but I think he told them better to look after me, or…” She made a cut-throat gesture and smirked. “They probably thought I was his bastard or something. They never asked me too many questions, but they certainly left me in peace and didn’t drive me too hard.”

It was strange how Sansa’s heart constricted at the thought of Sandor’s bastards. Does he have any?
she wondered. There was no reason why he wouldn’t – he had been in the Kingsguard only for a little while, and even its members never swore to abstain completely – just not to marry. Why it felt so bitter to imagine him and a child he cared about – and a woman he had lain with to beget the babe… Sansa forced that painful line of thought out of her head. She had sensed there was something else to Arya’s story but she didn’t want to press her too much and hence turned her attention back to her meagre meal.

“And you? The Hound told me it was not always… good for you.”

Arya’s tone was serious and when Sansa looked at her she caught a worried look on her face. Looking back she conceded that despite she having slept in comfortable rooms in a featherbed and dined the delicacies of the royal kitchens, her little sister was the one who had had it easier.

“It was not nice. They kept me well enough, outwardly, but when Robb started to march towards the capital, Joffrey got increasingly nasty about it. He liked to parade me in the court, showing everyone that he had me as his prisoner. As his *betrothed*. And he made his Kingsguard to hit me.” She stopped and swallowed hard, remembering the humiliations, the beatings, and Joffrey’s rages whenever things didn’t go his way.

“But not the Hound. He wouldn’t have done it.” The certainty in Arya’s voice caught Sansa’s attention. Yes, he had never hit her. And despite not being there, Arya’s trust in him was touching. She nodded.

“That craven king liked to torment you, he told me. He also said that it was nothing you couldn’t handle. Was it so?” Arya narrowed her eyes and looked at her expectantly.

At first Sansa was annoyed, almost like the time when she had lashed at Sandor. *Nothing I can’t handle!* It seemed so dismissive of her suffering and she almost said so – but then she realised what he had *really* said. *He thought I could handle it.* Forgetting Arya’s question she considered the implications of Sandor’s statement. *Maybe he doesn’t take me for such a stupid little bird after all.* The more she thought about it the more ridiculously proud she became. Yes, she had endured it all without breaking – and he had noticed it!

Sansa smiled to herself and only got roused by Arya’s nudge at her knee. “So?”

She smiled at her. “I guess I *did* handle it. It didn’t break me and look, here we are now!”

Arya smiled back and then got serious again.

“What happened yesterday? The Hound told me that he wasn’t going to come with us, and he had all these plans for the recruiter of the Night’s Watch to take us to the North. And then suddenly he came and everything had to happen right then. I asked him but he was being difficult as usual and only said that it wasn’t safe for you there anymore. Something that Joffrey did.”

Sansa wasn’t exactly surprised, as Sandor was not known to be particularly talkative if he didn’t have to. She found it difficult to talk about the events with Arya, but she also thought it important that she knew what had taken place, and why Sandor had decided to join them. So she outlined the events of the previous day to her horrified sister.

“He made you almost naked!?” Arya gasped in horror. “And Joffrey stopped when the Hound said it was enough?”

“Yes he did – he pretended to agree but it was only to save his face. Then he threatened to humiliate me in public, cut my finger off and send it to Robb…” Her voice trailed off.
Arya stared at her in disbelief and finally sighed.

“So that’s what it was. He left because of you.”

“No, he had to consider his own position. He had just publicly defied his king and Joffrey is not one to forget slights easily.”

Arya pursed her mouth. “He could have patched it up if he wanted. Joffrey did look up to him, no matter how much he liked to command him. He didn’t have to leave.” She sighed again. “I know he did it for you. He is my friend, I know he is, but he would have been quite happy to help me escape without sacrificing his whole life for it. But you… he likes you more.”

Sansa blushed and felt unreasonably pleased. “You don’t know that. Why would you think so?”

Arya opened her mouth but they were interrupted by their cranky companion, demanding them to stop chittering and get ready to move again.

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Sandor outlined his plans to them and from Arya’s affirming nods Sansa gathered that she had already heard them. She didn’t have much to add, but she felt relief knowing that the breakneck pace they had started with was not going to be necessary anymore.

“So this will mean that it will take longer for us to reach Riverrun? And we will have no chances to catch up with Robb if he is already on the road?”

Both Arya and Sandor looked at her surprised, but Sandor replied first.

“Aye. We have no idea where he could be, so it would be a wild goose chase even at best. And as I said, better to stay hidden and safe rather than risk being arrested. Joffrey will send troops in all directions, but especially towards Riverrun, and if we take the road we are as good as captured.”

Sansa nodded, satisfied with the answer. Sandor walked to Stranger gathering the reins into his hand, ready to mount, then glanced at Sansa.

“The ride is going to be slow and easy from now on. You can ride with your sister.”

Sansa’s heart sank. She had thought… she had felt so safe with him. Why did he want her to go with Arya? She looked at Arya who was fussing with her horse, a sturdy looking brown rouncey. Yes, sure she could… but she discovered that she didn’t want to.

“If it pleases you, I would like to ride with you. If you find it acceptable, of course. I… would feel safer.” Sansa stammered and wanted to kick herself for not being able to act naturally.

Sandor stopped, one leg already in stirrup, and stared at her. Arya had turned to look as well as and to Sansa it seemed that she was snickering. What? What did I say?

“It is only that you said the terrain is uneven. The horses may stumble. And I don’t want to fall…”

Arya snorted out loud, no mistaking about it.

“No need to fret, little bird, it is quite safe. At walking pace they are not likely to stumble; that is only if we ride high speed.”

“Yes Sansa, it will be fine. I will not let you fall.”
Sansa squirmed, feeling nailed to her spot by Sandor’s harsh look. *Why are they making such a big fuss about this?* she wondered. Yet she didn’t want to give up. Something in his strength gave her comfort, even if it was not only the safety of knowing that he would not let her fall. She raised her chin and looked at Sandor.

“Of course if you don’t want it, I understand. I said that I would ride with you only if it is acceptable to you.”

Her two companions exchange a quick glance with each other and this time it seemed to her that it was Sandor who yielded in front of Arya’s triumphant gaze. He grunted, turned his attention back to his horse and mounted in one fluid motion.

Then he extended his arm towards Sansa who skipped the few steps separating them with a glee, only to be whisked to sit in front of him, trapped in the cocoon of his strong arms.

And so, slowly they continued their journey.
“I told you so.”

“Don’t let that fire die. I had a hell of a job to find enough dry moss to light it.”

“She wanted to ride with you.”

“She was only worried about breaking her neck. That’s all.”

“It is not, and you know it. Did she hold on to you as hard as earlier? Even when we were just walking?”

“Let it drop, I tell you. Just drop it. Now, hand me that bird. It is not much but it is fresh meat and saves our supplies.”

“Why don’t you want to believe she wants to be with you?”

“Why? WHY? Have you had a look at me lately, girl? Have I fucking transformed into a handsome knight and just haven’t noticed it myself? She is a lady, she’s a bloody princess – and those may suffer dogs well enough when they are useful, but they don’t certainly like them.”

“What will it take to convince you otherwise?”

“Give me that stick, over there.”
“I know, we have three bedrolls, don’t we? I’ll set them down side by side, put your bags on one of them and then we can see which one she chooses as hers. If she picks the one next to you…”

“Well that I know already. She’s a maid and she knows better than to lie next to a grown man. You, you wouldn’t care.”

“I’ll do that and we’ll see.”

“Not hair off my arse whichever way you want to set the camp. Better that we don’t spread out too much anyway. But choose the spot next to those big trees and put my bedroll furthest out and hers closest to the tree. I need to be free to move in case if anyone comes. Not that I expect it, but nonetheless.”

“Very well. How long before we can eat?”

“I just put the bloody bird in the spit. Be patient.”

+Sansa+

After the evening meal, cooked by her companions who had seemed to be arguing about something most of the time, Sansa walked to the bedrolls Arya had set out next to a big tree. She saw that Sandor’s saddlebags rested on the one furthest out, and it made sense to her. He was their protector and the only one who actually knew what to do if anyone stumbled to their modest camp in the darkness of the night.

She dragged her own bundle next to his and fell on top of her bedding, exhausted. The long day at the saddle had worn her out completely.

Yet when Arya followed her soon after and laid down next to her, she roused herself. There was something on her mind, had been the whole day since their first break. She wanted to know why Sandor had been looking at her so oddly, and why at times Arya had seemed hardly able to hide her snickering when looking at them. Sansa knew she was not as able rider as Arya, and probably not the best companion on the road when escaping pursuers – but she had done her best, had not complained once, had done everything she had been told to do and had not fallen from the horse or done anything else stupid like that. So what was it? What had she done?

“Arya, you have to tell me what is the matter. Why have you been giving me those strange looks? Have I done something wrong?”

Arya turned on her side and rested her elbow on the ground, her head leaning against her hand. She appeared unusually contemplating.

“Do you like the Hound?” she suddenly blurted, quite out of the blue. Sansa flinched. Surely Arya could not know what even she had dared to contemplate only in the privacy of her own heart?

“Of course I like him. He has saved us both from the captivity of the crown. And he is not nearly as bad as is his reputation.” Her reply was careful and cautious. Her realisation was still too new and too raw to be shared with anyone yet. Especially not Arya.

“I mean, do you really like him?”
As delighted as Sansa was to be united with her little sister, she was now reminded of how persistent and annoying she could be when she had something on her sights.

“Why do you want to know?” She responded to the interrogation with a defensive move.

Arya huffed. “He likes you. A lot.”

Sansa remembered then their discussion from earlier that day, the one Sandor had interrupted. Arya had just been about to tell why she thought Sandor liked her. Her heart started hammering, fast.

“You said that earlier. But why do you think so? He didn’t look very happy about the prospect of having to ride with me today.”

“Aaah, that.” Arya waved dismissively. “I know he cares about you. I saw how he was always looking at you even when we were back in Winterfell, and then on the road. And in King’s Landing.”

As excited as Sansa was hearing that, she was also disappointed.

“Many men liked to look at me, I know. I am not stupid; men do that when they see a pretty girl.” Calling herself pretty didn’t feel conceited but just stating a fact.

“No, it was more than that. And he talked about you a lot. Asked about you. And when he came to Leya’s and saw Aline, he only wanted her, even though she was already taken. There were girls who were prettier than her; Myriah and Daria were the prettiest of them all and they were free, and he just stormed past them straight to Aline.”

“Aline? Who is Aline?” Sansa didn’t understand the word Arya was saying, trying to remember if she knew anyone called Aline. Or Myriah or Daria, for that matter. Arya didn’t seem to register her question, only continuing.

“The girls said he never used to care with whom he went, taking any girl who happened to be free. But you see, Aline had red hair and blue eyes, and if one squinted one’s eyes she looked a bit like you. I saw it when it happened, and as soon as he saw her, he went straight to her.”

Suddenly Sansa realised, and covered her mouth with her hand in shock. What Arya had said earlier about the girls, Street of Silk… Oh!

“You were…in a house of ill repute?!” As soon as she asked that, another realisation pierced her. Sandor had been there, with some girl… Sansa felt something cold squeezing her heart. With a girl.

Arya stared at her, realising her blunder too late. She looked apologetic and tried to explain, but Sansa didn’t pay attention to her words anymore.

“It was not bad, the girls were just doing their job, and they were clean and nice and Leya looked after the house very well. It was one of the best houses in the street, everybody said so.”

Sansa stared right past her, an image of Sandor with another woman in her head… everybody knew what men looked for in those houses. She felt almost physically sick.

“Sansa, what is it? I am sorry, it came out all wrong! I only meant that he wanted a girl who looked like you, so it must mean that he really wants you. I asked him about it afterwards but he didn’t want to talk about it. So I knew I must have hit close. And he didn’t do it again.”

Sansa raised her hand to make her stop. She was angry. “You tell me he likes me and that he went
with another woman almost in the same sentence! How dare you!?”

Arya looked at her, clearly confused. “But…isn’t it clear? I mean…”

Then another thought hit Sansa. Had it happened after they had embraced, when she had thought something had irrevocably changed between them? Had he left her arms and gone to the …brothel?

“When did it happen?” she interrupted Arya’s spluttering explanations.

Arya wrinkled her nose and counted back in her head. “Well, it was the first time he came to see me. He told me he had to take care of his cover story; that it would raise questions if he came to visit that house just to see the cook’s help. So it was about a week from when he took me there.”

Sansa wasn’t sure what to think of it. At least it had been well before their embrace. And Sandor’s reasons were practical, even she had to admit it. Then yet another thing Arya had said caught her attention.

“What do you mean, ‘he didn’t do it again’? Did he go with one of those other girls?” She grimaced at the thought but she had to know. “And did he use to come there often?”

“He didn’t come again. The next time I saw him he must have waited for me outside and follow me, as he stopped me at the markets where I had gone for some shopping. And so he did all the other times we saw after that. I asked him why he didn’t come to the house again, and he said he didn’t feel like it.”

Sansa stared at her, waiting her to answer her second question. It didn’t matter of course, it was all in the past, but still she had to know.

“I don’t think he came there that often. All the girls were a bit wary of him, although he had never hurt any of them. So, maybe a few times a year. Usually when there were some big celebrations going on, one of the girls said when I asked.”

For some reason that made Sansa feel better. She was not stupid, she knew that men had needs, and even members of the Kingsguard were known to visit brothels.

“I think you have told me quite enough, thank you,” she said to Arya with her most regal tone. She didn’t want to hear anything more and only wanted to curl inside her blankets, fall asleep and forget the horrible hollow feeling at the pit of her stomach. She purposefully turned her back to Arya and stared at the empty bedroll next to her.

Sandor would soon come and lay down next to her. Oh, how was she ever going to get any sleep now, being so close to him and imagining him holding a girl that looked like her but who wasn’t her?

Sansa wanted to cry but forced her eyes closed instead. And so sleep eventually found her.
Unfortunately there may be a slight delay before the next update, as I will be moving house – and we all know how easy and stress-free that is (not!). I do try to write as well, as we all need breaks, but I can't guarantee how that will go... In my plans there are still three more chapters after this, but again, we'll see.

So please bear with me… and thank you for following this far, and my apologies for leaving you in this very spot!

_Sandor & Arya_

“What did I tell you?!”

“---”

“What did she do? I saw her, she didn’t even stop to think about it but went straight to the roll next to you, you ‘she-knows-better-than-to-lie-next-to-a-grown-man’!”

“She thought I would be able to protect her better than you. And she is right. Nothing else to it.”

“Aaarrghhh! What else do you need to make you believe? If you only had heard how she talked about you last night and how she asked about you, you’d see it for yourself.”
“I give up! Very well; you clearly want me to ask what she said. Come on then. What was it?”

“She…I mean I…Well, you know, she wanted to know what do you do, in your spare time. Yes, that’s it. That’s what she asked.”

“In my spare time??”

“Yes, but then she was really tired and went to sleep and we didn’t get to talk more. But still. Isn’t that clear that she likes you?”

“Aye, as clear as mud in this stream. Go on, walk a bit further upstream to fill these water bottles.”

“How about a kiss? You should kiss her and if she likes it you can’t shrug it away any more. Sansa is a lady, she wouldn’t kiss anyone unless she really wanted to.”

“A kiss?? To make her scream rape and think I am just like one of those bloody thugs they call knights. Are you fucking out of your mind?!”

“I didn’t say you have to fuck her, just kiss!”

“Bloody hells, girl, watch your mouth! Hear that? That low rumble – don’t you feel anything?”

“What? What is it, what am I supposed to hear? Is somebody coming, should we hide?!”

“NO. That was just the earth moving as your poor septa is turning in her grave, or in whatever ditch she was thrown at. You are still supposed to be a lady – or to become one someday. I say fuck, you don’t. Is that clear?”

“Hmph! I am not a lady and never will be.”

“Mayhap so, but I don’t want to be blamed by your mother that I have turned you feral – any more than you already are.”

“I will not let them blame you for anything! But very well, I will be careful with them and don’t say fuck again.”

“Better not talk about kisses either.”

Sansa woke up just before sunrise and for a fleeting moment wondered where she was. Then the clear sky above her head, the uneven ground under her and the rising crescendo of birds waking up to their day told it to her. And when she turned her head to her right, the sight of Sandor Clegane on his back, sleeping peacefully.

She took a moment to watch him, for once being free to study his face without his scrutiny making it difficult. He looked more peaceful, more serene. She tried to remember if she had actually ever seen him genuinely happy, and for true she couldn’t. A few times a corner of his mouth had ticked almost as in a smile – but when he was relaxed as he was now, Sansa found it surprisingly easy to imagine that expression on his face. She concluded that he would look much nicer if he smiled and decided to
do her best to coax one out of him. Now that they had escaped the oppressive atmosphere of the court, maybe she could?

And then he stirred and started to flex his body and Sansa quickly closed her eyes, pretending to be sleeping.

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She had been nervous when she had been awakened from her sleep by his arrival the previous evening, his heavy weight landing next to her with an audible thud. It had been much after Arya had already fallen asleep, judged by the soft snoring sounds from her bedroll. Sansa had stayed still, not wanting to Sandor know that she was awake. He had fumbled with his bedding before laying his heavy bulk down, and soon after Sansa had felt a weight of his blanket gently lowered to cover her.

There had been a respectable distance of at least two hand widths between them, but it had been the first time she had ever slept next to a man. That they both had been fully clad and accompanied by her little sister, as well as being out in the open, hadn’t quelled the butterflies in her stomach, and it had taken a long while before she had finally fallen asleep again.

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The day was uneventful, monotony of riding only interrupted by a few breaks to rest their mounts, to have a bite to eat and to take care of their natural needs. Sansa tried to start discussion with Sandor a few times but after receiving only monosyllable grunts as replies she eventually gave up and concentrated on admiring the landscape - and the sensation of him so close to her. As much as she had tried to push away what Arya had told her about the other girl – about the other women - she couldn’t help imagining those strong arms that surrounded her holding another, and it hurt.

Sansa had to close her eyes when the shame of thinking such things became too much. She could feel the heat on her cheeks and the most extraordinary tingling at the bottom of her belly. Her hands that were resting at the pommel of the saddle itched to touch him as she had done that one time in her room, when he had held her and she had felt his muscles tense under her hands.

She had a vague idea of what took place between men and women in private, but all descriptions she had heard had made it sound as something dirty and undesirable; something that men wanted and women had to endure. Yet being so close to the man who had loomed so large in her mind lately made her body react as it had never done before, and her heart leap of excitement - but it also made her apprehensive and unsure.

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On a midday break Sansa approached Arya again, determined to learn more about their surly saviour. Arya had been his friend for a long time and might be able to tell her what she needed to hear. Did Sandor truly care about her, what had he said, what were his plans after this – she wanted to know everything. Sansa had thought it to be easier to converse with the man himself away from King’s Landing, but almost the opposite had proven true. He had not responded to her queries and had completely ignored her questions about the future.

“Arya, why did you ask me if like Sandor – the Hound? What does it matter to you?”

Her sister threw a quick look at the man in question and seeing that he was bent down to examine hooves of their horses at the other side of the small clearing, she shrugged.

“He is a good man. He fights better than anyone and knows a lot about everything. He is not greedy
or false and in every respect much better than Joffrey or anyone I met in King’s Landing.”

“Yes, he is a good man where it counts. And I do care about him, I really do.”

“And he is not going to tell you himself that he wants you and if you don’t know it and if he doesn’t ask Robb, then he is going to leave and we will never see him again.”

Sansa’s heart started to pump loudly at Arya’s words but still she couldn’t reconcile her words with Sandor’s behaviour. If anything, since their escape he had seemed even colder and more closed than before.

“What do you mean, ‘wants me’? Maybe he likes me in his own rough way, but he most certainly is not showing it. And what does Robb has to do with any of this?”

Arya rolled her eyes. “I might have told him he could ask Robb for your hand. They will marry you again - even I know it - and I’d rather it be him than some stupid lord.”

Besides the mention of a marriage, which alone was enough to shock Sansa, the matter-of-fact way Arya talked about it as a necessity for a highborn maiden chilled her. Her wild sister might buck against the teachings and expectations of her position, but she knew them just the same. But… Sandor asking her hand?

“What did he say to that?” Her voice trembled and she didn’t care if Arya noticed it.

Again Arya shrugged. “He almost bit my head off for even suggesting. Said that you are a princess and that lords and kings don’t give their sisters away to dogs.” She stopped eating then, put the piece of bread she held in her hand on her lap and turned fully to face Sansa. Although it had been only a few months since they had been separated, suddenly she appeared much older and more thoughtful than Sansa had ever seen her. Her face had lost some of its previous roundness and her short-cropped hair gave her an air of solemnity, and quite unexpectedly Sansa found herself paying serious attention to what her little sister was about to say.

“He doesn’t think he is good enough. For you or for Robb or for anyone. He thinks you only like him because he is helping us, and he said that you’d likely drop him like an old boot when we reach Riverrun. But you wouldn’t do that, would you?”

Sansa was so flustered that for a moment she didn’t answer. Marry? Him? The whole notion was unthinkable. Sandor had been quite right in his insistence that kings didn’t give their sisters – the valuable pawns in the game of alliances – to just about anyone who asked for their hand. Especially not to a second son of a minor house who was famous for his allegiance to their bitter enemies. No, Robb wouldn’t view such proposal favourable. And then…then… he would leave.

“What… all that he said?”

“He told me I talked stupidly. But it was not what he said, but the way he said it! He became much more furious than he needed to. He could have just told me to mind my own business and ignore my suggestion, but he shouted at me. And walked away. And seethed for a long time afterward, and I know he was not cross with me, not really. I think he was just angry because he thought it couldn’t happen. Now tell me, would he have behaved like that if he really didn’t care one way or another?”

“Oh Arya,” Sansa whispered. “It is not that easy. We have duties, you and me, to our family and to our house.”

Now it was Arya’s turn to become angry. Her face contorted as she spitted out her frustration.
“It is easy! If you want it to be! Robb wouldn’t even have you or me back if it wasn’t for the Hound. You’d be married to that monster Joffrey – would that be better? ‘A powerful alliance’ as they say. That would be the reality if he wouldn’t have taken us away!”

