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**Come Morning Light**

by moffnat

**Summary**

"I lit a candle and I prayed for you," Sandor rasped. "I prayed that you'd hate me and forget me, forget this face. And I've been praying it ever since. Get that in your pretty head, girl. I lit a fucking candle, and I *prayed* for you." Blackwater AU where Sandor stays with Sansa instead of leaving. Red Wedding AU where Robb actually keeps his promise to Walder Frey. Multiple POV.

Sansa Stark is the key to the North should her brother fail in his quest for vengeance. The Lannisters have a plan, but Sandor Clegane has sworn himself to her protection through the many horrors she is made to face. Tyrion and Shae watch her with care until the King in the North comes to win freedom for his people. However, with each advancement, Joffrey tightens his grip on Sansa. The vow to save her happiness and the North soon stands upon the edge of a knife.
Gentle Mother, Font of Mercy

Chapter Notes

THINGS TO NOTE BEFORE READING:

- This fic is mainly about Sansa and Sandor, but will feature other ships and POV characters.
- This is basically a season's-worth of content in one fic. Enjoy!
- I mainly used the actors for the faceclaims here. Rory's Sandor doesn't get enough love, what can I say.
- This fic is spoiler-free if you've seen/read past season 2/A Clash of Kings.
- Make sure to read the tags! There are no actual rape scenes in this fic but there's some non-con up in this consent. "Consensual violence” sums it up pretty well. Dub-con maybe? You'll see what I mean later on when the time comes. This is just a warning for those who see the Rape/Non-Con archive warning and think, "ehhh." Don't worry. It's just a precaution.
- This is one of those fics where it starts out grand, but then you suddenly get hit by a bus of angst and plot and it just keeps getting worse. Each chapter is it's own accident. Before you know it, the bus is in in a river and you are too and you don't know how it can get any worse. You're drowning in the chaos and life fades from the world. Then you wake up in the hospital, recovering from your broken bones with a juice box and some band-aids. Your mom pinches your cheeks. You get a new puppy. Shh. *pets* Trust me on this wild ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

![Chapter I Cover](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Sansa
Sansa, run!

She thought the words were misheard, some folly in a dream that stole her from present horrors. The women in Maegor’s Holdfast began to panic. Shae gripped her by the arms, dark eyes wide with earnest. “Listen to me. You must leave.”

“W-What about you?” Sansa stuttered. “Shae, you heard what they said. I don’t know what will happen, I don’t know if I can get to my chambers in time—“

“You will. I promise.” Shae smoothed her hair from her face and maternally kissed her cheek. “No one will hurt you or I’d kill them. Go, now!”

Sansa obeyed without another word.

The sky raged with emerald fire. Clouds burned bright and toxicity hung in the air, the scent of smoke and blood and vomit rank with every inhale. Viridescent light cast shadows of violence along the Red Keep’s walls, and fear coiled around Sansa’s throat. The instinct for survival was all she knew, yet the gods themselves seemed bent on denying her sweet freedom. Since her arrival at King’s Landing, the thought of happily ever after was replaced by one of misery. What was life worth if composed of cowardice? Sansa knew the value of a soul. In the end we are all just flesh and bone, she thought, but tonight thousands of men will become ash instead.

Stannis’s forces had nearly shattered the Mud Gate. “The battle is lost,” Lancel Lannister had said to the queen. “We can’t hold them back much longer.” Shae had instructed Sansa to flee for her life on the grounds that King Stannis would not let harm befall her, but Sansa was beginning to doubt. Men had proven helpless to her cause. What could Stannis offer her that others had not? She could trust no one in King’s Landing, not even Lord Baelish who had promised to protect her. If anyone deserved the gift of her confidence, it was Shae. She would never betray me. This has to be right, it must be. Auburn hair whipped in the wind as Sansa fled further into the bowels of the Red Keep, desperate for whatever sanctuary remained.

The need to preserve herself clung to the fabric of her nature. Sansa could not pry it free, not for anything. She imagined her father begging her to run, to climb and dash until she was safe behind her chamber door, away from raging flame and battle. He would have died defending her, but Ned Stark was a headless wolf in a den of lions. Only she could howl at the moon now, scarred and bitterly alone. Sansa gathered her skirts and urged her feet faster along marble and stone, through empty halls and scattered plans, wary of each soldier she passed. War had no rules. Time in King’s Landing and Queen Cersei’s words taught Sansa what violent men did to girls like her. She would not become another victim. Not anymore. Not again.