She stood up abruptly and stormed away, muttering about how some people could be so blind and stupid.

Sansa stared at her retreating form and let her shoulders slump. Everything Sandor had said was true – but so was everything Arya had voiced. Their life had been turned upside down and even she didn’t see things quite as clearly she had seen them before.

Her eager anticipation of being reunited with her family was suddenly shadowed by the realisation that it wouldn’t be long before she would be betrothed again. Not immediately, not for a while – but she was a noble maiden of marriageable age and her brother the king was waging a war. He needed all the allies he could get. Sansa had always been expected to marry according to her family’s wishes to strengthen a bond between two powerful houses or to seal an agreement. She had been raised to always honour and obey her elders. Family, duty, honour, the words of House Tully, according to which she was expected to lead her life. And yet… The winter is coming. She also had to be prepared for when the times were hard. She had to be strong.

Sansa closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. Since the discovery of her feelings towards Sandor was still so fresh, she hadn’t really had a chance to consider what it would mean or where it could lead. I have to think about all this.

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And do she did, for the rest of the day, while they traversed through the woods and an occasional meadow or a field at steady pace. The landscape was still fertile and green and the absence of human presence made it feel like they had gone back in time and were wrapped in an existence consisting only of them and their mounts. Every now and then Sandor halted, examined their surroundings, sometimes even dismounted and studied the ground for signs or tracks, only to climb up again and lead the way even deeper into the forest.

This time Sansa was relieved that he didn’t demand conversation and let her brood in silence. His physical presence was as distracting as it had been before and succeeded only to muddle her thoughts, but she forced any distractions away and concentrated on trying toanalyse the situation as rationally as she could.

So; she had feelings for the Hound, maybe even serious feelings. He seemed to care for her as well, but whether it was just protectiveness or something else, a wholly less noble motivation that drove him, she still couldn’t be sure of. He had balked at the suggestion of asking her for his lady wife – it couldn’t be because of his Kingsguard vows as they were already forfeited forever. Was it because he didn’t want to – or because he didn’t dare to?

Sansa turned her head and studied his stern face from the corner of her eye. I have to find out. One way or another.

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And so arrived another evening, another camp fire, another meal. This time it was a hare, trapped with snares Sandor had set the previous evening and checked in the morning. Sansa had felt sorry for the little furry body that had hung from Arya’s saddle the whole day, but she couldn’t deny how good it tasted, slightly charred and still succulent.
Arya retired to her bedroll claiming to be too tired to stay up any longer, even if it was not *that* late. Suspecting it was a ruse Sansa nonetheless welcomed the opportunity to speak alone with Sandor. After the remains of their simply meal had been cleared away and the food scraps thrown into the forest floor to be consumed by its many scavengers, finally there they were, Sansa Stark and Sandor Clegane, sitting on a half-rotten tree trunk and staring into the burning embers at their feet. The nights were chilly but manageable with their bedrolls and thick blankets, so there was no need to keep the fire burning throughout the night. *Especially if he covers me with his bedding again,* Sansa thought.

She coughed nervously, searching for an opening for the discussion they had to have.

“So…what happens next? When we reach Riverrun?”

Sandor’s voice was low and level when he replied, after a moment’s consideration. “That depends. The last news in the court told that your kingly brother was waiting there for the next move in this pathetic war. Mayhap he will continue and seek revenge for your father, mayhap he is content to leave the South to its own mess. Lannisters have no leverage over him anymore, whereas he holds the Kingslayer, so if he is wise, he will use that to his advantage.”

“He could have exchanged him for me. I heard Cersei talking about it. She didn’t want to let me go, but she cares for her brother a lot.” Sansa tried to prevent the bitterness she felt to seep through to her voice.

Sandor let out a dry rasping laugh startling her. “Aye, that she does. I have no doubt that had your brother made the offer, she would have talked the little shit to agree to it.”

“And yet he didn’t.” Sansa had dreamed of it sometimes, but she had also resigned to accept the fact that when kingdoms were at war there was more at stake than a fate of a mere girl – as sour the realisation had been.

Sandor shrugged his broad shoulders. “A strong king has to consider all things, not only his own family or grievances. I hope he’ll be more sensible than to throw everything away uselessly. Not to behave as Joffrey when he chopped Lord Eddard’s head. *That* was a stupid move. Yet - your family seems to care for its members.” He looked into the distance and Sansa wondered whether he was thinking of his own family, of the brother he wanted to kill.

“Well, in any case there is no point to think about that now, as there is no need. You saw into that. You saved us and will take us to him.”

“We are not there yet.”

“What will you do next? Arya said you are considering leaving across the sea. Surely that is not true?”

Again he shrugged, poking some charred twigs that had fallen out of the fire pit back into the embers with a stick. Sansa sat on his good side, but she couldn’t see his expression through the dark curtain of his hair that had fallen down his side.

“I have no lands, no family to speak of, no masters or a lord of any kind. All I know is how to fight. What else is there for me? To become a bloody farmer or a merchant?”

“You could stay with us. Become a bannerman of House Stark.”

“You fancy yourself my master now? Wish yourself a dog to command since you lost your wolf?” Sandor growled but his tone was not as angry as his words might have suggested. If anything, he sounded defeated.
“You know it is not that. You would stay of your own free will, and only if you want.”

“I to become a Stark man? I don’t think your lot would take kindly on me. I was there on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor, I was the Lannister dog.” He shifted and the tone of his voice changed, becoming bitter as if he had to spit words out. “And I stood there and did nothing when that whoreson Joffrey had you beaten. Nothing! How well will that sit with your kingly brother, what do you think?”

Sansa hated his self-depreciating tone. Did he really think he could have done things differently? Stand up for her and get them both in even greater trouble because of that?

“You might have done those things and been that man, but not anymore. And you did something – you rescued me. And Arya. I will tell Robb that and he too will see that you are so much more than a dog. I know he will.”

He didn’t reply and for a long time they both sat motionless, still staring at the dying embers. Finally Sansa spoke. She had to know.

“Why do you help us? You didn’t have to do any of this.” As Sandor started to shift he hastened to add, “Please, don’t think that I am talking about a reward! I apologise my clumsy words earlier; I was reverting back to saying what I thought would be a proper thing to say, like the stupid little bird you told me I was. But I am not that brainless bird anymore. And yet I want to know, and understand - so I have to ask. You say you hate lying so I trust you to tell it to me true.”

She tried to capture his attention but he refused to meet her eyes, preferring to stare at the ground. The corner of his mouth twitched.

“What does it matter? I told you once that my reasons are my own. Better leave it at that.”

“Please don’t leave us. Please don’t leave me. What do you want? There must be something that will make you stay. I... if it is in my power, I will give it to you.” Sansa held her breath. If what Arya had said was true, this was his chance to let her know.

Sandor finally lifted his head and turned it towards her. It appeared as if he was taking her measure, so intently he studied her in the flickering light of the dying flames. Dark shadows danced across the deep grooves and stretched skin on his face and it would have been easy to see him as one of the hellish creatures emerging from nightmares – but Sansa was not afraid. She had seen through him and knew that he was not what others thought him to be. She straightened her back and lifted her chin, returning his gaze. She wasn’t sure what she expected to hear. What she hoped to hear.

Yet no words left his mouth. He only stared, and the intensity of it made Sansa squirm on her seat. She tilted her face, all the while staring into the abyss of those grey eyes. Did she imagine it or did he move as well? Did he come closer?

Sansa couldn’t breathe as she waited for Sandor’s next move – which he eventually made, slowly dropping his head to be at level with hers. There was hardly any distance between them anymore - she could feel his breath on her cheek. She had an impulse to close her eyes, but she feared that he would take it as a sign of rejection and so forced herself to keep them open.
Whether in the end it was she or him who made the final move she couldn’t say - but when his scarred lips met hers Sansa knew she had received the answer to her question.
Surprisingly I found a bit more time for this than I expected – we haven’t made the big move yet, only started packing and dismantling and cleaning and all that sort of preparatory work…Next week is the big heave-ho. Thank you all who have wished me a pleasant move! I gather that it is an activity that is not high on the list of anyone popular activities…

So here we are, continuation of where we were so conveniently left the last time!

_Sandor & Arya_

“Well, what happened?”

“Hand me that string, over there.”

“Well?”

“It is your turn to gut the game from now on. This a good day for you to learn it, and squirrel is as good start as any.”

“I don’t care about the squirrels! What happened with Sansa yesterday evening after I left you?”

“None of your business, little wolf.”
“It is! Especially after how Sansa behaved this morning. When she got up she was all upset that you weren’t around. Kept on asking if I knew where you had gone and when I said I didn’t, she just shut down completely. When I asked her what had happened, she refused to tell my anything.”

“Clever girl, she is. And a lady.”

“Not so much of a lady – she shoved me away when I insisted. Like really pushed; I almost fell on my back! She hasn’t done it since we were little kids and argued over something stupid. That is not very ladylike and she surely wasn’t a lady then.”

“Nonetheless, she knows what is her business and what is not. Look, you start by making a nick into the skin, not too deep so it doesn’t puncture the stomach.”

“Aaaarrrgh! I know something took place! Did you kiss her? Did she kiss you back? Did you do something stupid, you big oaf?!?”

“Mind you own bloody business, I said! With squirrels you can then just tease and tug the nick larger – you could skin the thing but for now we leave it on. I only want to remove it further away from the opening I am making into its gut so that it stays cleaner.”

“You did it. I am sure you did it. Only something like that would make her to behave so strangely. And she blushed! You were not even near and when I asked if something happened between you and him she turned red as a beetroot. Did she not like it?”

“Listen now. Something might or might not have taken place but it is not up to me to tattle on it. Lay off her back – lay off my back. Or you’ll regret it I swear.”

“Ha-ha, you don’t dare to touch me! If you do, Sansa will be angry at you. Come on, you can tell me! Did you do it? Did you only kiss or did you…”

“Fucking hells! Don’t even think about finishing that sentence or I swear I gut you! She is a lady, what part of that you can’t get into your thick head?”

“Oh well, she would be much too prude for anything else I guess. Septa Mordane always gave us sermons about a maiden’s virtue and all that…”

“Do you want to learn how to cut a squirrel or not? Am I wasting my time here? And stop rolling your eyes like a village idiot.”

“Of course I want! Make a nick, tear the skin off the stomach, I get it. What then?”

“Lay it flat and make a line lengthwise along the stomach. Again, don’t go too deep – you only want to open its stomach, not spill its guts.”

“I will get it out of Sansa one way or another. It is only three of us, and I know how to pester her so that eventually she gets exasperated and just gives in.”

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

 Sansa

Sansa didn’t know what to do with herself. She had woken to find Sandor’s bedroll empty and no
sight of him within their camp. After the restless night she had had, and after the fragmented and blurry dreams that had invaded her broken sleep, to see only an indent where his heavy bulk had rested was disconcerting to her. A quick glance towards the trees near which they had tethered their horses assured her – Stranger was still there, nibbling the scarce grass at his feet.

For a moment she felt guilty about her uncharitable thoughts. How could she have doubted for a second that Sandor could have done something as horrid as deserting two defenceless girls alone in the forest? Especially after…

_He must have gone to check the snares, that’s all_, she told herself while pulling on her shoes.

Arya was quick to rouse and as soon as she saw their companion’s absence, she started to pester Sansa with questions about what had happened the previous evening. How could she guess that something of worth might have happened, Sansa couldn’t understand. Had Sandor said something to her? How could he have? Then she thought that Arya might have heard them, but if she had, she wouldn’t have had to ask so many questions - so it didn’t really make any sense.

Yes, Sansa knew that Arya would realise soon enough that things had changed, but she wanted to be absolutely sure of it herself first. Although she couldn’t really believe that Sandor would back away from his word, there was still a difference between what is said in the darkness of the night and what is confirmed in the bright daylight. She needed to see Sandor again and gauge his reactions to make sure that she hadn’t dreamt the whole thing.

So after first establishing that Arya wasn’t any wiser about Sandor’s whereabouts, Sansa brushed away her enquiries, staying tight-lipped and evasive. Her little sister didn’t give up so easily - she never had – and Sansa’s already strained nerves made her abrupt and impatient. To her own disappointment she eventually snapped and Arya gave up on her in annoyance and ran into the woods – undoubtedly to find Sandor and barrage him in turn with her queries. Regretting her harsh actions immediately didn’t improve Sansa’s mood.

Yet she couldn’t prevent pleasant shivers traveling down her spine at the thought of what had happened. Unbidden her lips turned into a smile – only to be stifled when restlessness overtook her again. She scanned the woods around her in search for the only person who could restore her peace of mind, but saw only ancient trees and young striplings competing of space in a jumble of branches, foliage and fallen twigs.

She pulled down the sack containing their food, which Sandor had tied to hang from a tree branch to keep it safe from hungry animals. She counted its contents and set three pieces of bread and a chunk of hard cheese on a rock near the ashen pit where they had cooked their meal. Then she collected their water bottles and checked their levels to see which of them needed refilling. She walked here and there, picked up an item or another, only to put it down again.

Eventually her own edginess started to irritate her and sighing Sansa sat down on her bedding and rummaged through her saddle bag. She found what she was looking for; one of the few luxury items she had brought with her from King’s Landing, a hair brush her mother had given to her as a nameday gift many years ago. It had been the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, made of hard Northern birch and exquisitely shaped and carved, its bristles the finest boar hair.

She started to work along her long tresses and hummed to herself as she did so. Stroke after stroke, even and firm, and after a while she could feel the brush starting to flow smoothly through the disappearing tangles. With that she felt as if she was also unravelling the many knots of her own situation.

Every now and then she stopped in the middle of a stroke just to stare into nothing for a while as she
thought about the previous evening. More often than not she smiled and blushed deeply before resuming her actions. She had never behaved like that before, never been so presumptuous, so headstrong – and never had she been rewarded with so many heady emotions as a result. Her mind flitted back to their kiss – her first real kiss – and what followed after…

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When they kissed, Sandor was hesitant at first, his lips only ghosting hers. Sansa’s breath quickened and her mind was filled with a maelstrom of emotions; thrill, excitement, trepidation, nervousness. She knew she shouldn’t be doing this and at the same time she was painfully aware that she wouldn’t, she couldn’t stop.

It was unlike anything she had ever experienced. Shy kisses she had exchanged with Joffrey when she had thought to be in love with him hadn’t made her heart race so fast or invited a cloud butterflies to flutter at the pit of her stomach.

His lips were dry and somehow not quite what she had expected. They were warm. Firm. She felt rigidity of the scarred side and it only made it more real. I am kissing the Hound flitted quite irrationally through Sansa’s mind when he deepened the kiss, coaxing her mouth open. The jolt she felt when his tongue brushed against hers first shocked, then excited her.

Sansa felt awkward, not knowing where to put her hands or whether she should move closer or stay where she was. Sandor wasn’t helping, sitting stiffly on the tree trunk with only his upper body turned towards her, his arms resting on his sides holding onto the wood. Only when Sansa pulled back to draw some breath did she notice how his knuckles had turned white from the strain and how unnaturally still he was.

She looked at him then, cheeks flushed, a strange sort of joy welling inside her. He kissed me! He wants me! It was the most natural thing in the world to reach for him again, this time raising her hands and letting them slide up to meet the sides of his thick neck. His beard was coarse and rough and felt real under her fingertips.

Then it all changed. Abruptly Sandor’s hands grasped her sides and squeezed her hard and he yanked her against him. Sansa stumbled and would have fallen had she not been already held up by him – held up and seized so hard that she felt her ribs crushing under that iron clutch. The kiss – it changed too. Where it had been cautious and hesitant, it suddenly turned ravenous and hungry, his mouth devouring her and sucking breath right out of her lungs.

By reflex Sansa struggled to free herself from that overpowering grip, but it was futile. She felt helpless and all of a sudden panic started to build inside her; it was too much, too fast, his hold on her remorseless and suffocating. Sansa tried to hang on to the exhilaration she had felt just moments earlier, but as Sandor’s hands travelled down her body and pulled her on his lap, her fright made her turn her head and let out an involuntary yelp.

And then she was free.

Sandor dropped her unceremoniously into the ground, bolted up and turned away, panting hard, his shoulders heaving violently. Sansa gained her balance and stared at him still on her knees, too stunned for words.

“I bloody thought so.” Sandor voice was raspy and strained, his words muffled.

Sansa blinked her eyes, still shocked. “You though what?”
He took a few steps away and stood there, his whole body recoiled, his shoulders slump and head bowed down. He didn’t reply at first but finally muttered in a low voice.

“Nothing. Too much. It doesn’t matter.”

While Sansa was still trying to gather her thoughts and her composure after such a rapid turn of events, Sandor straightened himself to his full height, his back still towards her.

“I’ll move my bedroll to the other side of the camp. Won’t be bothering you with my presence.”

He squared his shoulders and started to walk away. Sansa was confused but even in that dazed state she realised that if he walked away now, she would lose him for good. And then, quite unexpectedly, from somewhere deep inside her she found strength and determination she hadn’t even been aware of before that moment.

“STOP! Sandor Clegane, stop right now and come back here. NOW!”

Sansa didn’t care to keep her voice down anymore. She didn’t care about anything but the necessity to prevent him walking away from her. She struggled onto her feet and stood up, willing him to stop with her stare.

Sandor halted on his tracks, in half stride. He didn’t turn around though, but the tension of his body was clearly visible from the way his fists clenched down by his sides. Sansa swept loose strands away from her face, then brushed her skirts in an attempt to calm herself. She called after him again, more restrained this time.

“Please. Come back. This is important.”

After one more moment that was probably only a few seconds but felt like a lifetime to Sansa, he turned around, slowly. His eyes searched hers at first but then quickly looked away. Yet he did come back, finally standing gingerly in front of Sansa. She had to crane her neck to look up at him.

“Sit,” she whispered while lifting her hands on his shoulders and pushing him down gently. To her relief he gave in and sunk slowly, allowing Sansa to look down at him. It made her feel better and in more in charge of the situation, although in reality she knew that her control was tenuous at best. He was so much bigger and stronger; if he wanted to order her around there was nothing she could do about it. Just like moments before, when his hunger had grown and he had seized control of her and her body…No, she had nothing with which to hold sway over him. Yet she had to try to understand what had just happened – and what it meant.

However, before she found the words, Sandor spoke.

“You saw yourself what kind of a man I am – are you happy now? I am not a bloody maiden’s companion and you are not safe with me, not with that sort of behaviour.”

“I always feel safe with you. It is just that…I don’t know about these things. It all happened too fast. I am a maiden still and you were so… unrelenting. I panicked. I apologise.” Sansa felt a bit silly. After all, they had only kissed. Yet the moment of panic was still with her and she had to make him understand what had just happened – and what it meant.

“Bloody hells, girl! It was not you, it was me. What were you thinking, letting me to do that to you? Less brains than even a bird has.” He shifted and cursed under his breath.

“I didn’t allow you to do anything to me, I wanted it too.” Sansa hissed and took pleasure in the expression of surprise on Sandor’s face. “I wanted to kiss you. But I am innocent in the ways of
men, I don’t know how to do it properly – and I may not be quite ready for anything else. Is it my fault? Why would you be angry at me because of that?”

Sandor had settled at the end of the trunk, away from the fire pit. Sansa stepped nearer as she spoke, hoping to achieve some of the closeness from earlier. He avoided her gaze but she reached for his chin, coaxing him to lift his head.

“Look at me. Please.”

He did, and in his eyes Sansa saw not rage but same wariness as displayed by a dog who expects to be kicked at any moment. Her heart swelled – but then she remembered her fright.

“Was there something more that you expected from me? Was the kiss not enough? Did you want from me the same thing you wanted from that redheaded girl in the place where Arya was hiding?”

He flinched visibly and swore softly under his breath.

“Bloody hells! Why the hells did she tell you about that? I swear I’ll wring her neck, your little sister or not.”

Sansa felt inexplicably better seeing his anger. “It slipped out, she didn’t mean to. I am not stupid, I know what men search in those houses.”

“Do you?” Sandor lifted his eyebrow.

“I know enough,” Sansa replied dryly, afraid that the discussion was running away from her. Sandor didn’t seem to be in an immediate flight risk, so she gathered her skirts and sat down, still peering at him from the corner of her eye.

“Is that all you wanted? Because if it is, I would rather know it now than later.”

“NO! I mean, I wouldn’t decline, but… Listen girl, I know you are a maiden, and more. You are the sister of the King in the North, a maid from of a noble house. I am a dog. I piss on noble houses but you were born to all that bullshit and that is all you know.” His tone grew more fervent as he spoke and Sansa followed his every moment and expression with fascination. She had never seen him talking so passionately about something, about anything.

“You’ll go back to your family and they will marry you to some lord or knight as you were always meant to. Fuck if I know why you kissed me just now but whatever it was, gratitude or maiden’s misplaced fantasy, you’ll forget that soon enough once you get back to your own kind. And then you...”

“No.” Only one word, but it was enough to pause Sandor’s tirade. He looked at her, puzzled.

“No what?”

“I will not forget that. I don’t want to forget that. It is not gratitude, although I am surely indebted and grateful to you, nor is it a maiden’s fantasy. I know what those are; I used to dream of handsome knights and gallant sers, but I have grown out of that.”

He scrutinised her long and hard as if trying to ascertain the veracity of her words. Then he sighed and muttered another muffled curse.

“Whatever it is, nothing changes because of that, and this big sodden world we live in is still the same. It is what it is. What you or I think doesn’t matter.”
“It matters to me.” Whatever trepidation Sansa had felt earlier had left her and she felt only sad. Sad that the outside world still stretched its long hold into something that should have been only between two people. It was not fair! For a moment she felt forlorn, but then she remembered the softness of his kiss before it had changed. She had felt so alive then, flustered and happy – she couldn’t just deny that it had happened. Even with what came after.

Sansa let her hand travel across the short distance separating them and let it timidly rest on his arm. Touching him gave her courage and her resolution from the earlier returned.

“It matters to me,” she repeated. “If we can’t speak our mind here, deep in the forest where we are the only people, where can we?”

“Why should we speak about any of it?” Sandor’s tone was still gruff but not as angry as it had been.

“Because we must. And because we can.” Sansa’s hand crept along his arm until it reached his wrist, stopped there for a moment, but as he didn’t pull it away, she took it as an encouragement and reached to grip his hand in hers. His was large and calloused and completely covered hers when he took it. Sansa squeezed it and he returned the gesture, but neither of them moved.

The night was quiet bar the rustling of the creatures of the forest in the undergrowth. It was half-moon and although the last remaining embers of the fire had died, the pale silvery moon shed enough light for Sansa to see his profile. His hooked nose, his high cheekbones. He stared into something only he could see – but he didn’t let go her hand. For a long time neither of them spoke, but silence was not uncomfortable. On the contrary, Sansa thought there was something reassuring in the way they just sat there, so close to each other, holding hands.

Finally Sandor cleared his throat.

“So, what do we do now?”

‘We’. He said ‘we’, was what Sansa’s ears first picked up. Where just a short time before there had been two individuals, each struggling with his or her own issues, now there was only one. ‘We’. It made her happy and the bond she already felt with him became stronger with just that one word. She squeezed his hand again.

“We rest, then we get up in the morning and continue our journey to Riverrun. We are careful and cautious, and eventually we’ll get there. And along the way, maybe we might get to know each other a bit better. There is still so much I don’t know about you, and you know precious little about me.”

“There is fuck all to learn about me. You’ll be bored out of your brain soon. I haven’t done anything a noble maiden might find interesting.” Sandor shrugged his shoulders but he turned to look at her and Sansa could see the whites of his eyes in the dim light.

“Anything you have done I will find interesting because it was you who did it. I want to know, not only about you but also about your world. As you have been so wont to remind me, I don’t know enough about the real world. So tell me.” Sansa scanned his face, trying to detect disdain or reluctance on his part. Yet all she saw was solemnity and seriousness.

“Why do you want to know about the world? It is ugly.”

“Because I am living in it, and whether I want or not, I will be moved by it. I don’t want to stay a stupid little bird any longer, doing only what my elders tell me to do without thinking about the consequences myself. Besides, if there is anyone dying of boredom it will be you. My life is so
uneventful and uninteresting, and anything I have done you will scorn upon I am sure.”

Sandor didn’t reply but took her hand into both of his and rubbed the back of it with his thumbs in slow and steady movements, staring at it as he did so.

“So it means that when I ask you a question or try to discourse with you, perhaps you might try to answer me with more than one syllable?” Sansa felt brave and only a little bit mischievous.

“Aye.”

Sansa huffed and after getting his attention, raised an eyebrow. A small pull in the corner of his mouth suggested that Sandor had got her meaning, his next words confirming it.

“I will. Answer you with more than one syllable. Maybe even with more than one sentence. Happy?”

“I will be,” Sansa smiled back.

After that there was no need to do anything more but to retire to their bedrolls. Sansa crawled under her blanket first, and as before, Sandor laid his own on top of her. When Sansa tried to decline it he shushed her protestations away and lay down next to her. All the tension between them was gone but it still took a while for sleep to come.

The last thing Sansa registered before finally losing herself to slumber was Sandor’s restless tossing and turning by her side.

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Sansa finished with her hair and tucked the brush away in her saddle bag. Putting aside her earlier anxiety she started to gather their bedrolls and blankets and roll them into a tight bundle as Sandor had shown her on the first night. She had progressed to the last of them when she saw her companions approaching through the bushes. Arya was carrying three squirrels hanging from a rope, gutted and beheaded, and looked pretty proud of herself.

Yet Sansa spared hardly a glance to her sister or their dinner for the night but only sought Sandor’s tall form. As they approached she studied him as if seeing him for the first time, but now instead of then, what she noticed the most were his massive size, his broad shoulders, his proud bearing and his grey eyes. She hardly registered his scars anymore – or to be fair, she saw them but they had become just one part and parcel of the man who he was. His long hair, still combed over the burned side, his coarse beard that travelled down his throat and merged with hair peeking from under his collar… Sansa’s heart started to race and she acknowledged to herself that there was not a thing she saw in him that she didn’t like, and she flashed her broadest smile at him.

When they were close enough he noticed her. He raised his hand to quell Arya’s chatter and hastened his stride. He looked straight at Sansa and after an initial moment of uncertainty and hesitation she saw for the first time the sight she had longed to see for a long time now – Sandor Clegane actually smiling.

Admittedly the stiffness of his other side of his face made it an odd looking smile, but a smile it was, reaching all the way to his eyes. Sansa dropped the bundle in her hands and walked to meet him.

“Good morrow to you,” she said shyly. “I can see that it has been successful to you so far with such a fine catch.”

He didn’t reply, only staring at her intently as if he was seeing her for the very first time as well. For
a moment Sansa’s confidence faltered. Had she read him wrong?

“Are we ready to continue our journey soon – our careful and cautious travel?”

“Aye. That we are. Ready to continue this fucking pony show. As my lady wishes.” Sandor’s smile returned - for all intents and purposes he was veritably *grinning*.

Sansa had never heard him respond to her with so many words and with such a grin on his face, and a flush of relief washed over her. No, she hadn’t imagined anything. It had been all true; the new closeness they had found and an admission that it might just be something even more.

She laughed out loud and in front of Arya’s stunned face she reached for Sandor’s hand and he took it, and together they walked back to the horses, hand in hand.
Hello ’possums! And apologies for this inexcusable delay… I have not had this long break in writing since I started almost 3 years ago, and it felt really weird… It was all because of the move of course, but now it is done and I am lounging here on my sofa admiring my lovely new abode, yay!

So here is the continuation of the tale of our three travelers…

_Sandor & Arya_

“It is fucking madness, that’s all it is.”

“No it isn’t. It makes perfect sense.”

“No it doesn’t – it is an invitation for trouble and you know it. Your sister knows it too, but she is just too foolish to admit it.”

“I’ll tell her you said that.”

“Not hair off my arse if you do. I have been trying to get it into her pretty head but she is just too stubborn. Never thought you were much of a same, but in this…”
“That’s because it is a good plan. We do it before we get to Riverrun and after that there is nothing anyone can do. At least if you two take care of the rest.”

“Here, in the woods? On the run? You both are flaming mad to even think about it! Life is not so simple, I’ve seen that often enough. Been around too many bloody nobles to know how they think. That is not an answer.”

“If it isn’t, what is then?”

“Nothing is. There is no solution. I should have been wiser and not to get sucked in, but bloody hells! My head has become soft with you and your sister.”

“But you like it. I have seen the two of you and it makes me sick.”

“Spying on us, eh?”

“No, not spying! But I have eyes – and ears. You really could tone it down, you know. Some of us would like to sleep in the evenings.”

“And we don’t? We talk, that’s all. I never thought I I’d hear that much chattering without losing my bloody mind – but she talks a lot of sense too. Not like before.”

“I don’t think there is much left of what she was before. She’s not nearly as stupid as she used to be.”

“She was never stupid. She was just fed horseshit by her elders and septas and maesters and the lot of them. Made to try to please everyone.”

“Well, she pleases you now, no doubt about that.”

“Isn’t that what you wanted? With all your bloody pushing and prodding, trying to shove us together?”

“Har! I did, didn’t I? Where would you two be without me? Some would say thank you. Civilised people, that is.”

“-----”

“I said, civilised people.”

“I hear you.”

“-----”

“Bloody hells! You have my thanks, little wolf! Happy?”

"I told you so from the start! Maybe now you listen to me better. So about this thing…”

“Forget about the thing. Hells, I can’t wait to see your kin betrothing you to some poor unsuspecting lordling. Poor man, you’d chew him for breakfast and clean your teeth with his sword afterwards.”

“I won’t be betrothed to anyone if I don’t want it.”

“Aye, I wouldn’t be surprised. Besides, you don’t need a lord or a knight. What you need is someone as stubborn as you - a bull.”

“Maybe I’ll marry a bull then. But a bull of my own choosing.”
Sansa

Sansa knew it was the only way. She had thought about all possible solutions during the weeks they had journeyed in the Riverlands, finding their route as far away from human settlements as they could. It was not always easy, Riverlands being so populated, but with patience and instincts of a bloodhound Sandor had found the way. On some days they had not dared to move at all, waiting for nightfall to sneak past settlements. On some days they had travelled brazenly along Blackwater Rush, on others they had diverted from the direct route and wound their way through the hills and across the many tributaries of the Rush.

Sandor had been true to his word. He had patiently answered Sansa’s many questions about his life and escapades - not always elaborating on details, but gradually revealing the evolution of an idealistic boy to a disenchanted and bitter man. Yet it hadn’t been easy. It had taken all Sansa’s patience and perseverance to chip through the armour of indifference and hostility he had built around him through the years.

He never pretended to be something he was not, didn’t tame his tongue or soften his words if he thought Sansa resorted to her old chirping. With him Sansa learned a new way of discoursing, as far away from the teachings of her septa as possible. Courtesy was not his armour but his strength and honesty were, and when Sansa argued with him that noble maids could not rely on such things he called her bluff and contested her – and claimed that women had more strength than any buggering knight and only fools allowed themselves to believe otherwise.

She also understood that his loyalty to the Lannisters was not borne from shared values or devotion to their cause, but from the fact that when he had nothing, when nobody had cared whether he lived or died, the lions had taken him in. Lord Tywin had shown a special interest in the burned, sullen boy, and the boy grew up to a man who paid him back with the only coin he had – his loyalty. That the arrangement was as cold as practical neither party had never had disillusions about - his value to them was summed up as the utility of his skills, and theirs to him as protection, rewards and a place to call his own.

Sansa put all the pieces together from many snippets of information he provided, some willingly, some between the lines – and after seeing the whole picture Sansa’s heart ached for him and the harsh live he had lived.

“You were never as vile a man as your reputation painted you”, she once stated to him – not as a question but as a simple truth. Sandor had only snorted and muttered about reputations being for fools who thought they were worth something.

Yet there were evenings when he withdrew beyond Sansa’s reach and sat alone, or times when he growled and snapped at her at the slightest provocation. When that happened Sansa sighed deeply and left him alone with his demons, realising that the Hound in him was not so easily tamed.

In turn Sansa poured her little life out for him, hesitant at first lest he scoff at her sheltered and privileged existence, but he never did. She told him about Winterfell and the North and he asked questions and offered opinions. The first time they disagreed Sansa was initially timid to express her true thoughts, but as he listened to her arguments and responded to them with his own rather than dismissing them offhand, she gained confidence. That this man, so quick-tempered and foul-mouthed, actually listened to her was a rarity itself – Sansa was not used to older people and especially men paying much heed to thoughts of a mere maid. Yet Sandor was different.
Despite their new familiarity and the many hours they spent in saddle, Sansa leaning into him and enjoying the solid feel of him against her back and surrounding her, it took a while before they kissed again. When they did, one evening after they found themselves alone on a rocky outcrop, this time staring into the treetops surrounding them an undulating sea of green and grey, the kiss was hesitant and tender, lacking tenseness and passion it had ended with the last time they had ventured into such intimacy. Sansa was painfully aware that it was because Sandor thought he couldn’t trust himself and kept himself in tight check, but she enjoyed the intimacy it conveyed nonetheless.

The following day as they rode beside a small stream and the sun was shining and Sansa closed her eyes and swayed her body in tune with Stranger’s gait she suddenly felt Sandor’s lips touching the back of her head. It was just a peck, but when Sansa sighed and leaned into his arms, he kissed her again, muttering something against her hair. ‘Little bird’ was all she could make of the words but that was enough.

Never again did Sansa feel frightened or lacking control – if anything, she realised that she wanted more. Many an evening Sandor pulled himself away from her when she would still have wanted to kiss more, touch more, everything more. When on those occasions she tried to pull him back into her embrace, he only grunted and warned her about playing with fire and stood up, leaving her to watch his retreating back with a strange mixture of want, longing and awkwardness.

Yes, the more Sansa got to know Sandor, the more she became lost in her own feelings towards him. Her mind travelled back to her father’s words in King’s Landing; his promise to marry her to someone who was worthy of her, someone brave and gentle and strong. At the time Sandor would have been the last person she would have considered fitting those words – and now she saw clearly how he was the only man to do so. He was brave, no doubt about that, and neither his strength could be questioned. That he was also surprisingly gentle had been a revelation to Sansa but now that she had won his confidence she could see the evidence of it every day, in so many ways.

One thing they never discussed was the future, unless it was about the immediate days ahead. Sansa didn’t want to bring it up as she was afraid what it would bring – and she didn’t want to spoil the magical feeling of being the only people in the wilderness, in a little bubble of their own where concerns of the world didn’t reach them. What Sandor thought of the matter she didn’t know – and didn’t dare to ask.

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Arya had been impossible ever since she had seen how things stood between them. Her self-satisfied “I told you so” would have irritated Sansa immensely any other time, but luckily for Arya Sansa was so happy that even her little sister’s smugness couldn’t annoy her.

To Sansa’s surprise Arya didn’t even seem to grudge her the time she spent with Sandor, every evening ending up with the two of them huddling by the cooling camp fire. But if evenings were Sansa’s, mornings were Arya’s, when she and Sandor checked the snares, dressed their next meal and discoursed about the plans for the day.

There were times when Sansa and Arya were left on their own when their companion disappeared ahead to do some scouting. After they had dealt with Arya’s initial gloating and boasting about how she had been the one to push Sansa and Sandor together – a claim that Sansa grudgingly had to agree with, but which she was not foolish enough to admit - they spent much of their time talking about what would happen once they finally reached their mother and brother.

“I wish we would leave to Winterfell as soon as possible,” Arya sighed one morning when they were sitting on a riverbank, bare feet dangling in its cool waters. The river was just a small unnamed stream, far away from human habitation. Sandor had gone to examine what lie ahead with dire
warnings for the two of them to sit tight and wait for his return.

“Me too. I never want to set my foot in the South again.” Sansa traced her toe along the surface of the water, enjoying the light breeze cooling her bare skin. The last few days had been unusually warm, which had prompted them for such unusual behaviour.

“And Sandor will have to come too. Robb will take him into his service and he will truly become one of us,” Arya exclaimed. Her belief that it was a matter of only asking was touching to Sansa, who was not fooled to think that anything was that simple.

Along their journey they had ran into other travellers every now and then when passing near one road or another or at a river crossing. None had paid any attention to them; a tall hooded man traveling with a young woman and a boy, just a few more of the many misplaced people the disturbances in Riverlands had pushed on the road. They had heard tales of the atrocities carried out by the Mountain Who Rides and his men, and Sansa had noticed how Sandor’s jaw had clenched whenever his brother was mentioned. By now she knew that he wanted his brother dead and an opportunity to face him must have been tempting – but when she had later asked him about it he had only muttered that for now he had better things to do.

“He will not become one of us that easily, and you know it,” Sansa admonished her sister softly. As much she cared for Sandor she was not unaware of the difficulties lying ahead.

“How could Mother and Robb doubt him after all he has done for us?”

“They may not doubt his deeds and will undoubtedly be grateful, but it is still a long way from there to become a trusted bannermen.” Sandor’s reputation alone worked against him, and his visible role in the events leading to their father’s arrest and execution didn’t help. Sansa knew that he had only done what he had been commanded, and that he had changed since then - but the others did not.

Arya shrugged her shoulders. “When he asks for your hand and you get married, he will be more than just a bannerman. He will be family.”

Sansa had thought about it more and more as days went by – and to her embarrassment she had to admit to herself that her curiosity about what else beyond mere kisses happened between men and women was a big part of it. Every time when Sandor untangled her arms from around him and chortled about eager little birds, she felt disappointment and frustration that found no outlet in her current predicament. She was aware that her situation was highly unusual; young maiden from a respected house was not supposed to spend time in a close company of an adult man with a questionable reputation. Yet she didn’t care, and she wanted more.

“Arya, I know you would like it, but surely you realise that it may not be possible. I am sister to a king and Sandor is not exactly a high lord, and neither can he bring with him lands, soldiers, wealth or allies.”

“Who cares!? Without him we wouldn’t be with our family and you couldn’t be given away for any of those things.”

“Robb cares and Mother cares. They have to.” And therein lay the difficulty that Sansa had tried not to think. “No matter how good he has been to us, it is not good enough reason for Robb to accept him as a goodbrother. You remember Jory Cassel?”

Arya nodded, her face momentarily clouded by the memory of the man who had been an important part of their childhood, and so cruelly murdered by the Lannisters.
“Father loved him dearly and trusted him with his life, just like he loved his father Martyn. Yet had Jory asked for the hand of either of us Father would have said no. It would not have been proper.”

“But why?! It is not fair!”

“I know it isn’t. But that’s just the way it is.”

Silenced by the unwelcomed glimpse into the world outside their little bubble they sat silent for a long time, until the man at the forefront of their minds emerged through the bushes gesturing them to follow him.

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Of course it was Arya who made the suggestion first.

“Well, you just have to get married before we get to Riverrun. Then there is nothing anyone can do about it.” She smiled broadly, satisfied about having found a solution to their quandary.

Sansa gulped audibly and glanced at Sandor, who stopped in the middle of a bite to stare at Arya. Instead of a snort or a quip to keep her stupid thoughts to herself, as Sansa expected, he said nothing at all and after a while returned his attention back to the charred bit of bird in his hand.

Sansa too chose to ignore her sister’s radical suggestion and swiftly changed the topic, but later that same evening when she was sitting with Sandor as was their habit, she asked him about it.

“Well, I haven’t even asked for your hand, to start with.”

Sansa’s embarrassment manifested itself by her fussing about her cloak, arranging and re-arranging it around her shoulders. Yes, it was true – he hadn’t talked about marriage or what would happen when they reached their destination.

Just as she desperately tried to think of how to make it sound as it didn’t really matter to her, Sandor cursed and pulled her closer.

“I haven’t asked you because I know it to be a fool’s errand. They will never give you to me and pretending otherwise is stupidity. And even if they would, you would be a dimwit to stay with me.”

“I would be honoured to accept your proposal, should you present it.” Sansa’s voice trembled but she didn’t hesitate. The many long hours when she had skirted around the issue in her head, wanting not to think about it but thinking anyway, culminated into this one moment of absolute certainty. Yes, she wanted to marry, wanted to marry him and nobody else.

Sandor’s face contorted into an expression of agony and anger. “Bloody hells! I Not asking doesn’t mean that I wouldn’t want to. A wife – I never thought I would seek to have one but here I am like a lovesick runt fawning over something that is out of my reach. You know it is impossible, why do you have to make it harder?!” His loud outburst was as sudden as it was rare these days but Sansa didn’t flinch. She took a deep breath.

“There are many things in this world that are impossible. And then there are things that are possible for those who want them bad enough. Now, look me in the eye and tell me which one this is?” She prodded his shoulder until he turned to look at her.

“Impossible or possible?” Sansa whispered.

Had anyone ever told her that there would come a day when she asked a man to wed her, Sansa
would have considered the notion absurd beyond imagination. No, her life path was to be as her mother’s had been – her marriage decided by her parents. Yet here she was, waiting breathlessly for the answer that could turn her life towards a completely new and uncharted direction.

Sandor was visibly uncomfortable, traces of his outburst still lingering in his features and in the line of his tightly pursed lips.

“That is not a road you want to travel, little bird. You’ll be ruined, people would snicker behind your back and think that a loss of your virtue made you stoop so low. Everyone would see that you married beneath you – and they would be right.”

“I will likely be ruined anyway. I know how cruel gossip can be, and having travelled with you for such a long time many likely think me already spoiled,” Sansa whispered. “If that is not enough, the word of my treatment in Joffrey’s court will leak out soon enough - and what better way to humiliate and disgrace a maid than to take her virtue?”

Sandor flinched. For once it was Sansa who made him uncomfortable and although she didn’t enjoy his discomfort, it was a potent feeling nonetheless. She, making the indomitable Hound squirm!

“You were never alone with me. Aye, that wouldn’t stop some of the fucking knights I know, who wouldn’t give a rat’s ass to the little wolf’s presence – or worse. But would I dare to come back to your kin having disgraced either of you?”

It was Sansa’s turn to feel embarrassed. Yes, some men did horrible things to women and young girls, but this… Yet she wasn’t above using every card she had. If Sandor thought her chances for respectable marriage already diminished, he might reconsider his stance.

She tried again. “If we would arrive married, there would be honour in it and I could held my head up high. And I wouldn’t care what people say. I am brave enough to ignore idle gossip.”

Sandor looked at her with a hint of amusement, his lopsided grin a proof of it.

“Fuck me sideways! So it has come to that a noble maiden has to teach the Hound about courage?”

Sansa smiled. Despite his frequent grumbling and indignant façade, Sandor had a keen sense of humour and as they had relaxed in each other’s company, she had glimpsed it more and more often.

However, in a flash he was serious again. “You sure you want to do it? Face your folk and not be ashamed of the man walking beside you?”

“I do. I won’t.”

The intense scrutiny Sandor directed at Sansa would at one time made her falter and squirm, but knowing what was at stake and having learned more about the man, Sansa braved it without a wince, challenging his stare with her own gaze.

After a long break Sandor spoke. He had pulled back when he had taken her measure, but now he shifted closer and lifted his hand to brush her cheek.

“Then I’ll be as brave as you. Never let it be said that I am craven in things that matter.” A deep breath, so deep that it shook his whole body. “Will you marry me, little bird? Take this dog as yours?”

Sansa pressed her cheek against his touch and closed her eyes. Yes, this is it. The moment of no return. Nothing in my life will ever be the same after this.
“I will.”

Somewhere in the darkness of the night they heard a jubilant hiss.
Wedding in the Woods

Chapter Notes

So I had a mishap in writing this – most of the already written chapter inexplicably disappeared from my laptop into a thin air – aaarrggghhh! After lots of detective work (that led absolutely nowhere) it still remains a mystery what happened, so alas, I had to restart from the scratch again. Bleh. But anyway, here we are – getting closer to the end, inch by inch… Thanks for sticking along!

Sandor & Arya

“So I guess you’ll have to start calling me goodsister from now on? No more ‘little wolf’ or ‘girl’.”

“Goodsister my arse. And if you as much as mutter goodbrother to me…”

“Why not? I have one big brother and two little brothers already, but you could be my biggest brother of them all!”