Sansa climbed the final steps and scrambled into her chambers at last, slamming the door shut in her wake. Barring the exit didn’t feel like enough. She panicked to find something, anything that would keep her from the monsters that lay waiting outside her door. Sansa hurriedly grabbed her vanity by the legs and dragged it back against the entrance, not caring what valuables and nonessential things went crashing to the ground. Her safety was paramount. Stannis won’t hurt me, she thought again, and he’ll let me go back to Robb and Mother. I can last for them. I can last with the thought of home.

Thunder roared from outside, demanding her attention. Sansa turned to the open balcony and shielded her eyes from the blazing emerald light. Is that thunder or explosions? Perhaps it was both, two sounds of terror mingled with the beat of her heart. Screams and shrieks of battle flooded into her chambers and she hugged herself close, whimpering, trembling. So many people were sacrificed to the flame, and for what? A great ugly iron chair, and a crown with the weight of millions. Sansa wanted none of it, but she begged the gods to allow Stannis his victory regardless of whatever dark magic he employed. Anyone but Joffrey, she pleaded. Anyone but him.
“I knew you’d come,” said a low voice. Sansa gasped and whirled around.

“Please,” she begged. “Don’t hurt me.” She snatched a comb from the nearest table and gripped it in her hand like a dagger.

“You gonna stab me to death with a hairpin?” The deep voice laughed, though it sounded more like sorrow than true amusement. “Don’t worry, little bird. No need for that.”

Sansa froze, recognizing the intruder. Her muscles relaxed slightly. The Hound was Joffrey’s dog; he’d said so himself countless times and proven it on many others. Had he come to drag her away? Did Joffrey mean to kill her at last? He did not move, even as they remained fixed in mutual trepidation. She stepped cautiously toward the massive figure sitting on her bed. She was wary with every move she made, not wanting to provoke him. Sansa stopped before the Hound’s slumped frame and swallowed the fear in her throat, eyes searching desperately for his in the darkness.

The sky pulsed with jaded light. His face was illuminated in hues of wild green, exposing his features, both burned and human. Sansa turned a moment to fumble with a match and candle, which she managed to strike and light a lantern. She placed it on the end table beside her bed, hesitating.

“What are you doing here, my lord?”

“Always so courteous. I bit your shit smells like courtesy.” The Hound scoffed, shaking his head. “Fuck manners, little bird. They’re wasted on me.”

Sansa frowned, holding her arms close. Why is there misery in his eyes? She bit her lip and studied him a moment, and not once did he meet her gaze. “The battle?”

“Over,” he replied. “Everything…everything’s on fire. Even the water. Even the air.” He gestured out her window. “Even the bloody sky.”

“Like a nightmare,” Sansa whispered. He only laughed, lifting the bottle of wine to his lips and taking many long gulps of sweet poison.

*He’s drunk,* she realized. *More drunk than he has a right to be.* She wanted to ask him to leave, but Sansa had barred her door twice over and he wasn’t in a condition to go anywhere. Instead, she stood rooted to the floor. Her voice wavered. “Why are you here?”

“I’m going.” He swirled the wine around in the bottle. “Someplace that…isn’t burning.”

“What about the king?”

“Joffrey? A right cunt. We’re all better off without him. He can die alone.”

Sansa remained silent. She wrung her hands and shifted her feet, anxious to his intentions.

“I could take you with me.” He stood then, placing the empty glass bottle on her dresser and turning to her. Sansa flinched and her back pressed up to the wall. He continued to step closer, trapping her there and their bodies stood inches apart. *Don’t run,* she thought, *or he’ll chase you.* She locked eyes with him and he leaned lazily against the wall, his hand resting just to the side of her head to keep steady. He stunk of wine and blood and battle, but she was not frightened, not even as he moved closer to her. His eyes did not speak of malice. “I could take you with me,” he said again. “To Winterfell. I’ll keep you safe, little bird. Do you want to go home?”