“I doubt your lady mother would care much of such thing.”

“You don’t know that. As long as you treat Sansa well, she’ll get around.”

“Treat her well? If dragging her through miserable backwaters on horseback, making her cook and
clean and sleep in the open, and to top it all up, making her wed in rags in the middle of fucking forest is treating her well, your mother and I will get on splendidly!”

“Sansa doesn’t mind that. I know she doesn’t. Besides, you can get married again in Winterfell, in the Godswood. She’ll like that, and she would get her big wedding day then.”

“If we get to Winterfell.”

“Why wouldn’t we? Of course we will go there!”

“You may, not so certain about myself. I am sure your family would rather welcome bloody Mad King himself than me, even freshly risen from his grave. I know the little bird thinks everything will be solved by us getting wed, but marriages can be annulled quicker than one can say ‘he forced me to it’.”

“Well, now it is up to you two to make sure it can’t be annulled.”

“Haven’t you happened to notice that we are still on the run? Still camping under open skies, sleeping on a hard ground. With one much-too-curious-for-her-own-good-wolfling sniffing on our steps. Do you take me a monster?”

“It neither doesn’t matter to her. I have seen the way she throws lovey-dovey eyes at you. It makes me a bit sick to think about it, but meh. Has to happen.”

“Has she said anything to you about it?”

“No, but she doesn’t have to. She is not stupid. She too knows that marriages can be annulled if not done properly. But you do know that she would never say anything about you forcing her, don’t you?”

“Maybe not her, but she may not be given a chance to talk for herself.”

“We are not like the Lannisters, you better learn that. In the North every man – and woman – is heard out before condemned.”

“Aye, I believe that. I can see your folks enthralled to hear me telling them that only by happenstance I come about to be in the steps of Great Sept of Baelor when Ned Stark’s head got chopped off.”

“It doesn’t matter what you did before! Or maybe a little. But you are not doing that anymore, just tell them that.”

“Pffft! And they’d believe me, you say?”

“They would, if you talked to them. You know, being surly all the time and looking like you have a stick up your arse might work with Lannisters, but if you want to be accepted by our family, you have to learn to share. I thought Sansa has already told you that.”

“Gods be cursed, I knew I made a mistake in sticking you in that whorehouse – I should have found you a place with Silent Sisters. That language doesn’t do you any favours either when you get back. In your case you’d better stay silent.”

“Bah, I am not stupid, I know what I can say and to whom. Would you listen to me better if I told you that your demeanour is not endearing you to your new kin, and that you should contemplate about the virtues of opening up to make your good intentions known to them?”
“Do you mock me, girl?”

“Goodsister to you. And no, I do not. I just… I just want you to get along with my family. Could you do that? For me, and for Sansa?”

Sansa

Immediately after the decision had been made it had seemed a straightforward proposition to execute it; find a septon, wed, bed, and continue their journey to Riverrun. Yet the reality was that septons were not quite so easy to find in the forest while trying avoid unwanted attention and possible sorties still searching for them in the Riverlands.

It had been several weeks since they had departed King’s Landing but Sandor had warned them that Joffrey’s wrath was immense and Cersei’s even more so, and that those two would not stop until they had tracked them down one way or another. It was true that the closer they got to Riverrun, the looser the grip of the Lannisters was in the lands they travelled through – but a small group of soldiers could still travel relatively unnoticed if they had eyes only for their mission and had disguised themselves well. And Sandor was not ready to take any chances.

They discussed their options yet another evening, Arya arguing in her typical fashion in favour of the simplest option: finding a village with a sept, waiting until everyone slept, sneaking in and persuading the septon to wed them – with force, if necessary. Sandor had none of that though, grumbling that if the septon made noise, they would be captured by the villagers and word of it soon would soon spread to Lannister men who had their ears on the ground exactly for something like that.

The exchange was just one of many alike, Arya making suggestions and Sandor shooting them down. Although Sansa was sure he was not making excuses in order to go back on his word, she was concerned that even after several days they were not any nearer to find a solution to their dilemma. Since accepting that Sansa truly wanted to marry him, Sandor had not questioned her or shown doubt, but the circumstances seemed to be against their union.

Her shy suggestion to wait until they reached Riverrun, slip in under disguise and seek a septon there, was met with even less enthusiasm. Sandor’s argument against that was that if they were recognised, they would never be wed, which assured but also despaired Sansa. Without any further inspirations they retired to their bedrolls none the wiser.

After lying down, Sansa brushed her hand against Sandor’s side in search of his hand. Since the proposal he had even more steadfastly refused to touch her intimately, but she could feel his eyes on her more than before. She didn’t understand it fully – being betrothed, surely they could kiss and embrace without shame? Yet she didn’t try to break his resolve and settled to feel his closeness when they rode and to hold his hand when they were lying on their bedrolls at the end of the day, gaining satisfaction from those innocent gestures.

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The next day the solution to their dilemma however quite unexpectedly fell straight into their laps.

Turning around a bend in the road – if the partially overgrown carriageway deserved to be called one – they saw a horse and a carriage and two men stopped on the side of a clearing. Sandor halted and
raised his hand to stop Arya, who was following close behind as usually.

Sansa’s initial fright settled as soon as she took in the scene: A covered wagon pulled by an old horse who had seen better days, a young boy dressed in peasant’s clothes attending a fire and another man, fat, smooth-shaven and wearing a dull-brown habit, sitting on a fallen tree trunk looking expectedly at the lad’s exertions.

But what really caught her eye and made her tug at Sandor’s sleeve to get his attention was the crude painting on the side of the wagon; a seven pointed star.

“Sandor, could it be…?” she whispered, but before she could finish, she was interrupted.

“Greetings, fellow travellers,” the fat man called, staring at them warily. Yet he too seemed to calculate that they did not present an immediate danger – just one man, a woman and a boy - and his voice picked up a friendlier tone. “A lovely day to travel, isn’t it?”

“Greetings to you, my good man. Aye, a fine day.” Sandor urged his mount ahead and they strolled closer.

“Where you’ll be heading, if you don’t mind me asking?”

The youth looked up from the fire, but seeing his master conversing with the strangers, got back to his work.

“To Riverrun. And you?”

“Myself, I am coming from Riverrun, on my way back to my flock in Pinkmaiden. Yes, it is House Piper that I serve and Septon Merigold is my name.”

“How were things at Riverrun?” Sansa couldn’t help piping up. The septon looked at her, somewhat surprised, but answered none the same.

“Things were as well as can be in these times of trouble. Lord Tully is abed and young Ser Edmure rules in his stead. Lord Stark – or King in the North as many say – is in residence and many Northmen with him.”

Obviously having had enough of chit-chat Sandor leaped down from the saddle and addressed the man brusquely, but courteously.

“Since you are the servant of the Seven, we have a request for you. You see, this woman and I would like to wed and if you’d do us the honour we would be thankful. I have coin – a fair reward for fair work.”

The septon glanced between him and Sansa, only mildly curious.

“Wedding is a joyous affair. Wouldn’t you rather celebrate it with your loved ones in your own home?”

“Our home is far away. We’d rather wed now than wait. Waiting leads to temptation.”

Sansa blushed. She realised Sandor played with the septon’s aversion to sin and sinners, but she couldn’t help being conscious about what the man must think about them. Yet whatever that might have been, he didn’t show it. Turning to Sansa the septon addressed her directly.

“And what of your parents, dear child? Have they approved of this marriage?”
“My father is dead, but my mother is keen for me to marry,” she said, feeling only slightly uneasy about the half-truth she proffered.

“Hmmh.” Septon Merigold glanced at his servant behind him and the fire he had stoked into full flames, then at the sky, then at Sansa. Sandor rattled the pouch in his belt to remind him about the promised coin. Which of the factors settled the matter wasn’t obvious, but finally he nodded.

“Let it be so then. This is highly irregular, but unusual times call for unusual measures.” Turning to the boy he called to him. "Sylvan, will you fetch me my copy of the Seven-Pointed Star from the cask?"

“We would also like to acquire a written statement to bear witness for the marriage. So we can prove it has taken place,” Sansa added.

“We’ll pay for the extra work and parchment.” Sandor clinked his pouch again.

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Sansa swiped her hands on her skirt, rubbed her face with her sleeve and ran her fingers through her hair.

I must look a fright.

No wedding dress, no preparations – only a hasty affair by the roadside. As if reading her thoughts Sandor approached and muttered to her under his breath.

“Not exactly the wedding day you imagined? Not too late to pull back, little bird. Had you any sense you would.”

Sansa’s heart constricted – how could he even think she could do anything so cruel? She reached for his hand.

“When I was younger I used to think about my wedding day all the time. How I would be dressed in the finest clothes and my hair would be made up in elaborate curls and woven with ribbons and pearls. It was always in a grand location, first in the Great Hall of Winterfell, but later I pictured the Great Sept of Baelor.” She didn’t let go despite Sandor trying to pull his hand away and only squeezed it tighter. "But do you know the most curious thing? I never gave much thought to my husband-to-be. If I considered him at all I took it for granted that he was someone my parents chose for me. And later, for a while, I expected it to be Joffrey.” Sansa’s face clouded at the memory of her naivety.

Sandor was quiet so she continued. “But that was before. What I do know now is that I’d rather wed the man of my choosing by the roadside, or in the pigsty if needed, than any other man in a great sept. No, I will not pull away and this will be our wedding day for true.”

It was Sandor’s turn to hold her hand so hard that she almost yelped. He didn’t say anything but his eyes conveyed to Sansa all she needed to know.

Arya approached them then, grinning broadly. “The septon is ready. Are you?”

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It was a short ceremony, witnessed by Sylvan the servant and Arya. Soothed by Septon Merigold’s droning voice Sansa closed her eyes for a briefest moment. She had heard the words before in the rare occasions when couples in Winterfell had wed according to the faith of the Seven rather than the old gods, and she remembered some of the words. And the colourful lights filtering through the stained glass windows, the melodious songs, the solemnity of the event…and she felt a small tinge of regret for missing all that.
Then she opened her eyes - and saw the soft green grass under their feet, the light and dark green foliage of the surrounding trees flickering in the calm wind and the vast expanse of clear blue sky above them. She felt the warm rays of sun on her face, smelled the fresh air tinged with the scent of forest and heard the songsong of the birds. She glanced at the man beside her, so tall and solemn, the good side of his face towards her, and any remnants of remorse disappeared without a trace. *Strong and brave and gentle – my husband to be.* Sansa hoped her father would see them from beyond; see how his words were finally coming true. In this life he would have objected, she knew, but if he could see into Sandor’s heart and into all that had transpired, he would approve, she was sure.

When came the time to give their vows Sansa knew as well as Sandor that they had to give their true names, as a marriage under false names would be as false. Hearing Sandor’s name the septon swallowed hard but didn’t seem overtly surprised - he had already started to throw curious looks in his direction when Sandor had lowered his hood. The Hound’s looks and reputation were widely known, but as he had behaved cordially until then the man must have concluded that he was not in an immediate danger from him.

When Sansa declared her own name, the septon’s eyes widened and a sudden fit of coughing overcame him, interrupting the proceedings. Sansa gave him her most reassuring smile and whispered for him to continue, and Sandor lifted his hand but instead of the pouch of coins he reached for the hilt of his sword. Pale as a ghost Septon Merigold licked his dry lips before croaking the remaining words and pronouncing them man and wife.

Visibly shaking he then sat down, weighed by his vast bulk and sudden weakening of his knees. Sandor pushed the parchment and the quill his servant had dug up in front of him, but seeing the frightened state the poor man was in, Sansa motioned Sandor to move further away. Arya seemed to be bursting with excitement and dragged him with her without delay.

“Dear Septon Merigold, do not fear. You have done nothing wrong and you will not be punished for this. On the contrary, you have my eternal gratitude and ten silver stags for your troubles.”

Seeing that Sandor had moved out of earshot, the septon seemed to recover his composure and leaned conspiratorially towards Sansa.

“My lady, does he keep you against your will? Shall I alert someone about your predicament? I would help you myself, but as you can see, the two of us would not amount to much against the Hound…”

“I thank you for your concern, but truly, I am with him of my own true will and have entered this marriage in the same spirit.” Sansa felt sorry for the man but at the same time she couldn’t let him draw attention to them. “It will be in your best interest to stay quiet about this whole encounter. Should you send anyone after us, my lord husband and I would not take it kindly. And he can be quite unpleasant if aggravated. I suspect you would not want to risk his wrath.”

The septon swallowed once again and nodded, turning his attention back to the parchment. Hearing Arya’s name as a witness didn’t seem to worsen the state of his discomfort, and after scribbling down what was required he handed the document with shaking hands to Sansa, who thanked him sincerely.

After talking with Arya Sandor had been conversing with the boy, but seeing the transaction concluded he came back and gave the septon the silver stags as promised. When the man took it Sandor fingered the hilt of his sword meaningfully, saying something into the septon’s ear so low that Sansa couldn’t hear it. She saw the fear in the man’s eyes though and concluded that whatever it was, it was Sandor’s way to make sure that they would not be betrayed.
Last tense greetings and they mounted their horses and continued on their way, leaving the grassy clearing that had borne witness to the marriage of Lady Sansa Stark, princess of the North, and Sandor Clegane, a masterless warrior, behind them.

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I am married. I am Sansa Clegane now. It had happened so quickly and so unexpectedly that Sansa had difficulties in comprehending that it had really happened. That morning she had woken up a maid, this night she would lay down as a wife. Tomorrow morning I won’t wake up as a maiden. The tight knot in her stomach got tighter at the thought.

The kisses and embraces she had shared with Sandor had woken new sensations in her such as she had never felt before. Sandor’s reticence had had quite an opposite effect on her as perhaps intended; the more he pulled away, the bolder and more curious she became. Sometimes Sansa lay on her bed and revoked the memory of their first kiss and how Sandor had hungrily claimed her then. It had scared her at the time but in the safety of her memories she relived the breathless excitement and felt the fire it had lit in her. Women and especially young maids were not supposed to be wanting those things but gods, she wanted to feel his touch again, his tongue teasing hers, his strength against her.

Sansa couldn’t put into words what she was experiencing. What was it that she wanted? What she knew about marriage bed had always sounded revolting or at least peculiar - she couldn’t imagine that the act itself could be pleasurable. Maybe what she wanted was not that at all but something else, a heightened sensation of being with her loved one? The other thing… yes, that was part of being married, she realised, and was determined to endure it with good grace. What she craved was to be close to Sandor, and whatever came after was to fulfil his desires. Men had needs, everyone knew that.

Tonight I will lose my maidenhood.

Although it was not late, Sandor started to eye out a camping site whenever they passed a promising area. After riding along the dilapidated road for a while and not seeing anything that satisfied him, they once again ducked into the woods. From thereon every time they saw a rocky boulder or a hill, Sandor guided Stranger there and explored it. What exactly he was looking for was not clear for Sansa, but when she asked him about it, he only mumbled something about needing to find a good spot.

Eventually they found a place he was happy with. Sansa didn’t really see what the difference was to the others; it was just another slightly elevated spot leading to a rocky boulder tightly surrounded by the forest. The edges of the boulder were sprinkled with smaller rock formations, jutting out from the forest floor. The main boulder was so large that riding around it took a good while.

After declaring that this was to be their camp for the night they attended to their duties, each to their own in a manner that had been polished and made effective over time. Arya unpacked their horses and established the fire, Sansa attended to their dinner and Sandor set the warning lines around the perimeter to alert them about anyone approaching, and lay down new snares for catching their next night’s meal.

This time he however stayed away much longer than normally. Even by the time their meal, two plump birds, were fully cooked, he hadn’t come back.

“Where do you think he has gone?” Sansa wondered if Arya knew something she didn’t.

“I don’t have an inkling. But do not fret, I believe it highly unlikely that he would abscond now at all
times,” laughed Arya at her worried expression.

“I didn’t mean that. I was just wondering.” Sansa removed the birds from the spit lest they char too much. Arya became serious.

“Are you nervous? About tonight, I mean?”

“Of course I am not.” Sansa sighed deeply and her shoulders sagged. “Of course I am. I know hardly anything, and I have no one to tell me how to prepare for it. I wish Mother was here. Or, I mean, not here right now, but…”

“I know what you mean.” Arya nodded. “If it is any consolation, I don’t think he is going to be that bad. He had some compensations to his ugly face, Aline said. I don’t know what, but…”

“I don’t want to know what some…paid woman said about my lord husband!” Sansa shrieked. She couldn’t believe Arya chose that very moment to bring it up again! Dropping the wooden platters she held in her hands on the ground with a clatter, she stood up and stormed away, huffing in irritation as she went. There was nowhere she could go though, so after reaching the perimeter of their camp she turned around. She was still angry, but seeing her sister’s stricken expression soothed her hurt feelings somewhat. *Oh Arya, still putting your foot into your mouth.*

Sansa walked back to Arya and addressed her more softly. “I am sure he means well for me. I am sure it will all be fine. But Arya, can you please promise that you will not eavesdrop on us? I couldn’t bear it if I thought you heard me and him. Please?”

Arya looked still chastened but nodded vigorously. “I promise. I will stay on my bedroll and see nor hear anything, I swear. I can move to sleep on the other side of that rock. You’ll hear not a peep from me.”

She pointed to a mossy rock leaning against the wall of the boulder. To Sansa it looked still embarrassingly close to the main camp, but before she could say anything they heard the heavy footfall heralding Sandor’s return.

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The dinner was unusually quiet affair. Sandor hadn’t explained what had taken him so long and Sansa hadn’t ask. Her nervousness increased, especially as she could feel and see Sandor’s eyes trained on her, intensely, unrelentingly. He didn’t talk much but whenever Sansa glanced at him he was staring at her, grey eyes flashing in the firelight. It reminded her of the times in Winterfell and on the Kingsroad when she had thought him to be regarding her like a hunter assesses his prey, and how uncomfortable his gaze had made her feel then.

“Hey, do you know what this is?” Arya broke the silence with a loud announcement. Both Sansa and Sandor turned to look at her.

“It is your wedding banquet! I’ll admit this is not much, but we’ll have to make do.”

Sansa let out a nervous laughter. Indeed. In her childhood dreams she had seen long tables creaking under the weight of many delicacies and exotic foods; roasted boar, pike and salmon, wilted greens and vegetables lathered with butter, freshly baked breads and stews, spicy sauces and the best of all, lemon cakes and sugary desserts to her heart’s content.

“Aye, so it is. A banquet fit for the occasion.” Sandor lifted the wing in his hand and nodded. There was no mockery in his tone and just like earlier in the day Sansa regarded the reality in front of her.
The roasted birds were plump and succulent, and the valuable pouch of salt Sandor had sensibly packed with him was all the spice they needed. They had bread, bought from a baker they had met on the road only two days hence, and it was still soft and not dried into rock-hard chunks. They had no vegetables nor butter and sugary treats were just a dream – but they had food to fill their bellies and it was not bad at all.

“I think this the most unusual wedding meal but this is all we need,” she declared, smiling at her companions.

“A wedding feast calls for a toast.” Sandor got up and rummaged through his saddle bag. “Took this for emergencies or special occasions and almost forgot all about it. If this is not a special occasion, I don’t know what is.” He lifted a half-full wineskin and brandished it triumphantly in the air. Arya reached for it and grabbed it from his grip.

“Since I am the official master of ceremonies, I shall raise the first toast.” She turned the stopper until it cracked open with a loud pop. “My most worthy wedding guests, the distinguished couple of honour, and all you revellers,” she gestured towards Stranger and her own horse, which she had rather ambitiously named Fast Wind, “let us offer our felicitations to this young couple who have become man and wife this very special day. Let their union be long and happy and fruitful.”

Arya lifted the skin to her lips and just as Sandor called ‘Careful, little wolf, it is not for young girls’, she took a sip – and grimaced and spluttered most of the bitter concoction on the forest floor. The shock on her face looked so hilarious that Sansa giggled, the tense atmosphere mere moments ago forgotten.

“Bloody hells, I tried to warn you. It is strongwine, good for grown men, but not intended for little girls.” Sandor reached for his skin muttering darkly, but from the twitching in the corner of his mouth Sansa knew he was not angry in earnest. He took a good swig himself and when he offered it to Sansa, she grabbed it keenly. She wanted to toast her own wedding, but having been forewarned she sipped from the skin very carefully. The liquid was strong and burned like fire going down her throat, but she prided herself for not choking on it as Arya had done.

“You turn! The bridegroom’s toast!” Arya cheered, and Sandor glared daggers at her. Throwing a quick look at Sansa he however seemed to accept the demand and reached for the skin once again.

“You lot, you are the best group of honest souls I could ever have imagined to celebrate my wedding with.” A nod towards the horses who were nibbling grass, completely oblivious to the important role they were playing at the feast. “Had I ever imagined it – my wedding, that is. Never thought I’d marry, even less thought I’d marry a bride such as the little bird here. To the bride!”

The skin made a new round around the fire, landing last on Sansa’s lap. Her second sip went down easier than the first, and whether it was the strongwine or the playful spirit they shared, she raised it again enthusiastically.

“Dear guests!” The compulsory nod to their horses. “I am honoured that you have chosen to join us in this joyous occasion, this joining of the houses Clegane and Stark. A bride could not wish for a happier day, or for a better lord husband.” She downed yet another gulp of the fiery liquid before handing it to Arya. Before her sister had her turn Sandor pushed ahead and snatched it.

“No more for you, little wolf. You are not used to strong liquors.”

“Neither is Sansa! This is not fair!” Arya’s face was flushed and Sansa grinned at her protestations.

“She doesn’t need any more either,” Sandor measured Sansa and this time the intensity of his
scrutiny only made her giggle. She felt warm and a bit lightheaded and boldly returned Sandor’s gaze. Their eyes locked, and it was as if it had been some kind of a sign, because Sandor put the skin aside and stood up.

“Come with me.”

He offered his hand to Sansa. She took it without question and stood up, trailing after him when he led her past the rock Arya had pointed and further. The warm feeling in her belly and the lightness in her head had chased away all her concerns, and made following her lord husband into the looming darkness the easiest thing in the world.
It has been a while again, but it is always difficult to find how to write the millionth version of a familiar theme... There is tension, there is passion, there is joy...well, whatever there is, it is here now!

_Sandor & Arya_

“What now, why did you come back? Where is Sansa?”

“She is resting in a camp I made for her. She’s fine.”

“Shouldn’t you be with her?”

“I will be soon. Just one thing I have to take care of. Come here and bring that blanket of yours.”

“You have enough blankets! I need some too. And what are you doing with Stranger’s saddle cloth? It is not _that_ cold here, you know.”

“Do me a favour, lie down here.”

“Why? Why do you want me to lie on top of these? Are you measuring something? You know that
Sansa is much taller than I am?”

“Just for once do as you’re told, wolfling!”

“Very well, no need to get grumpy about it. Here – so what?”

“Stay still now.”

“Hey! What, uh, mmmphhh! What in the seven hells are you doing?! Let me go!”

“The more you resist the tighter the wrap will be. Just relax and you’ll be fine. Now I’ll just tie the cords…”

“GET OFF ME! You can’t do this! Arrrghhh!”

“…and another down your legs…”

“Release me at once!! I’ll tell Sansa!”

“I don’t care if you tell High Septon himself, but tonight you are going to stay here. Your sister has enough to worry about without having to fear you sneaking around.”

“Damn sure she has enough to worry about, married to a monster like you! You can’t do this!”

“Quit whinging, you’ll be fine. You can move your head and wiggle your toes, you can sleep even. Nothing into it. But at least now I know that you won’t be lurking around us.”

“Is this about that one time, when you proposed to her? I swear it was that time only, and I promised Sansa I will not come anywhere near you tonight!”

“As much as I want to trust your word, I trust this wrap and my knots better.”

“I can’t move my arms! I can’t even scratch my nose!”

“Nothing wrong with your nose that needs to be scratched. Stop bleating now, that is not going to do you any good. I’ll come back after and release you.”

“When you do I’ll run right to Sansa and tell her what you did!”

“And she’ll thank me for it. Listen, you stay still now and get some sleep, I come and free you when I am well and ready. You promise – and I mean truly promise - that you will stay on your bedroll from now on and we don’t have to ever talk about this again. Or…”

“Or what?”

“I’ll do this every night until we get to Riverrun. Your sister will pout and protest, but she’ll settle. So, what is it going to be?”

“Drop dead!”

“Good night to you too, little wolf.”

Sansa
“You did this?” Sansa was speechless. In front of her stood a small edifice leaning against the cliff face; four thick tree branches resting against the rock just above a naturally concave half-cave. The branches were covered with leafy tree saplings as densely as any thatched roof. The structure was covered at one end and open at the other, where a small fire had been lit and shedding light into the interior.

Bending down and peeking inside she saw that the base of that cosy den was covered with a thick layer of leaves and moss, clearly freshly gathered from trees and boulders all around them. Their heady green scent filled her nostrils and reminded her of the possets of dried flowers buried between her dresses in Winterfell coffers. Tentatively she tested the bedding by pressing her hand down and it gave in, suggesting a surface softer than what she had rested on since they left the Red Keep. Surprised she looked up at Sandor, who was arranging their bedrolls on top of the base to make it even more comfortable. He stared at his task and didn’t meet her eyes.

The weeks on the road had made Sansa used to sleeping on the hard ground and the prospect of soft bedding was inviting – and yet knowing its purpose made her heart run faster. To cover her nervousness she fumbled with a frayed corner of fabric and heard more than saw Sandor getting up again.

She glanced at her newly minted husband and met the same intense stare she had been aware of the whole afternoon. Her voice quivered only slightly when she addressed him.

“What a lovely surprise this is, Sandor! Such luxury in the middle of wilderness.”

“It is our wedding night and I mean to have you, little bird. Time for bloody chivalry is over - but the least I can do is to try to make you as comfortable as I can.”

Shivers travelled down Sansa’s spine. *Is it a threat – or a promise? Or both?* She had no answer and Sandor didn’t seem to expect any.

“Settle yourself comfortably. I’ll be right back.” And then he was gone, disappeared into the darkness.

Sansa’s nervousness had returned with a vengeance after the momentary lightness brought upon by the strong spirit. She swayed on the spot unsure of what she should do. Sandor had clearly worked hard to make the shelter, cutting the branches, hacking the saplings and stripping the leaves, painstakingly building the solid structure in front of her. *It must mean that he too considers tonight as something special. Not like with the other women.* Fleetingly Sansa wondered if he had ever prepared a love nest for anyone else, and was surprised by the strong pang of jealousy even thinking about it caused.

Yet she felt touched by Sandor’s consideration and in the lack of better ideas, she knelt down and crawled inside. The bedding was as soft as she had surmised, and after she had smoothed their bedding to cover it fully it was quite snug. Like the day, the evening was mild and the fire was strictly speaking not necessary, but she liked it nonetheless. She settled near the entrance, then noticed the blankets laid down on the side and pulled them to her. She wondered where Sandor had gone – did he have another surprise for her, even more preparations?

Lying there in wait of her lord husband to come and claim his rights Sansa wondered what he would expect of her on his return. ‘Settle yourself comfortably’, he had said. Should she undress – was that what he had meant? Or would that be too forward? She fingered the laces of her top apprehensively but couldn’t make up her mind. In the end she removed her boots as she did every night, placing them side by side outside the shelter.
Loud steps, crunching of twigs under a heavy weight, and Sandor was back.

“Where did you go?” Sansa asked timidly.

“There was something I had to take care of in the camp. Are you well settled?”

Sandor sat down, his big bulk shaking the whole shelter. He too removed his boots, throwing them carelessly to the side, then crawled inside, landing by Sansa’s side. Grunting he fell on his back and crossed his hands behind his neck.

“Does this suffice? I hoped to find a proper cave, or an abandoned shepherd’s shack or barn, but we are too far away from farmlands to find any. Which is probably a good thing anyway. Where there are buildings, there are people.”

“But we are getting close to Riverrun. Isn’t this safe yet?” Sansa raised up and leaned on her elbow to observe Sandor. He stared at the roof and furrowed his brow.

“The septon’s servant said it is three, maybe four days away. It is safer here than before but it is not only Lannister men we have to avoid. Any group of leaderless men coming across us, you a fetching young maid and all, would mean trouble. I’d defend you, of course, but I’d rather keep my sword clean for now.” He glanced at Sansa and smirked. “Besides, I have better things to do with my time.”

Sansa blushed at the insinuation and looked down. “So three or four more days and we’ll be with my family? And yours…your new family.”

“Aye, all going well. Might not be a happy family meeting you’d expect though. I might as easily find myself in the deepest cells than sitting above the salt in the great hall.”

“Oh no they wouldn’t! They couldn’t! You are my lord husband now!”

Sandor’s expression was solemn when he turned to her. “Not yet. Mayhap we better do something about it.”

Sansa’s blush deepened. The marriage had to be consummated for it to be legal and sanctified in the eyes of gods and men. She had known that all along, and she wanted that too, but…

“I…I don’t know what to do. You have to guide me,” she whispered – and felt Sandor’s hand hovering above her head, hardly touching. It brushed her hair, her cheek, then travelled to her shoulder and arm and down her body, pressing on the fabric of her blouse and skirt so she could feel the warmth of his large palm. Then he leaned closer and claimed her lips.

“You could start by revealing yourself to me,” he growled into her mouth. Sansa responded by returning his kisses – at least she had done that before, although she still felt quite inadequate and inexperienced. Yet she had a feeling that she was not the only one; Sandor’s kisses had always been somewhat awkward and tentative and this time was no exception. They oscillated between pressing down on her lips almost painfully hard and sometimes missing their mark, gracing her cheek or nose when she moved. It was as if his usual ability to read Sansa’s reactions and anticipate her actions had deserted him. His uncertainty encouraged Sansa and she met his hunger with an increased enthusiasm.

To illustrate the meaning of his words better Sandor reached for the cords of her blouse and tugged them sharply. With shaking fingers Sansa took up the task and one by one opened the knots. Sandor’s hands that had travelled up and down her body returned to her shoulders and started to pull the fabric down, and Sansa let him.
The kisses, the keenness of his touch and the thought of her nakedness soon being exposed to his eyes made blood course through Sansa’s veins hot and fast. Tingling and anticipation fluttered at the pit of her stomach and after releasing her arms and pulling her top away Sandor didn’t need to instruct her any further as she started to wiggle out of her skirt and pull it down along with her smallclothes. It felt odd, it felt wicked, it felt mortifying, but she didn’t hesitate.

“You too,” she gathered her courage and piped up. She had once chanced upon Sandor crouching by the river’s edge, bare-chested and washing himself in cold water. She had stopped on her tracks before he had detected her presence and taken in the spectacle of him, so unusual and so unguarded. His upper body had been sinewy and solid, hard muscles roiling under his skin as he had raised his arms and flexed his shoulders. He had coiled his long dark hair into a messy knot at the back of his head, and the sight of his neck, so pale and so exposed, had made Sansa’s breath stricken. He had been like a giant beast unaware of his own strength that was so obvious to an onlooker, and yet so vulnerable.

When Sandor had gotten onto his feet and turned around she had caught a sight of dark hair covering his chest and arms. It had served only to reinforce her perception of him as a wild beast, untamed and one with nature. Sansa had slinked away then, backing carefully one step at a time, but she had seen enough. She knew it to be ridiculous to think about Sandor in those animalistic terms, but on that day she had seen a man in a completely new light for the first time in her life and that new awareness had excited her and haunted her ever since.

And now she wanted to see him again.

Raising his good eyebrow Sandor didn’t ask questions but obediently lifted his upper body and swiftly pulled his tunic off. It went the same way as Sansa’s top, towards the back of the shelter, soon to be followed by the rest of their clothes.

And then they were naked, the heat of their bodies meeting under the blanket. Sandor didn’t hesitate to pull her to him and the feel of his skin against her own was the most exhilarating thing Sansa had ever known. She sighed and allowed her body to mould against his, his hard angles meeting her soft curves and matching them as if their forms had always meant to complement each other.

Soon Sandor’s hands were everywhere; grasping, kneading, exploring her shape, squeezing the swell of her breasts and her buttocks. He was greedy, he was impatient, and at times Sansa had to suppress a yelp when he pinched her too hard or pressed too heavily at a sensitive spot. Yet she didn’t want him to stop.

Her own hand swept along the angular lines of his body, the hard contours and firm muscles. She didn’t know what she was doing, only that she couldn’t get enough of it. This is what I wanted, flashed in her heated mind. To be close – ever closer.

Their bodies were so flush against each other that she felt coarseness of the hair on his chest against her breasts and down below his member, that had grown hard and rested stiffly against her belly. It was as if a foreign object had been placed between them, odd and yet tantalising. Sansa had a vague understanding of what it meant, but her mind refused to accept the logic of something so big to be able to be associated with what was supposed to happen…no, it couldn’t be.

“Gods, woman,” Sandor sighed in strained undertones. “I will hurt you, I know I will.” His shoulders were taut and tense as he pushed her on her back and positioned himself on top of her, taking the most of his weight on left arm, his other reaching down and in between them. When he pushed his fingers between Sansa’s legs, still coyly pressed tightly together, and swept them along her secret woman’s place, the jolt made her shudder – but not of pain but of pleasure. She could feel the wetness from her core and to her horror Sandor’s fingers dipped in it and spread it further. Seven
"You’re so wet, little bird, so fucking wet. Gods, do you know what that does to me?!" Sandor didn’t sound scandalised – on the contrary. Sansa stole a peek and saw his eyes 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. It spread her wetness even further and despite the heady sensation it caused, she instinctively flinched in preparation of the inevitable pain.

Against her expectations Sandor didn’t try push her legs apart – quite the opposite. He positioned his own thighs on either side of Sansa’s and squeezed her legs even tighter together, before resuming a steady motion of pushing himself in and out of the cavern between them. In every movement the length of him swept slickly against Sansa’s sensitive spot and she exhaled noisily, adapting to the rhythm, her own breathing adjusting to the tune of his actions. In and out. In and out.

The pain she expected didn’t materialise – as a matter of fact, with the curiously mounting pressure on her womanhood focussing on the pulsing of her own heartbeat down there, it felt opposite to painful – it felt glorious… She started tentatively to push her hips up to meet his motions, wanting something more – what, she couldn’t say, but still more.

Then Sandor cursed, reached once again between them and fastened his pace. Sansa could feel him lift his groin and his hand stroking his manhood – he cursed again and his movements became erratic and jerking. Sansa held on to him for her dear life, at loss of what was happening. Just as she started to worry that something was not right, Sandor tensed once more, let out a deep animalistic growl, and she felt something wet and warm spreading on her things and the juncture between them.

Gasping Sandor collapsed on top of her, but when she struggled under his heavy bulk he rolled aside and landed heavily on his back. He took in deep lungfuls of breath and Sansa stared at him, hoping to find some indication of whether what had happened was good or bad. His face was twisted – was it agony?

Hesitantly she touched his heaving chest. “Sandor? Is everything well?”

One more shuddering gasp and he turned his face towards her. In his eyes Sansa saw something she had never seen before – a twinge of shame? But surely it couldn’t be? They had just consummated their marriage and it hadn’t hurt at all – he had no reason to be ashamed!

“Are we…was it…was that it?” Sansa didn’t know how to ask the question properly. Sandor’s surprised expression didn’t help – she felt a bit foolish.

“That? Do you think I took your maidenhood just then?”

“Well, yes… I think so. Didn’t you?”

Unexpectedly Sandor burst out laughing. Not his usual low chortle, but a boisterous roaring laughter. If Sansa had felt foolish before, now she was petrified.

“Bloody hells! I’d like to think that when I take you, you’d actually know it! Gods but you are still an innocent little birdling, aren’t you?” His face was relaxed and he was clearly in high spirits. Sansa enjoyed seeing him thus, so far removed from his general sullen demeanour, but she was starting to get annoyed at the way his mirth was directed at her. Seeing her expression Sandor seemed to grasp it and got serious, pulling Sansa against him.

“No, Sansa. It was just me letting off steam. I had to do something or I know I would have hurt you in my eagerness. Fuck, like a lad with his first wench, I was.”
“So we didn’t…”

“No, we didn’t. Yet. You deserve better than a rutting beast too consumed with his own pleasure. Mayhap now I can take my time to be careful with you.” Sandor’s skin was still sweaty under Sansa’s touch, but his breath had settled and he felt calmer than before. Although still annoyed by her foolish mistake and how hilarious he had found it, Sansa snuggled closer to him, glad to hear his reasoning. She had much to learn, that much was true.

The situation still raised one question though.

“So…when do you think that will happen? I mean, we have only a few more days before…”

“Days?! Give me a few moments, you eager wench!” There was laughter in his voice again and Sansa hit him with her fists in mock anger.

“I told you I don’t know about these things!” Sandor just chuckled and Sansa joined him, having given up her indignation. To laugh with him, to feel so alive, to have her senses awakened and to let go of trepidation she had carried with her the whole day… Sansa felt warm and fuzzy and happy and quite spontaneously she planted a bit wet kiss on Sandor’s chest – the only place within her reach as he was holding her so tightly.

“Did you like it though?”

Holy Maiden! Sansa couldn’t imagine it being proper to admit anything of the sort – ladies did not discuss such things. And yet…

“Mmmmmh,” she purred against his skin, torn between desire to be honest and not wanting to appear wanton. Whether he heard her or not she wasn’t sure, but from the squeeze of his arm she thought he might have.

Languid after their exertion she nuzzled against Sandor’s chest, breathing in his scent and letting his wiry hair tickle her face and nose. How is it possible that I want to get even closer to him? Sandor had curled his arm around her shoulders and stroked her hair in lazy motion. Time stopped and that one moment seemed to last forever - there was no need to talk, no haste to cover themselves or disentangle their intermingled limbs. The night was mild and the still burning fire warmed them even after the heat of their bodies had dissipated.

Emboldened by the tranquillity of the moment Sansa let her fingers slide down his chest, drawing the map of his muscles and many scars as she did so. A pale white line across his side, a red welt near his lower ribs, another ragged red line across his stomach – all long ago healed but having left behind memories of past injuries. There were so many… it made her sad to think about the life of violence he had lived, but she was grateful that he had survived through it all. It was selfish, and Sansa knew she should feel sorry for all those he had slain – but still she proffered silent thanks to the gods that it had been he who had been victorious.

She also stole a curious peek to his nether regions, in full sight as he had kicked off the blankets and the glow of fire was quite bright. To her surprise, where she had imagined some kind of an impressive staff, a macabre display of manliness, all she saw was a soft wrinkled shape resting harmless against his thigh. She stared at it, trying to reconcile whether it could be the same object she had felt moving between her thighs, so hard and relenting.

“I said give me a few moments,” Sandor grumbled and Sansa flinched, feeling guilty of having stared. Looking up she saw him glaring at him, still amused. “I guess you haven’t seen a man naked before?”
“No, of course not!” Her curiosity got the better of her and she asked, genuinely perplexed, “How does it change so much? Why does it do that?”

“Bugger me if I know. That’s just the way it is. All it takes is a woman, a touch or a thought stuck in my head about a certain redheaded beauty and her pert little ass.” A low chuckle. “Why don’t you touch it and see what happens?”

Sansa’s first reaction was to pull away. I couldn’t! But as scandalised as she was about the prospect at first, it was more than curiosity that soon saw her inching her fingers closer. She wanted to touch him.

The trail of dark hair from Sandor’s navel to his groin guided her and she held her breath as she got closer. A soft sweep, a press of her fingertips – she was surprised how smooth and soft his manhood was.

Nothing could prepare her for what happened next though, as that harmless looking object soon started to grow…and grow…and grow. Eyes widened she stared at it, still holding on to it and sensing under the palm of her hand the complete transformation that was taking place. Soft and smooth it was still, but now rigid and hard, twitching almost as it had a life of its own. She sighed and her apprehension returned.

“Sansa.” Sandor’s voice was low. “Look at me.”

She tore her eyes away from the fascinating sight at display and obeyed.

“I try not to hurt you. But gods, I have waited for so long…” The intensity from earlier had returned and Sandor’s breath had become forced.

“I don’t mind. I am ready,” Sansa whispered.

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Lying once again against Sandor’s chest, her hair spread over both of them like a silken curtain, Sansa couldn’t help smiling back at her innocent self from just some time earlier. No wonder he laughed at me.

When he had taken her for real, it had hurt just as she had anticipated. What she hadn’t expected though was the fulfilment and elation after her stretched flesh had adjusted to the invasion. When Sandor had eased himself into her, little by little, taking his cues from her reactions, the sensation of being torn asunder had gradually given way to a feeling of being fulfilled and consumed – satiating the longing and hollowness she had felt earlier. Whatever had been missing from their earlier encounter was granted to her tenfold. With the tentative swings of her hips, adjusting to the strange rhythm, Sansa had welcomed him with newly found fervour.

When Sandor’s gasps had become harsh and uneven and the cords in his neck had strained, he had fumbled between them once again but instead of attending to his own pleasure he had stroked Sansa’s flesh. Relentlessly, unevenly, clearly distracted by his own upcoming peak, Sansa had nonetheless felt a burning, pulsing awareness that had seemed to concentrate on her core, on that very specific spot. She had been almost afraid of feeling something so out of her control, and Sandor’s peak while she was still trying to process her own reactions had left her somewhat confused – but happy. To see her lord husband so spent after he had gained his pleasure from her had been a reward in its own right. Even the discomfort of her invaded flesh and bruising of her thighs, chafed against Sandor’s sharp hips, didn’t trouble her. It was worth it. I am his wife now for real.
“Just so you know, now I have taken your maidenhead,” Sandor had muttered to her afterwards, pretending to be serious.

And once again Sansa had been surprised by the sudden appearance of joy in a situation she had expected to be solemn and serious. Tension that had hung between them for such a long time; initially born from wariness and mistrust, later from uncertainty and improbability, and even that same day from the fear of unknown, had been lifted and discarded and the two of them were finally completely comfortable with each other.

Yes, Sansa was happy.

Just as she was about to drift into sleep Sandor roused, got up and started pulling his clothes on.

“What, where are you going?”

“There is something I have to take care of in the main camp. I’ll be right back. Just rest.”

Sansa wondered drowsily what took him back and forth but decided to worry about it another time. For now she was too spent to extend energy for that.

By the time Sandor returned and claimed his place next to her, she had drifted into a relaxed half-sleep. She felt his arms around her and how he pulled her closer, and everything was right in the world.
I planned to have only one more chapter of this, but alas once again words run away from me and it will turn to two… So here the first part of the long-awaited reunion – how will it go down?

_Sandor & Arya_

“Better now?”

“Hells yeah, I am starting to feel blood returning into my hands. Bloody scroundles deliberately crossed them tighter than septas legs. Aaaah!”

“Pump them a bit, it gets better sooner. I should know.”

“I never tied you this hard and don’t even pretend I did.”

“You did!”

“Nevermind that. So what do you think? This is going well so far, isn’t it? Just as I said, House Stark welcoming me with open arms.”

“I don’t understand why they can’t believe us already. We are here, you are here, we told them you did the right thing. What is so hard in it?”

“Highborns have a way of seeing things differently. Besides, should that little shit Joffrey come here
now and tell that he regrets all his appalling decisions and he is going to be a good king from now, would you believe him - just like that?"

“I would run my dagger through him!”

“That’s what your family wants to do with me right now. Can’t blame them, really.”

“Hmmmphhh! I hope they don’t continue this for long. I don’t want to go back on the road any more than I’m sure Sansa does, but if they don’t…”

“Hush, shut your mouth. If anyone is going back on the road that’ll be me. You will stay with your kin. That was the whole idea. Did I risk my neck and my livelihood just for the fun of having you two wandering aimlessly in Westeros? Hells no! It was for you and your sister I did it all.”

“You say ‘you and your sister’ – did you really do it for me too? Not only for Sansa?”

“Bloody hells, of course I did. That’s what men do for their comrades in arms. For their friends.”

“---“

“What, what’s with the face? Didn’t you like it? Fine, I’ll keep my hands off your ladyship from now on, then.”

“No… I did like it… Jon used to muss my hair like that…”

“Bloody hells, don’t start bawling on me now! They’ll think I hurt you and ran me through with a dagger for real! Quit it, you hear!”

*snif* “I am not crying!”

“Well, good.”

Sansa

Sansa was much more nervous than she had ever envisaged. The sight of the walls of Riverrun, the goal that had pushed them forward for so many weeks through trials and tribulations, should have made her heart jump of joy and brought on a feeling of immense satisfaction. Safe! Finally! And yet…

She glanced quickly at her companions. Sandor had dismounted and stared stony-faced the sandstone walls rising from the water-filled moat. She knew her husband well enough by now to know that he was assessing the situation in his military mind; where the watch near the gate was the strongest, where the weakest, what could be their back-up plan should things go awry. Arya’s expression was harder to read: she too was looking at their destination, but as if she couldn’t quite believe that it truly was there within their reach.

Sansa thought of the two people residing inside those walls; her lady mother and Robb. Her heart ached to see them again and finally be able to share her grief of her father openly with those who had loved him the most – but as they had many times concluded on the road, things were not that simple anymore. She was not the same obedient daughter, Arya was not the same carefree tomboy, Robb was not the son still guided by the firm hand of his lord father, and their mother was not the dutiful
spouse to the Warden of the North but a widow. And then there was Sandor.

“What now?” she sighed, pushing her conflicted feelings aside.

“We go to the guards and ask for an audience with one of the household knights or somebody else in the inner circle of your family. I doubt they’d grant every fucking wanderer an audience with the King in the North should they ask it,” was Sandor’s curt reply as he had already started to move towards the gatehouse, pulling Stranger from the reins behind him.

“Maybe we could ask Uncle Edmure or Great-uncle Brynden,” Arya suggested. “Sansa and I have never met them but at least they’d be family.”

And so they walked towards the gate; a tall man, a peasant girl and a young boy, just few more souls in the hustle and bustle of a busy keep going on about its day.

The plan might have worked had one of the guards not spent time in King’s Landing some years past and seen the Hound in King Robert’s entourage. His loud warning to his fellow guardsmen saw all of them revealing their weapons and stopping Sandor at sword’s point. Sansa and Arya were pushed aside and would likely have been forgotten when the men started to drag Sandor towards the keep, having sent one man ahead to get reinforcements, had Sandor not raged at them.

“You fucking sons of whores, are you so dim-witted that you think I came here with just these two to plan an attack on your precious boy-king? That Lannisters would have sent their best man here just to walk to the gate and ask to be let in? I am NOT here on the lion’s business – but I do have information your King will be glad to hear, believe that! And he will want to see my companions as well, be sure of it!”

Sansa shouted at the men to get their attention, Arya screamed at them – it was an overall mayhem, but to Sansa’s relief Sandor did not resist – too much. He would have had a good chance against the soldiers but he seemed to resign to his fate for the time being, only punching one of the too eager youngsters in the gut and cursing indiscriminately while being led away. He was relieved of his sword and the daggers on his belt, but the men paid no heed to Sansa and Arya, allowing them to trail the noisy procession into the keep. Their horses were led aside, Stranger rearing and trashing with his hooves until Sandor called him out, made some soothing noises that only the man and the beast understood, after which the horse allowed himself to be walked away. Sansa breathed a silent sigh of relief; if it would not have started well for Sandor to assault her kin’s soldiers, it would have been almost equally bad for his horse to do the same.

Sansa had no illusions about the impression their little group gave; all travel-stained and dishevelled, both out of necessity to blend in with the smallfolk, but later also simply because they had been on the road so long. After her initial shock she concluded that waiting for their interrogators would offer them a better chance than screaming at their captors. The soldiers looked too scared and nervous about guarding the dangerous Hound, of whom many had heard only horror stories the kind mothers told their children to make them behave, to be receptive to reasonable argument.

The room they were ushered into was a simple unadorned hall not far from the entrance to the keep. Sansa had hardly time to register the hangings on the wall depicting Tully sigil, the sturdy wooden furniture and the outlook from the windows when they heard brisk steps and loud talk from the outside. The door opened and a tall, lean man walked in. He was grey of hair but had bright blue eyes, and it was clear that he was someone with authority from the way he stopped, took in their small troupe and without further ado addressed Sandor.
“So it is the Hound indeed! Strangers balls, what brazen bravado, the Lannister dog walking into Riverrun just like that! How dare you!” His eyes narrowed and his tone became more threatening. “Why were you sent? They said you have some information the King might like to hear – but I very much doubt that. Well, what is it, Hound?”

*This must be Great-uncle Brynden! The man they call Blackfish,* flashed through Sansa’s mind. She was about to step towards him before being stopped by Sandor’s voice.

“Then you’ll be twice the fool, Blackfish. My news will interest the boy king greatly, I’d wager. And his mother.”

The man frowned, clearly not used to being addressed so forwardly.

“You better speak more courteously about the King in the North. And leave Lady Catelyn out of this, she doesn’t need to see your vile face or hear Lannister lies from your lips. Now, tell me why you are here. I am not inclined to wait for too long before throwing you into the dungeons, to rot next to the Kingslayer.”

“No!” somebody shouted. It took a moment for Sansa to realise that it had been her. Everyone in the room turned towards her; the guards, Blackfish, Sandor, even Arya.

“Great-uncle, it is me, Sansa. And this is Arya! We have escaped from King’s Landing and Sandor Clegane helped us to do it.”

It was a testament to the old soldier’s self-control that he only stared at her, then at Arya, then back at Sansa. Finally he glanced at Sandor, who stood tall with his hands tied behind his back between two of the strongest guards. None of the machinations of his mind showed in his demeanour when he barked fast commands to the men.

“Out. Everybody out. Is he well bound?” After affirming that indeed the Hound was well trussed and bound, the guards left the room, some peeking curiously behind their shoulders. Only after the last man had left the room and closed the heavy door, did Blackfish talk again.

“You, Lady Sansa Stark, sister of the King? My niece?” His eyes travelled from Sansa’s head to toe before turning to Arya. “And this…boy is Lady Arya, you say?”

“Yes, Ser Brynden, it is us. We apologise for our appearance, I realise it is not very ladylike, but we have been on the road for months and we had to disguise ourselves…”

“It is me, Arya. And you better get my mother and brother here at this minute, they’ll tell you soon enough,” Arya chimed, still clearly upset of the way they had been treated.

Sandor said nothing but swayed slightly on his feet, following the other man with sharp eyes.

“And the Hound? Were you sent here for the exchange? That was a stupid plan, even Lannisters should know that. Now that we have the girls – if they indeed are who they say they are – there is nothing that would compel us to give you the Kingslayer. Gods, I’d had thought Cersei is smarter than that.” The old man sneered.

“No exchange. The girls wanted to get back to their family and here we are.” Sandor’s laconic answer seemed to surprise Blackfish, who looked at him thoughtfully.

“Hmmm, there is more into this than what is obvious. You will tell us all we need to know. For now I will send for the King…”
“And mother!” Arya interjected.

“…and Lady Catelyn, and we’ll see what is what.” Blackfish left the room shouting commands to men behind the door to guard them well in his absence, and then he was gone.

Sansa understood that her great-uncle had to be careful and not believe any traveller with a wild tale, especially if associated with such well known villain as the Hound, but his doubts still stung a bit. Yet the promise of soon coming face to face with her mother…and Robb…

Nervously she tried to clean her face with her sleeve for the hundredth time and ran her fingers through her hair. Would they recognise her? She had been a lady before, now she looked like a mess. Arya didn’t seem concerned about such things, still huffing indignantly to Sandor.

Sansa walked to Sandor and took his hand, still bound, and squeezed it.

“I am so sorry, Sandor. This is not how I wished it to go, but we will sort this out shortly. Just please do not lose your temper.”

He looked at her and his face softened. “If not for the promises I made for you these louts would be picking their bloody guts from the floor, that’s true. But if I held on for this long I might just control myself for a little while longer.”

Sansa stood on her toes and planted a quick kiss on his bearded cheek. One of the guards snickered but Sandor’s glare silenced him soon enough.

After a while they heard again people approaching from the hallway.

“…is so urgent anyway? At least you could have told me before dragging me out of the council meeting. Mother, do you know about this?”

“No Robb, I am as much in the dark as you. But if my uncle tells it is important, I am sure it is.”

The two people entering the room looked like her mother and brother – but older, more haggard. Her mother’s shiny auburn hair looked limp and lifeless and lines on her face had deepened but none of that mattered when both Sansa and Arya rushed forward towards her.

“MOTHER!”

So many shouted exclamations, jumbled words, sobs and cries followed that it was impossible to separate who said what and to whom. Lady Catelyn held on to Sansa as if she would never want to let her go, pushing her away for a moment to have a look at her face only to sob and clutch her against her bosom once again. Arya shared their mother’s embrace, all the bravado of the young girl forced to grow up too fast forgotten, leaving behind only a child desperate for her mother’s embrace.

Eventually they were released only to jump next into Robb’s arms, their brother who had shuffled awkwardly around the reunion scene with questions pouring out of his mouth. He had changed too; his arms were strong and curled around Sansa’s as their father’s had once done – he was a man and not a boy they had left behind at Winterfell. A king.

Blackfish and Sandor watched them from further away, Catelyn finally beckoning to her uncle with tear-streaked face.

“Uncle, uncle, where did you found them? My darling daughters, sound and well, finally! Oh!”
To Blackfish’s credit he didn’t even try to embellish his role in that miraculous recovery.

“Found them in this room just like you, little Cat. The guards alerted me that the most unexpected person had been apprehended at the gates and I came to see him.” He pointed at Sandor and at once Catelyn and Robb looked in his direction, took a moment to recognise him and as one, shouted out:

“The Hound!”

“Clegane!”

Robb was faster. “What in the blazing lightning are you doing here? What do the Lannisters want? If you have ever so much as touched the hair on my sisters’ head I swear…”

Finally it was Sansa’s turn. She stepped in front of Sandor whose eyes were locked with Robb’s, the corner of his mouth twitching. Sansa was grateful of her earlier insistence about how important it was for him to maintain his calm, knowing only that held him back from barking instead of only snarling.

“Sandor saved us, we wouldn’t be here without him. We owe him our lives, and you owe that to him as well.”

Robb looked unsure and Lady Catelyn’s mouth dropped open.

“What do you mean, sweetling? He is at the Lannister service, has been his whole life their most loyal man. Everybody knows it,” she said soothingly.

“He was their man, but not anymore. He has left them and is his own man now – or a man of House Stark if you have him.” Sansa was nervous in front of the disbelief and hostility projected towards her lord husband, the man she loved more than anything.

“I have to be strong. He has protected me all this time, it is my turn to do it for him.

“Dear Sansa, even if it really is true, he may only say so. I don’t know what he wants to achieve, but men like him are not to be trusted.” It was Robb’s turn. He too looked at Sansa as if she had just lost her wits.

“He can be trusted! He is my friend, and when Cersei wanted us arrested and killed, he helped me to escape the Red Keep,” shouted Arya in turn. She had even less patience than Sansa and she had clearly had enough of doubting. “He would have helped Sansa too but she was already taken to the Queen and that horrible Joffrey! We had to wait for a long time before the opportunity came to release her. And then he helped us travel through the country and protected us and hunted for us and found a way for us to get here without being captured by the Lannister men.”

Lady Catelyn, Robb and Blackfish exchanged glances, not yet completely convinced but seemingly wavering from their earlier stance. Good. Sansa took a deep breath. She had contemplated whether it would be better to keep the truth about their union for a bit longer while first establishing Sandor’s good intentions, but had finally concluded that it would be better to come out with all of it at once. The thought of Sandor being thrown into dungeons or just into more modest guestrooms while she was sleeping in a comfortable chamber of her own was too much to bear.

“Mother, Robb, Great-uncle Brynden, there is something more.”

Again everyone turned to look at her. Sansa swallowed.

“He… he is also my lord husband. We are wed in the eyes of the Seven and in the eyes of man. I am his lady wife.”
If before her family had been stunned, the expression on their face now was beyond comical – and yet nobody laughed. Her mother let out a sound between a sob and a wail, then closed the distance between them in two strides, clutching Sansa’s hands in hers.

“My poor child! Did they do this for you, how could they! Oh my darling innocent child!”

“Is that true, Clegane? Was it some horrible jape at the expense of House Stark – is there no depths of depravation the Lannisters will not sink into?” Robb spoke through clenched teeth, every word cold and full of contempt.

“No! I mean, yes, it is true that we are married, but it was not the Lannister’s doing. This is for real, I chose him.” Sansa squeezed her mother’s hands and peered into her eyes. It was important that she would make her understand. “I love him!”

Throughout this whole exchange Sandor hadn’t said anything, but Sansa sensed how his whole body was tight as a bow string. Now he raised his voice.

“Is this a way you greet your new goodson, Lady Catelyn? And your goodbrother, Robb Stark? It is true. I forced her not. You may choose not to believe me, that is not hair off my arse, but you’d do well to listen to your own flesh and blood.”

Robb extended to his full height and it was only now that Sansa saw what else had changed: he was a commander and a king in truth. He hissed at Sandor: “It is King Robb to you, Clegane! And what do I believe or not is my own concern. I will get into the bottom of this, you can be sure of it.”

He was touched by the arm by his mother who murmured in soft voice, “Robb, I am sure the girls are tired and weary. Maybe we should all take a break and allow them a moment of rest. Prepare and show their rooms for them, maybe a bath, clean clothes, food – we can return to this later.”

Only then Sansa realised how anxious she had been – the tension she had been holding left her and she felt thoroughly inflated. Suddenly the thought of a warm bath, clean clothes and food seemed the only thing worthwhile thinking. Just one more push…

“I’d love to have a bath! And wear clean clothes for a change, and have some food. We have not exactly starved but I can’t remember the last time I had warm bread or butter or roasted vegetables!” Her mother smiled at her, somewhat shaky smile but so full of love it radiated and warmed Sansa even in that loaded moment. She extended her arms to her and Arya, but Sansa pulled away.

“As for my room – it will be my and my lord husband’s room. Sandor will stay with me.”

Visibly displeased her mother frowned and was about to say something before Sansa cut her off.

“If Sandor will not share my room, we will take it as a sign that neither of us is welcomed here. In that case we will take the road again. We have done that for weeks and we can do it again until we find a more welcoming place.” Of course the thought of leaving now was almost impossible – but so was the thought of leaving Sandor. If Sansa had learned anything during her time in the South it had been that confident people often got what they wanted – so she hid her uncertainty and raised her head high, staring straight at her mother, then at Robb.

“And I want his hands to be unbound. He will not do anything to anyone, you have my word. And his.” She glanced at Sandor who nodded his confirmation.

“I can do it.” Arya had already moved behind Sandor and started to work out the knots. Robb and Lady Catelyn looked on disapprovingly but didn’t stop her.
“Sweetling, do come here and let’s discuss about the arrangements,” Lady Catelyn waved Sansa to approach and out of habit Sansa crossed the room to her. They were out of the earshot of Sandor and Arya and once next to her, Lady Catelyn spoke in low voice, only Sansa, Robb and Blackfish hearing her.

“Darling Sansa, I don’t understand any of this, but you clearly want to portray a role of a loyal wife in his hearing. Yet you don’t have to do it – we can protect you. If we assign you separate rooms it is not your doing and he knows you did your best.”

Sansa started to protest but was interrupted by Robb. “He may have some hold over you but do not worry, we can and we will severe it.” Blackfish nodded sympathetically along.

It irked Sansa how little her family thought of her own faculties but she reminded herself of the same advice she had given to Sandor. *Calm yourself.*

“Mother, Robb, great-uncle, he doesn’t have any other hold over me but my love for him, and his for me. I am serious and speak the truth of it – *I want* to be with him of my own free will. So please assign us one room as you would do any other married couple, that is all I ask.”

From the doubting look on her mother’s face Sansa knew she was still not convinced, but she sighed and gave in, turning around and leaving the room in search of servants to give the necessary commands.

Robb and Blackfish stayed behind but had nothing further to say. Following their gaze Sansa turned to see Arya having already freed Sandor’s hands, which he was now flexing in front of him. The two of them were deep in conversation and even to an ignorant observer it was clear that it was jovial and friendly.

*It is not only one sister and the Hound you have to worry about,* flashed mischievously through Sansa’s mind when she watched Robb’s stricken face.

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The bath felt every bit as luxurious as she had imagined and Sansa lingered in it for a long, long time. The chamber appointed to her and Sandor was a modest one, but after time spent in the wilderness it felt more sumptuous that any room in the Red Keep had ever been. A soft bed, a real window, a fireplace where the maids scurrying frantically around carrying linen and bedding and setting the room in order, had lighted a roaring fire. And the big copper bath filled with warm water scented with herbs…

Sansa sighed, knowing that it was time for her to get up, but still reluctant to do so.

“If you want to me to continue to stink in the company, by all means don’t get up,” grumbled Sandor behind her. “Not that it likely matters whether I bathe or not – in your family’s eyes I will stink just the same.”

“It is not true! They are just surprised – you have to admit it is a lot to take in. They will see the truth of things, we just have to be patient and explain it to them so that they understand.”

“Hmmmph!”

Hearing Sandor drop his boots on the floor with a heavy thump Sansa unenthusiastically stirred and started to climb up. However, the tub had high-raised edges and its bottom was slippery. “Please help me out, Sandor,” she pleaded lifting her hand. He took it and leaning on him Sansa stood up. Rather than helping her out though, her husband’s eyes roved over her in a way that made Sansa blush.
“You are a sight for sore eyes, girl. Might as well, to be worth all this trouble.”

Was it his eyes that burned in that familiar way that Sansa only recently had started to recognise for what it really was; desire, lust and longing – or the fact that this was the first time he had held her thus, standing completely naked in front of him? Sansa’s blush deepened. Since their wedding night they had lain together every single night – more than once on some nights, after Sansa had recovered from her initial soreness.

Every evening Sandor had built her a shelter – nothing as laborious as the first one, but each offering protection from the elements and some privacy. Even to her own surprise Sansa had been much less sympathetic to Arya’s plight than her sister had expected after pouring out her frustration of half the night spent rolled in a blanket. *Serves you right for sneaking on us*, Sansa had replied and extracted a promise that no such drastic measures were needed again.

The shelters, and the continuing caution they took on the last leg of their journey saw it taking over five days to reach their destination – but Sansa didn’t mind it the least as long she shared those nights with Sandor.

And what nights they were… It didn’t take long for her to realise that men were not the only ones with ‘needs’. On their third night, when Sandor had by his admission ‘let go off enough steam’ to pay more attention to her reactions, Sansa had experienced something totally unexpected; an explosion inside her own flesh, a sensation of an unbearable tension and bliss concentrated on her womanhood. From there it was coaxed out by Sandor’s fingers, twirling and rubbing her flesh following her wordless instructions, heeding her whines, deep intakes of breaths and squeezes of her hand on his arm. The way her release had left her completely sated and satisfied had been yet new lesson for her, and she was still astounded that her body was capable of such a thing without her ever having been aware of it.

Once again she had been reminded that it was all new to Sandor as well, after seeing his eyes narrow and regard her suspiciously. That he had been the source of such pleasure to her had defied his belief and Sansa wasn’t sure if she was relieved or saddened by the fact that the magnificent man by her side thought so poorly of his skills as a lover as to doubt her sincerity even for the briefest moment.

Yes, she had loved those nights and learned to love her husband even more. Yet they had only regarded each other naked in the confinements of a low shelter, tangled in blankets and partially covered.

Sansa’s first reaction was to shy away but soon the unmistakable feeling of wanting him compelled her to act differently. Still holding Sandor’s hand and standing in the bath she squared her shoulders and straightened herself to stand as tall as she could. Meeting his eyes she took his hand and led it to rest on her left breast.

Not letting go his gaze she murmured under her breath, “Show me yourself, husband, and bathe quickly. I have a need of you.”

Kneading the swell of her breast Sandor’s breath quickened and he licked his lips. He threw a look at the big bed, laden with clean clothes the maids had carried in. “Here? Are you sure, little bird? What if we are summoned?”

Sansa smiled. She felt wicked but also very grown up. *I am not a little girl any more. I am a woman wedded and bedded, I am a wife of the most magnificent warrior in Westeros.*

“Here. As soon as you are clean enough not to soil the bedding my family kindly provides for us.” Pushing Sandor aside she stepped out of the bath, deliberately running her hand along Sandor’s side
and down his thigh.

“Hells, they will be soiled soon enough,” he grunted and started to tear off his clothes on the spot.
Did you truly expect Robb and Catelyn to welcome the Hound with open arms into their midst? Well, me neither. First there are going to be a few questions that need to be answered. So many, as a matter of fact, that once again this extends to yet another chapter…

_Sandor & Arya_

“So you too were asked to come here?”

“Aye, to answer a barrage of questions. I guess I should be bloody thankful they didn’t involve pinchers or red-hot irons. Although if it was only up to that kingly brother of yours, I might not have been so lucky.”

“Robb would never do that! Not even to his worst enemy.”

“I _am_ his worst enemy – or at least one of them. Killed his father, if you don’t happen to remember. And yours.

“You didn’t kill him! It was Joffrey. I know that and they know that.”

“Hmmpph.”

“Were they angry?”
“I have to hand it to them; they did behave much better than that cunt Cersei or that little shit Joffrey would have, had Robb wandered into their clutches. I expected worse.”

“I have told you that we Starks are not like Lannisters. Do you believe me now?”

“What I believe or not doesn’t matter. It is what they believe that does.”

“I am going to tell them exactly what happened. And they’ll believe me. And Sansa, they must ask her as well.”

“She was there – just wasn’t allowed to talk. They’ll take their turn with her as well for sure.”

“And then she too will let them know what really happened and what kind of a man you are. And they will believe her – mother always did, over what I told.”

“Aye, she will tell the truth as she sees it – now. Back with her family things may start to look different than on the road.”

“What do you mean? That she would go back on her vows? She will never do that. She loves you, you big oaf.”

“-----”

“Yes she does. I know it. She told me so. And even a blind septon would see it – the way how she looks at you.”

Sansa

Making love in a real bed was yet another revelation to Sansa. Even despite the concerns at the back of her mind about possible interruptions, the ability to relax and luxuriate in the space and warmth of a real room was something new and exciting, as was the possibility to examine her husband in the bright daylight filtering through the window.

She had admired Sandor while he had taken his rather hasty bath; the solidity of his body, the span of his broad chest and long legs, his prominent muscles and raw allure that was only heightened by the way he had stared back at her with open desire gleaming in his eyes. When he stood up and without even bothering to dry himself with the towel walked to her, dripping water, Sansa shivered. It was then that she realised that it was not only her husband she desired, but also an affirmation that this was real; that she was not anymore a timid daughter who could be ordered around, but a grown woman who had made her choices and was prepared to stand up for them.

There was also a part of her which selfishly wanted to experience once again the new world she had found in his arms, a hunger she had not even realised she possessed before he had awakened it. The man approaching her, signs of his intentions clearly visible in the proud stance of his manhood, was what she needed to satisfy that craving.

So she devoured him, her initial shyness disappearing further and further every time they lay together. Drunk from the sense of strength and pride of having stood up for her kin in his defence she pushed Sandor down and the powerful man acquiesced without complaint. Sansa climbed on top of him, and guided by his strong hands on her hips she took charge of their coupling, finding this new way thrilling and gratifying and providing yet a new level of satisfaction – which it did by all signs
also to Sandor. Sansa admired the sight of him - his eyes closed, his jaw clenched and the cords in his neck straining under the tension that occupied him, and she became giddy of the feeling of power it accorded.

Afterwards they embraced each other and Sandor inhaled the scent of her hair, his breath tickling Sansa’s temples. It was a short moment of serenity in the squall they found themselves in and she enjoyed it, knowing that their peace would be shattered soon enough. *Until they understand. Until they see him as I do. Then it will be all over and good.*

A loud knock on the door broke the moment sooner than expected.

“Sansa, it is your Great-uncle Brynden here. Can I come in?”

“Uhh…yes, of course… just a moment.” Sansa jumped to her feet. They had locked the door so she knew he couldn’t enter without her say-so, but gods, she was naked as on her nameday and so was Sandor! Frantically she rummaged through the pile of clothing to seek for something to wear, settling on a dark-blue dressing gown of old-fashioned cut but with long sleeves and modest collar.

“Sandor, you too!” she hissed through her teeth, throwing a large tunic and a pair of breeches on the bed. Her husband only grinned, but after Sansa’s renewed urging got up and started to dress.

“I am coming right over, just a small moment!” Sansa shouted while tying the cord of the gown on her waist. A quick look over the room told her that there was no way she would be able to hide what had just transpired, so she sighed resignedly and decided that it was just part and parcel of being married, after all, and she had no real reason to hide it.

Blackfish turned to face her when she finally opened the door, took in her dishevelled appearance, threw a glance behind her shoulder to the room, to the messy bed, to Sandor still struggling to fit a too small tunic over his head. Whatever he thought of the scene he kept to himself, entering with no further greetings.

Once inside the room he addressed Sandor.

“I need to ask you to come with me, Hound. The King and his lady mother wish to speak with you.”

“Sandor. His name is Sandor Clegane,” Sansa spoke the words in a low voice but with full of meaning.

“Clegane.” Blackfish corrected. “Shall you come with me?”

“Aye, I come with you as soon as I get this bloody tunic on. Are all the men in Riverrun dwarfs? Much too tight across the shoulders, this thing.”

“I am sorry we were not prepared with a suitable attire. Had you alerted us about your arrival, we could have ordered a set of clothing from the seamstresses.” There was an unmistakably sarcastic tone in Blackfish’s voice.

Sandor glanced up surprised, then something close to a smile crossed his face. The last few tugs and the clothing settled as well as it could, indeed tight and bursting from its seams across his shoulders and forearms. The breeches were somewhat better fit, although much too short.

“I am coming with you,” Sansa declared. “Just give me a moment to change.”

“No need to trouble yourself, child. It is only Clegane we want to talk to. You can stay here and rest…” Blackfish’s gaze swept across the bed again “…after your bath.”
“I am not a child and I will come. If there is anything you need to ask him, I will be there as well. Just try and stop me. Sandor, please, wait for just a moment.” Sansa disappeared behind a wooden screen between a small recess and the chamber and changed quickly into a dress – it was probably her mother’s from the Northern style of it and it fit well, being only slightly loose from the body. She concluded that she couldn’t do much about her hair but decided that after a bath it could be expected to be somewhat tangled.

“I am ready,” she emerged into the room. *For whatever it is that waits us.*

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In any other circumstances Sansa would have paid more attention to her surroundings while being led through the keep to study the place where her mother had grown up, but for now her mind was too occupied to pay attention to such things. After many turns Blackfish finally led them to a comfortable room with a large table and six chairs, a writing desk, shelves stacked with papers and leather-bound books - possibly Hoster Tully’s solar, now serving King in the North. Behind the table sat Robb, Lady Catelyn and young Edmure Tully, whom Sansa recognised both from his appearance so similar to her mother’s as well as from the Tully sigil dominantly displayed in his attire. All three of them seemed surprised to see Sansa.

“Sansa dear, what are you doing here? We asked to speak specifically alone with the H…Sandor Clegane,” said Lady Catelyn. She seemed to have composed herself during the break and was a noble lady and the mother of the king once again, not a woman reduced to tears at the sight of her long lost children.

“He is my husband and if he is interrogated, I want to be there. I am not anymore a child you can order about.”

“He is not as much interrogated as simply asked a few questions. You have to admit it is a wild tale you are telling, and we want to hear more, from his own lips.” Robb looked at her warily. Yet he must have concluded from Sansa’s stubborn expression that it would be useless to try to send her away, as after a while he sighed. “Very well then. You can stay – but please sit at the end of the table and promise you will not interfere. We will talk later, but for now I don’t want to hear from you. If you indeed are not a child as you suggest, can you promise to do that? If you break these conditions I have no choice but to have you forcibly removed. Understand?”

It was a king’s voice he spoke with and Sansa muttered her acquiescence to the terms, settling into a chair at the other end of the table. Sandor had sunk directly in front of Robb, who was flanked by his mother, his uncle and great-uncle. The two men stared at each other but this time their expressions were not threatening but rather like those of two opponents taking a measure of each other before the first blow is struck in the battlefield.

“So, can you tell us with your own words how you ended up here with my sisters, Clegane? Take all the time you need and leave nothing out. I promise I will not challenge your words without first hearing you out – but you have to tell us your side of the story.”

Sandor looked at Sansa, who tried to smile at him encouragingly. She knew how much Sandor hated to explain himself, but in their earlier discussions she had emphasised to him how it was the only way to make her kin understand. She prayed he would be patient and obliging.

For the most part he was. In curt but clear sentences he summarised the events that led to him smuggling Arya away from the Red Keep, much of it being news to the others. He told about Cersei’s orders for the arrest of the whole House Stark household and what had transpired between that and the execution of Lord Eddard. Lady Catelyn turned away when her husband’s fate was
touched upon but Robb stared ahead with no sign of emotion.

“And you placed her in the whorehouse?” Edmure repeated at one point.

“Aye, a whorehouse – but not just any dump but a high class establishment, the only one of those in the Street of Silk not run by Littlefinger. Too bad if it busts your balls, but I didn’t happen to know any Silent Sisters. The place was well guarded, she stayed at the back of the house and the cook was a decent person who treated her well. Ask herself if you don’t take my word for it.”

Hearing about the way how Joffrey had treated Sansa shocked all of them. When Sandor told how every victory by Robb’s forces meant punishment for Sansa it was Robb’s turn to turn away, looking like he was going to be sick. Yet he stayed true to his word and didn’t interrupt Sandor.

Sandor also covered the man of the Night’s Watch and his anticipated role, then the last straw that saw him taking things into his own hands. His description of their escape was almost mechanistic with the way he described their route, the precautions he had taken, how they had evaded the searching parties and taken care of themselves during their long journey.

He didn’t tell about the meeting with the septon but that was sure to come out soon anyway, Sansa guessed. Sandor’s story finished at the gates of Riverrun, after which he shrugged his shoulders.

“And here we are now.”

The others asked a few clarifying question, each in turn. Were any of the Stark men still kept in the Red Keep? Did he act on his own or did he have accomplishes? Had the Lannisters had any notion of the role he had played in Arya’s disappearance? It was Robb who voiced probably the one question in all their minds.

“Why, Clegane? Why did you do this? You are – have been – a loyal Lannister man all your life, sworn shield to the Queen and the King. The North is nothing to you. So can you help me to understand why did you do it?”

Sansa held her breath. She had wondered the same question herself many times and had never gotten a wholly satisfactory answer. Since learning about his feelings towards her she had concluded them to be a possible factor – but why would he have acted thus when the possibility of the two of them actually ending up together must have been near non-existent in his mind before?

Sandor didn’t like the question, that much was clear from the way he shuffled in his seat and frowned. He started answering once, then interrupted as if to gather his thoughts, then started again.

“My reasons are my own, I once said to Lady Sansa. They still are, but I guess some of them have already been revealed. It is just… I spit on knights and buggering codes of chivalry, and don’t you even think about casting me into that role. Knights are for killing and that’s that. And yet there has to be some sense in it all.” He challenged Robb with his gaze daring him to contradict him, but hearing nothing he continued.

“Old King Robert and Lord Eddard overthrowing that bloody madman on the throne, fine by me. Robert putting down the Greyjoy rebellion, good riddance of the fucking squids. Lord Eddard to be executed in cold blood just because he dared to snoop around the Lannister twins and their depravity – that didn’t sit well with me. Neither did Joffrey pouring shit on a helpless girl, a girl he was supposed to wed. Joffrey is a vile little cunt and Cersei is another and I had had enough of them both.”

And finally, of course it was Lady Catelyn who asked the biggest question of them all.
“And how did this marriage Sansa talked about come to take place, and how do we know it is true? Was it one of your reasons?”

Sandor’s eyes met Sansa’s and she smiled. Almost imperceptibly a lopsided smile crossed his lips as well but Catelyn caught it just the same and turned to look at Sansa. She lowered her eyes but not before seeing puzzled expression on her mother’s face.

“It is true. We met Septon Merigold from Pinkmaiden on the road some five days hence and he wed us in the Faith of the Seven, witnessed by his manservant Sylvan and Lady Arya. We have a parchment bearing signatures declaring us husband and wife beyond all doubt. It is in my saddle pack, unless your men pilfered it while apprehending me and taking our horses.”

“Only five days?” Robb queried, visibly relieved. “And only two witnesses?”

Sansa had to bite her tongue to refrain from speaking.

“Aye, only five days. And nights.” The meaning of Sandor’s words was unmistakable and Sansa blushed.

“You have forced yourself on my little girl, you mean?!” Lady Catelyn’s voice trembled.

“The only one planning to force himself on your girl was that twat you and Lord Eddard willingly betrothed your precious daughter,” Sandor snorted. “Had I not whisked her away after Joffrey got her stripped in front of the while court, I’d wager her virtue wouldn’t have stayed intact for much longer. Our king has started to grow up and I could see the look on his face when he glared at her teats. And it is just a small move from torturing defenceless animals to torturing unprotected maidens.”

Sansa clutched her hands together so hard she felt her fingernails digging into her flesh. Sandor had never mentioned any of that to her, only talked about threat of maiming and public humiliation. The thought of Joffrey taking by force what she had willingly given to Sandor made her nauseated.

She didn’t seem to be the only one feeling that way judged by dismayed and somewhat ashamed countenance of her mother.

“That…was our mistake. We didn’t know Joffrey and King Robert was Ned’s oldest and dearest friend,” Lady Catelyn whispered.

“And that fat bastard was such an exemplary role model for the boy?”

Sansa knew Sandor had always resented her parents’ choices but she hoped his derision wouldn’t antagonise her mother too much.

“Was the marriage the price she had to pay for your help?” Robb was clearly ready to move on from dangerous waters.

“Bloody hells, what do you take me for?! I asked her nothing in return. I did have in mind though to ask you for a fair reward so I could haul my ass across the Narrow Sea. There is nothing for me in Westeros after I pissed off the lions.” Sandor glanced at Sansa and his featured softened. “There wasn’t.”

“So why to marry her?”

“If you are as stupid as you sound the North has no chance under your kingship,” Sandor snarled. Sansa closed her eyes. Why does he have to be so mocking? She realised Sandor’s reluctance to talk
about his feelings – he hadn’t told even her in so many words what he felt. But to say that to the man in whose hands their future happiness resigned…

Robb didn’t look much pleased and started to respond but Lady Catelyn raised her hand shutting down his son.

“You did it because you love her,” she breathed. It was not as much as a question but a statement.

Robb stared at her mother but Blackfish and Edmure only had eyes for Sandor. So did Sansa, holding her breath while waiting what Sandor would say next.

He didn’t. He only stared defiantly at Lady Catelyn, then at the others. He studiously avoided Sansa though, and she was not the only one who noticed it. Lady Catelyn’s eyes flicked between Sandor and her daughter but Sansa registered it only fleetingly, so absorbed she was at studying her husband; the man she had found insufferable at first sight, baffling and intriguing later – and now the only man she could ever imagine spending her life with.

The silence stretched on and on, nobody breaking it. Finally Lady Catelyn spoke.

“I believe we have heard all we needed to hear, for now. I thank you for your honesty.”

Taking it as a cue that he was let off the hook Sandor got up and glancing at Sansa walked to the door, muttering something she couldn’t quite hear. As the door opened Sansa saw Arya behind it, accompanied by one of the Tully household knights. She remembered a muted discussion between Blackfish and one of the servants some moments ago; he must have asked somebody to fetch Arya.

“You have heard him. Do you believe us now?” Sansa stood up, thinking it would be acceptable for her to talk now that the interview with Sandor was over.

“Yes, we heard him. And I believe he did the things he said he did. I am still not sure why – and that is what is really important,” Lady Catelyn said.

“Sansa, you can’t blame us for wanting to be sure that we are not letting a traitor amongst us. Who is to say that he didn’t do all those things because he was advised so by the Lannisters? He could have befriended you and offered to take you away just as a means to infiltrate our house. Your escape does sound a little bit too easy to me – the two of you just walking out of the Red Keep?”

Robb’s expression was obstinate and for a briefest moment Sansa wondered if Sandor’s comment about his stupidity was that far off. She felt guilty soon enough though. There was a huge burden on Robb’s young shoulders and it behove him well to be suspicious and not too trusting. He only had to be made to see the truth.

“Are you going to talk to Arya as well? She can tell you more.”

“Yes, we asked her to come. And after we have spoken to her, we will want to hear your side of the story."

The door opened and Arya burst in.

“What is it now, why was I asked to come here?”

“Dear Arya, thank you for coming. We are just trying to put the pieces together of all that has transpired recently and would like to ask you a few questions,” Lady Catelyn answered her question soothingly.
Arya studied everyone around the table with narrowed eyes but sat down in the chair Sandor had just vacated. Sansa also took a seat, deciding that she needed to hear this discussion as well.
Almost at the end… still to follow is a brief epilogue (I love those things and can’t help myself…)!  

_Sandro & Arya_

“Uh, it is you.”

“Who did you expect?”

“No one. Anyone. The little bird, or a guard to drag me to the dungeons.”

“They won’t be doing _that!_ You saved us.”

“Hmmmpph.”

“Did they ask you too to tell them everything from the start?”

“They did. I told.”

“You didn’t tell them about Mycah – _I_ had to tell them that and they were like they hadn’t hear anything about it before.”
“Your butcher’s boy wasn’t part of the tale how we three ended up here.”

“But he was! It shows that you are not the monster they thought you are.”

“I am a monster and they are quite right to think so. I never pretend to be anything I am not and neither should you.”

“No you are not. You are a good man.”

“Har! Many names have been thrown at me, some more colourful than others and most of them not fit for your ears, but this takes the top. 'Good man', pffft!”

“You are! Take Mycah; mother told that he did come to Winterfell, got a place in the kitchens and is now an assistant to the meat cook. Had you not been a good man he would be dead, his bones thrown into a ditch.”

“Good on the boy, but it was not my doing.”

“But it was! And how about me; if you hadn’t smuggled me away I would have been a Lannister prisoner like Sansa. They would have forced me to look at my father’s head, and I am not sure you would have been able to prevent me for toppling Joffrey. And then I would be dead too. Or at least beaten, just like Sansa.”

“Fuck that, it was only…”

“Or Sansa! I heard what you told about Joffrey, I listened behind the door. Had you not saved her, that horrible Joffrey would have tormented her even more, would have even taken her to his bed. Imagine Sansa there – you know better than I do what it could have been. But it didn’t happen because you took her away and saved her. I know you don’t think it was being good but it was!”

“Gods girl, stop that chittering already! What the fuck is being good anyway?”

“Being good is not how you look like or what you say, but what you do.”

“If I smack you in the head now does that count being good?”

“You won’t. You are a good man, I told you.”

“Shut up about it already.”

_Sansa_

If Sandor had eyed his interrogators like opponents in a battle, Arya’s gaze was that of a defender; stubborn and obstinate and not ready to give in.

She explained their adventures along the same lines as Sandor had, but telling more about her stay in the brothel. From the way she described the events it sounded like a relaxing stay in a country house; days full of exciting activities such as shopping excursions, playing with animals such as pigs, chicken and lapdogs belonging to the house’s inhabitants, culminating in sumptuous meals whose preparation she had been privileged to observe at close quarters. Sansa had to hide her smile and at times Robb’s mouth tugged in the corners, they both seeing how taken Arya would have been with freedom such situation afforded her.
“Did you know what that place was?” Robb asked.

Arya frowned. “Of course I knew. Sandor wouldn’t have lied to me, he is always honest.”

“And did you discourse much with the…ladies there?” Catelyn didn’t seem to fully buy in Arya’s tale of a carefree and innocent existence.

“Not much. They stayed at the front of the house, I at the back. But I did talk to some of them and they were always very friendly and nice to me.”

“Did they walk around scantily clad all the time?” That was Edmure and the rest of the party turned their heads in his direction and Blackfish hissed at him to stay quiet if he had no real questions to ask. Sansa smiled internally although outwardly she stayed serious – she had wondered the same and had asked Arya about it.

“No, I never saw anyone in anything but proper dresses.”

Sansa knew that not to be exactly true, but she didn’t begrudge little white lies if they made Sandor look less likely to have damaged Arya’s innocence. Most of all she was grateful that Arya had not said anything about Aline. Gods! If their mother heard about Sandor’s visit to a brothel to be serviced by a girl that looked like her…. She hadn’t asked Sandor himself about the incident and had decided not to. It was in the past, before he had been hers. Maybe someday they might share with each other the paths that had taken them together – but for now it didn’t matter.

The main thing Arya’s story conveyed was that she had not been mistreated or suffered, and all her interrogators seemed to be happy to leave it at that.

“And why do you think Sandor Clegane decided to help you?”

Arya grimaced. “I know you all think he is just a brute, but he is much more than that! He was my friend already in Winterfell, and once you get to know him you too will realise that he is not as bad as people make him to be.”

“That may be so, but you didn’t answer my question.” Robb was clearly not in a mood to discuss about the character of Sandor Clegane just yet.

“I told you! He was my friend. Would you not help your friend if they were going to be arrested by bad people?” Arya’s eyes flashed but she controlled herself admirably, Sansa thought. “And then of course there was Sansa. He liked her, I knew that. He never said as much, of course, but I knew.”

“Did he ever say anything about wanting to marry her?” Lade Catelyn queried.

“Nah. He would have never done anything about it, I suspect, had I not told him that Sansa liked him too.” Arya shrugged her shoulders.

“You? You said that Sansa liked him? Was that even true?” Lady Catelyn’s eyes flicked to Sansa.

“Of course it was! I am not a liar! She liked him just fine. I suspected it ever since he saved Mycah, but after I tested her, I knew for sure.”

“Mycah? Wasn’t that the boy he killed on the way to King’s Landing? Ned wrote about it, he was most devastated by the cruel justice meted by the king.”

“But Sandor didn’t kill him! He gave him new clothes and some coin and sent him to Winterfell – didn’t he come there?” Suddenly Arya was all concerned. Lady Catelyn looked thoughtful and
stayed silent for a while, before an expression of comprehension crossed her face.

“Myykkel! A young boy came to Winterfell not many weeks after you left, asking for a place to stay and work. He claimed to have lost all his family and being an orphan, and that he knew his meat and butchering. He was sent to the kitchens to help the cook and he did well there, soon advancing to the first assistant to the cook in charge of meat. He is there still.”

There was no mistaking the gleeful grin on Arya’s face. “I told you so! Sandor didn’t want to kill him and considered that his duty as Joffrey’s shield was done when he sent Mycah away. As if Mycah would have ever done anything to Joffrey – he never did in the first place. It was all Joffrey’s fault.”

All four behind the table looked thoughtful at those words, and it took a while before Blackfish got back to Arya’s other words.

“You said you tested her – what did you mean?”

Arya glanced at Sansa somewhat abashed. “I told Sandor that if Sansa chose to ride with him rather than with me, even though it was quite safe, it would mean that she liked him. And when we set our first camp I put our bedrolls next to each other and his things on the one furthest out, and told him that if Sansa chose to sleep next to him, it too meant that she liked him.”

Sansa gasped. She had been played and she hadn’t even realised it! Some of the looks and smirks which at the time had confused her started to make sense now. Oh gods, was I that transparent?!

“And then what?” Lady Catelyn pressed on.

“Well, they must have talked a lot on the journey, riding together and all, and in the evenings they stayed back at the campfires and talked more. And then they fell in love for real and wanted to stay together and really, what else is there to do but to get married?”

“This marriage… do you think Sansa truly wanted it, or was she pressured into it?” Robb seemed to choose his words carefully, refusing to look in Sansa’s direction.

Arya squirmed on her seat. “Well, I might have suggested it first. Sandor thought I was being stupid and Sansa talked about duty and obligation to a family, but then they both saw that it was the only way. In the end it was actually Sansa who practically asked him to marry her. I was not supposed to hear that but I did.”

Lady Catelyn’s loud intake of breath resonated across the room. She raised her hand to clutch her collar and looked positively ill. Robb and Blackfish frowned and Edmure stared wide-eyed at the little girl in front of him, then at Catelyn, and a small smile spread across his boyish face. Fleetingly Sansan wondered if Edmure recognised something of his older sister in Arya; had her own lady mother been as wilful in her youth?

“You suggested the marriage?” Lady Catelyn’s voice trembled.

“I did. Surely it was better than the alternative? Those two are meant to be together. You may not see it now but they are.” Arya crossed defiantly her arms in front of her and leaned back on her chair.

After that followed only a few very carefully constructed questions about the rest of their travel, clearly designed to find out more about their sleeping arrangements. Again to Sansa’s relief Arya didn’t mention anything about their wedding night or the way how Sandor had bundled and tied her up. She decided she needed to give her heartfelt thanks to her little sister afterwards for her discretion – although when Arya went on to describe how Sansa and Sandor had retired early every evening to
their private shelter only to emerge from it late in the morning, she found herself wishing that Arya wouldn’t be quite as eager to prove the validity of their marriage.

Eventually the others had heard enough, thanked Arya for her contribution and she was escorted out of the room.

Then all eyes turned to Sansa and she knew it was time for her to put her side of things forward. She moved to the hot seat wondering if she would be able to convey the stressful situations and the powerful emotions that had dictated her course of action. She sighed deeply. *I simply have to.*

 pendurata

“Sansa dear, we have now heard from Clegane and Arya and have a reasonably good picture of the events as they have transpired. Is there anything else you might want to add?” The love in her mother’s eyes shone through as she regarded her daughter and Sansa wanted nothing more than to make her understand, make *all* of them understand.

“What they say is what happened. What Sandor told about the events in the court were true as well. You may suspect that he exaggerated what Joffrey did to me, but I assure you it was not the case.” Tears came unbidden to Sansa’s eyes. “Joffrey… he took me to the battlements to show me father’s head on the spike, and that of Septa Mordane. And he was *smirking!* I don’t know what came to me then, but I wanted to kill him…”

Sansa had to swipe her eyes with her sleeve, but she forced herself to not give in to the horror of those terrible moments. “I would have. I would have pushed him over the parapet had Sandor not come to stop me. And he did it in a way that didn’t reveal my intentions; he only bent down to swipe blood from my lip, ever so gently. Joffrey never knew – but I know that Sandor had seen what I intended to do. He saved my life that day as surely as he did that of Joffrey’s.”

The shock her mother displayed didn’t escape Sansa but she had no words to console her about the horror of her firstborn daughter having to witness her lord husband’s lifeless head being displayed for his enemies.

“Blood? What blood?”

“That was the first time Joffrey asked his Kingsguard to hit me. A fisted gauntlet on the face tends to cause bleeding.” Seeing her mother’s eyes widen in horror Sansa hastily added, “Sandor never hit me, Joffrey never asked him to. He might have known he would refuse. And once he interrupted Joffrey, the time that saw us leaving.”

The silence that followed was deafening. After a while Sansa continued, wanting not only to be answering questions but putting forward her own case as well – or that of Sandor’s, as it may be.

“You think you may know something of Sandor Clegane, the Hound as he is called. That he is a remorseless killer, a man who mocks gods and man alike.” She took a deep breath and prayed that Sandor would forgive her what she was about to do. “And yet you know nothing of the man himself.”

“So tell us about him. Make us understand what you and Arya see in him that has escaped our notice.” Robb’s voice was almost tender.

“Most people don’t know what caused the terrible burns in his face. They think it was a battle or some other atrocity and probably blame him for it. But it was his own brother who did it! He was just a young boy, six or seven, and he played with Gregor’s toy and for that crime Gregor pressed his
face into hot coals and changed his life forever."

All four leaned ever so subtly forward, rapt by the tale Sansa was telling.

“His father never punished Gregor for what he did – he was probably afraid to. And some years later Sandor’s father and brother went hunting and his father never came back. And then there was what happened to his mother and sister…” Sansa’s voice broke. Sandor had yet to share the story of them with Sansa but she knew there was something sinister behind it, something to do with Gregor.

“Sandor joined the Lannisters as that was the only place where he felt safe and where he was welcomed. Not for his own sake, mind you, but for what he could do to them. Lord Tywin took him in and when he was twelve, he was sent to the sacking of King’s Landing and he killed his first man.”

Sansa had put together this sad tale from many snippets Sandor had shared with her, never telling his story in full but revealing enough just the same.

Robb shifted in his seat and Sansa addressed him. “He was only a boy! And it was his own brother! Imagine you doing that to Brandon, and then killing our father, and gods forbid, mother and me. Imagine how it would be for Brandon? He dreamt of becoming a knight – and so did Sandor. How do you think a boy treated like that grows up to be, in the house ran by the Lannisters?”

Nobody didn’t seem to have anything to say. Sansa’s eyes had dried and she continued more steadily.

“Sandor may be many things; brusque, uncouth, too honest for his own good, a killer. I deny none of those things. But deep inside he is a good man – he just has never had a chance to let that show.” She smiled. “And he is good to me. Never has a woman been treated more gently or with more reverence.”

“Reverence?” Blackfish raised his eyebrows and Sansa knew he was referring to the messy bed he had seen in their chamber. She blushed.

“He is my husband in all ways possible, that is true.”

“And you gave yourself to him willingly?”

“Yes mother, I did.” A mischievous notion entered Sansa’s head. “The last time only a few hours ago, under this very roof.”

Blackfish rolled his eyes, Robb seemed to have found something fascinating in the grains of the wooden table, Edmure looked uncomfortable and Lady Catelyn frowned.

“And there is nothing we can do to persuade you to let go of the folly of this marriage?”

Sansa turned to her mother and regarded her for a moment. For the first time in her life she saw her not as the all-powerful mother, invincible lady of the house and the soft strength behind House Stark, but as another woman who had loved and lost and experienced all that life of a highborn lady brought with it. She knew that her marriage had been a happy one, eventually, but also that when she had first married she had hardly known her future husband.

“I am afraid there is not. I adhered to your and father’s wishes once and it ended up disastrously. I love you and want to do my duty to our house in all the other ways I can, but on this I can’t be dissuaded.”
Her mother held her gaze.

“You love him too.” Again, not a question but a statement.

Sansa didn’t want to stay silent as Sandor had – she wanted to shout her answer from the rooftops.

“I do. I love him very much. I love the way he looks at me as he has never seen anything so wonderful. I love the way he touches me, so gently and softly that you wouldn’t even think that be possible for a man with killer’s hands. I love the way how he talks to me, really listening to what I have to say. I love the way he thinks and follows his own code, not maybe a knightly code but principled just the same.”

There was more she wanted to say but her mother reached across the table and took her hand in hers, squeezing it tightly.

“Oh Sansa! I think we have heard enough. Please forgive us our actions – you must know it is only your best interest that drives us.”

Sansa squeezed her mother’s hand right back, a clump in her throat. Robb, Blackfish and Edmure murmured their own assertions and Robb got up and walked around the table to embrace Sansa. She rested her head against his considerably broadened shoulder and for the first time since they had walked up to the gates of Riverrun she felt that she had truly arrived home.

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Once again back in their room Sansa walked restlessly back and forth, back and forth. She felt like a caged animal, not knowing what would happen next. She and Arya were home and safe, she was assured about that much, but what about Sandor? Would he be accepted by his new kin or would there be doubts and suspicions that would tear her loyalties and break her heart? Would he be hidden in their rooms or would he be welcomed to the Great Hall with the whole household present? Would she be expected to sit by the side of her family tonight? Enough people had seen them so there would be rumours and talk sweeping the keep already. How was her family going to explain the Hound’s presence in Riverrun?

Sandor had seemingly accepted the situation and taken the old approach of an experienced soldier to a situation where there was nothing he could do – he was dozing off in the bed. Sansa wringed her hands and looked at him with a mixture of astonishment and annoyance. How could he be so relaxed when his fate was being decided by the people who had the happiness of them both in their hands?

Knock on the door interrupted her brooding. Without bothering to ask who it was she opened it – and found her mother behind it.

“May I come in, dear?”

“Of course mother, do enter.” Sansa stepped aside and gestured to Sandor to get up. He did, still a bit groggy from the nap. Lady Catelyn’s gaze swept around the room but this time Sansa was better prepared and no signs of the earlier encounter were visible. Yet just the sight of the large four-poster bed seemingly made her mother uncomfortable and she swept past it to the other end of the room.

“What can we do for you, mother?”

“My dear, I will come to the point directly.” Lady Catelyn was beautiful and regal, dressed in Stark colours with a nod to her father’s house in the form of a brooch depicting a leaping trout. She was a great lady and a mother of a king, and Sansa couldn’t help feeling slightly nervous in front of her.
“You all have told us an extraordinary tale. I still don’t quite know what to think of it, but it seems that we misjudged you at first, Clegane. Rest assured that you do have our gratitude for returning our girls to us.”

Sandor gave her a wordless nod.

“I admit I would rather thank you and reward you handsomely but then see you on your way. Your position here is not easy – if we saw you as an enemy, so will every man and woman in our houses and among our bannermen.” Sansa started to protest but Lady Catelyn raised her hand to stop her. “But I see it is not that easy. Whether I like it or not, you are married to my daughter. Even more, it seems that it is a bond neither you nor she are likely to relinquish easily.”

“I will not!” Sansa couldn’t contain herself anymore. “I will not leave him or let you chase him out. He is my husband in truth – and besides, I might even be carrying his child by now.”

The unwelcomed reminder that her little girl was not so little anymore clearly made Lady Catelyn ill at ease, but once again she raised her hands, this time in supplication.

“I know it, my dear. I have seen it. And I suspect Clegane wouldn’t leave you either, not without a fight.” She took a deep breath and turned fully to face Sandor. “And fight is what I don’t want. There is enough of it already and with Sansa and Arya safe I have advised Robb to end the hostilities and return home. He’ll do as he sees fit as a king, but I’ll have no division inside my own family at least. And hence, Sandor Clegane, I welcome you to our family and recognise you as my goodson and Robb as his goodbrother. What say you? Will you pledge your loyalty to our house as you have done to my daughter?”

Sansa’s heart skipped a beat. This was all she had wanted; her husband and her family united, and to go home to Winterfell and leave the misery of the South behind her.

Sandor just stood there, taking measure of the woman staring at him unflinchingly. Sansa prayed that he wouldn’t say anything rash. Finally he nodded again, slowly and never letting his eyes leave Lady Catelyn’s.

“Aye. I will give you my promise to be loyal to your daughter and to your house, but if you expect me to kneel in front of you or your boy and swear some fucking vows you’ll have another thing coming. Those things are for a bloody show for those who like to parade and pretend to be nobler than they are.”

If Lady Catelyn was taken aback by his words she didn’t show it.

“Very well then. I’ll warn you; it is not going to be easy. Many eyes will be trained on you at all times only waiting for you to slip up. Many will question Robb’s judgment for having allowed you to enter our house. All I ask is that you don’t make it more difficult than it has to be, and that you will show us those same qualities that have made both my daughters to become devoted to you. Can you promise that much?”

“I can.”

“And…” suddenly the mask of a regal lady crumbled and a loving mother peeked through “…treat my daughter well. Please. She has been through too much already and her wellbeing means a world for me.” Her eyes were as pleading as were her words.

Sandor looked at Sansa and she caught a rare flicker of doubt in his expression. That he still thought that he could fail her in any way made Sansa want to go to him and tell him that she believed in him.
And yet she had to let him do this alone.

“You have my word on that. If she ever regrets her choice or I fail her in any way, you can smite me down because as sure as hells as I’ll deserve just that.” Sandor’s voice was low and gravelly and the tone of his declaration sounded more like a threat than a promise – but from the way Lady Catelyn held his gaze and tilted her head in acknowledging it, Sansa knew that something important had just transpired between the two people she loved the most in the world.

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And so it was that later that evening Sansa found herself in the Great Hall of Riverrun, seated in the place of honour next to her brother the King in the North, Sandor by her other side. Arya sat between Robb and their mother, Blackfish next to Sandor and Edmure by his sister. Lord Hoster, as so often lately, had stayed in his sickroom. Sansa hoped she would be able to visit her grandfather soon – but it had to wait for another day.

If she had been unsure of how her family was planning to explain the presence of the hated Lannister Hound to Tully bannermen, it was solved by the speech given by Robb at the beginning of the dinner. He introduced his beloved sisters to all those gathered, followed by a brief statement about Sandor Clegane, also known as the Hound, having left House Lannister and joined House Stark not only as a bannerman but also as a family. He obviously shared Sansa’s earlier sentiments about it being better to lay out the truth at once and face the consequences.

The news were met with gasps and exclamations, but out of respect to Robb and young Edmure nobody questioned him outright. Yet Sansa could feel the weight of many eyes on her and Sandor as they went through the meal.

You better get used to it, she told herself. You better show them and the world that this is a true marriage, and Sandor is better than what they think. We will show it to them together.

She sought Sandor’s hand under the table and he returned the gesture. He looked at her and in his eyes Sansa saw the same determination she had seen before, when he had faced a challenge head on. It had been there in the throne room when he had shouted ‘Enough!’ to Joffrey, on the day when they had escaped from the Red Keep, many times on the road when faced with danger or capture – and on the night when he had asked her to marry him.

She smiled at her lord husband. She had lost her wolf, but she had found her hound.

Everything is going to be fine.
Well this is IT! It is all over! The End, Fin, Die Ende, Loppu… Happy holidays, Starbird1!

Little did I know when I started this in December that this would grow this big. In my first post for the holiday-exchange in LJ I said “I estimate this to be about 10 or so chapters, although I am still writing this so we’ll see…I may post more quickly in the beginning, but this will likely extend beyond the New Year.” Pfffttt!!!

Apologies for the saccharine sweetness of this epilogue… Just this week of all weeks I didn’t feel like edgy or sad or anything like that. So sue me... :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Sandor & Arya

“Stop fidgeting.”

“I can’t see anything! Can you? You are much taller than I am so you should.”

“Mayhap I would if I looked. But I am not going to. They come when they come, and no amount of
gawking is going to make it happen any faster.”

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“Stop fidgeting I said!”

“This stupid dress is itchy! It is bad enough that I now have to wear dress on most days and always
for the dinner, but this gown that mother had made for me is impossible! I can’t even move my arms
properly, look.”

“Stop spinning your arms like a bloody windmill. You are not supposed to be doing it in that dress,
just curtseying and bowing and lifting a plate and goblet in the feast. It is not meant for arms
practicing.”

“Can you even like, turn your head a bit? I think I hear something, maybe they are finally coming.”

“They’ll be here when they’ll be here, I already told you so. This thing has been coming along for
three bloody months so we can wait a few moments longer.”

“It is them! I don’t care, I am going to have a look.”

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“She is beautiful!”

“You sister is always beautiful. Why would this day of all days be any different?”

“Well, for the fuss she has made since the morning you would expect her to be prettier today. She
had not one but two maids to help her with her hair – and in the end mother dismissed them both and
made it herself anyway.”

“Hmmph.”

“There they come; Robb first with Sansa, then Bran and Rickon right next to them, Bran in his
wheeled chair.”

“Is she kicking and screaming, do they have to drag her behind them?”

“Har har, not funny. If anything, she is dragging them behind her. Heavens know she has waited for
this day long enough. Don’t really see why.”
“You know that well enough. She deserves her big day, not just a bloody forest wedding in the middle of fucking nowhere. And in the proper Godswood as well, back in her home.”

“I don’t mind this wedding itself, just all the fuss around it. Mother and Sansa have not talked about anything else for weeks.”

“Just pipe down and let the little bird enjoy this, she deserves it well.”

“I don’t mind the food either, Mykah – sorry, Mykkel told me about all the fancy food we are going to have. I can hardly wait!”

“And still wait you must.”

“I like it how not only Robb but also Bran and Rickon are giving Sansa away. I think it fitting.”

“You know that your mother suggested you to be with them as well.”

“I know – but I rather be here with you. You have no kin – so I’ll be your family.”

“So you are, little wolf, so you are.”

“Talking about family, when are you two going to going to give me a niece or a nephew? I can’t wait all my life for that, you know. I’d like to have a little girl first – I could show her all the things Sansa is not going to; how to play rough and do all the fun things.”

“You? Look after a babe?!”

“And the next one could be a boy. I would show him things as well. Or another girl. Or twins, more the merrier.”

“Slow down girl. You don’t get to tell us what to do. Even I don’t get to do that to Sansa, bloody hells!”

“Well, I think you owe me some. If it wasn’t for me you would have sulked all the way from King’s Landing to Riverrun, and probably by now would be serving in some ghastly sellsword company across the sea.”

“Mayhap so.”

“It is so.”

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“Stop fidgeting!”

“six years later”

_Sandor & Arya_
“Still here? What was so bloody important I had to come all the way up here?”

“I wanted you to walk me downstairs, that’s all.”

“Well, let’s move on, everybody is waiting.”

“They can wait a bit longer. It’s not like they are going to go ahead without me, are they?”

“Mayhap not, but I wouldn’t count out the possibility of that bull of yours coming to get you if you dilly-dally much longer. I have never seen a boy so besotted in my life.”

“Hah, so you haven’t looked into a looking-glass lately, have you? After all these years you still worship the ground Sansa walks on, even now when she is once again carrying a babe.”

“Why in the seven hells would I care about the ground when the little bird is there right on front of me, plump and big like an auroch? And just so you know, with a babe in her belly she is even more beautiful to me. Besides, it is not the same. I am not moon-eyeing over her like some sick calf, like that soon-to-be-husband or yours.”

“Pffft! But I swear I never thought I would be doing this. Getting married, I mean.”

“You are not the only one. Until that boy showed up I could have sworn even your kin’s best efforts were going to end up naught.”

“He is not a boy, he’s a man grown!”

“I’ll admit that much - he has some pluck to be taking on a wolf bitch like you.”

“And…we do owe it to you, and Sansa. I know it, I am not stupid. Without his true name I suspect Robb and Mother would not have allowed this to pass. I would have had to elope with him like you did.”

“Hells, I had been around fat King Robert enough to see a resemblance when it stared me in the eye. That’s all I did. How Sansa got the dragon queen to give him the Baratheon name I’ll never know, but your sister seems to have an understanding with the Targaryen girl. Too bad he didn’t get the Storm’s End too.”

“I don’t mind it, I rather stay here. Besides, Shireen is a nice girl and will make a wonderful Lady of Storm’s End.”

“In truth, I don’t mind either. This way I can better keep an eye on him. Listen to me, if he ever as much as upsets you, you tell me about it and I put him in his place. You hear it?”

“He will never upset me. Or harm me in any way. He may be stubborn and bull-headed, but he’ll never hurt me.”

“Well, tonight he might – just so that you know. But that can’t be helped.”

“Oh you sweet summer child! I have nothing to worry about tonight. Did you think I would be as prim and proper as Sansa was? How would I know that he is the right one before trying out first?”

“Fucking hells! And now you’re telling me! I swear, wedding day or not I’m going to bust his head and cut his balls…”
“Shush, you are going to do no such thing! I need them. Both.”

“Hmmmpph!”

“Well, shall we go now? Robb, Bran and Rickon must be ready to give me away.”

“I still think it should be only three of them, not me too.”

“Nonsense. You are my family as much as they are. Take my hand, good ser, and escort me to the Godswood.”

“Fuck your sers. But I have to admit that if I squint my eyes just like this, you almost pass as a lady. I have seen uglier.”

“Ha-ha, not funny. Everybody says that I am beautiful and I better be, after sitting here the whole morning being cosseted and plucked and preened like a price hen going to the market.”

“Aye, they might not be wrong.”

“Sandor & Arya

“What’s with the tears, woman? I see enough of those in my own chambers with your sister weeping and lamenting like a madwoman.”

“Well then you should know! It is not easy to see your firstborn leaving to go across the country. So what if I shed a tear or two?!”

“Hold on, don’t get your smallclothes into a twist. I didn’t say it wasn’t understandable. Bloody hells, do you think me jumping of joy of seeing our boy off? But that’s the way it is, they both are big enough to spend some time with their kin and do some squiring.”

“I know, I know, it does make sense, but still…”

“Hells, it is only going to be for a few years and then he’ll be back, just like our eldest. And you’ll still have the girls. Although from the way you have raised them, I wouldn’t be surprised if you planned to send them too to squire for some unsuspecting kin in the South.”

“Nah, they have been spoiled by Sansa with her stories of knights and princesses, the same ones she tells to your girls. But that’s fine. I don’t mind, as long as they get to do what they want, not what we want.”

“Spoiling the youngsters, the lot of you. Gendry is as bad as you and Sansa.”

“And you think we don’t know how you cosset yours? You can act as tough as you want on the
outside, but everyone in the keep knows that your girls have you firmly twirled around their little fingers!”

“Seven hells!”

“And your sons – the way you have trained them all is a testament of its own. They sure are some of the best swordsmen in the North already.”

“Bloody hells, don’t remind me. I am still sore of the practice from a few days ago.”

“That’s because you are getting a bit long in the tooth yourself. Look at that beard and hair of yours – there’s more grey than black in both of them, has been for a while.”

“I can still knock you on your ass. You want to test that in the training yards after we see the boys off?”

“Maybe tomorrow. Let me mope about my loss for a little while at least.”

“Sansa tells me it helps her when I’ m there with her. Mayhap I need to have a word with Gendry.”

“He was here already and he’ll be back - he’ll do right by me so don’t you worry about that. He is just sorting out some last minute arrangements.”

“More stuff? I swear those horses are going to keel over long before they reach Riverrun or Storm’s End, with all the gifts and supplies your sister and your mother are bestowing on them.”

“We all want to send them off with the best we can provide. My little boy, going so far…”

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“I thought you were done with the tears.”

*Sniif*

“Come here, girl.”

“----”

“Feeling better?”

“Hold me just a bit longer.”

“As long as you want, little wolf.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you soooo much to all of you who have read and commented this story – as you all know, they are the only external reward a fanfic writer gets, besides the internal glow and happiness, and they truly do help and inspire. So thank you once again!

So, without further ado…Bye for now!
*ladytp off*

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!