*Home,* she thought. *I could go home.* The thought of warm stone walls and summer snows filled her heart with longing. She envisioned her mother sewing a dress for her by the great hearth, Arya and
Bran fighting with wooden swords in the courtyard. Jon, Robb and Theon would practice their archery while little Rickon ran around playfully with Shaggydog. Her father polished Ice in the godswood, somber and reflective. Those were the memories she held most dear. But while the Hound had always been gentle with her, he was not always kind, and Sansa would not make the mistake of following him blindly even if Winterfell was the reward.

“Stannis won’t hurt me,” she muttered. “He’ll let me go home.”

The Hound scoffed. “You’re not foolish enough to believe that, are you?” His gaze turned harsh and she could smell the liquor on his breath. “Your brother’s rebelling against King’s Landing. Stannis worships a fire god. You’ll be a pretty little prisoner to him, only difference is that he’ll burn you, and then you won’t be so pretty anymore. No fate worse than that.”

“He won’t.” Sansa swallowed. “I won’t let him.”

“Sharp hairpins don't stop men like us. This is a place for killers, remember? None of your little songs will make Stannis happy.” His finger brushed her cheek, gentle if not demanding. “But a little song would make me happy…”

Sansa shivered. “My lord, please—“

“Florian and Jonquil, wasn’t that the one? You promised.” He gripped her harshly by the arms and she cried out, her back hitting the surface of her bed when he moved. The Hound crawled possessively over her fragile frame, a dagger pressed against her throat. The pressure of him straddling her hips was uncomfortable, unbearable and she dug her fingers into the sheets as if they could save her.

“I’ll have that song,” he ordered. “Sing.”

Florian and Jonquil did not come to mind, but instead came a song of a different sort. Bravely, Sansa captured his gaze and tried to drag it under her control, to save what remained of fragile hope.

And softly, so softly, she began to sing.

\begin{verbatim}
Gentle Mother, font of mercy,  
Save our sons from war, we pray.  
Stay the swords and stay the arrows,  
Let them know a better day.

Gentle Mother, strength of women,  
Help our daughters through this fray.  
Soothe the wrath and tame the fury,  
Teach us all a kinder way.

Gentle Mother, font of mercy,  
Save our sons from war, we pray.  
Stay the swords and stay the arrows,  
Let them know a better day.
\end{verbatim}

The Hound was silent for a long while. The cacophony of warfare outside replaced her sweet voice with one of bloodshed. Sansa didn’t know why, but the sudden agony in his eyes drove her to compassion and his despair became hers. He is afraid, she thought, so afraid to be surrounded by fire. And he came for me all the same. Trembling hands cupped his face for reasons she would never know. One cheek was even and smooth, the other savaged with rough cracks and craters. She felt his
tears and wiped them away.

It was not the Hound she saw in those murky grey eyes. Sandor Clegane looked at her as he must have been many years ago, aching and vulnerable, weeping. She knew not his reasons for violence, nor would she ever try to justify them, but Sansa felt the gift of mercy calling for her action. She lifted her head gently from the mattress. Before she could instigate, his lips came crashing down on hers.

His mouth was hot and the taste of him was wine and war, stirring something in the pit of her stomach that she dared not entertain. His tongue forced between her teeth and her lips parted, unbidden. He took one of her wrists and pressed it back against the bed, trapping it there while the other caressed her cheek, oddly tender. His hands were rough and his kiss was intoxicating, and suddenly she felt as drunk as he was, her head spinning and her heart hammering rapidly out of control. Sansa whimpered into his open mouth and he captured her again, claiming her in whatever broken tryst this had become, harsh and bruising, almost seductive. She did not push him away. Her fingers slipped into his hair and he groaned against her lips. The sound filled her with a sinful ache, and her tongue brushed against his more willingly than not.

He pulled away without warning. Sansa was left gasping for air. The Hound released her wrist and sat back on his knees, still straddled over her lower half. His expression was misery and impossible self-control. He dragged his hand down his face and said nothing.

“What do you feel?” she wondered.

“You did nothing I did not allow.”

The regret in his eyes was consuming. It moved her to know that even under the influence of wine he would not take her with force. Not like Ser Meryn or Ser Boros, or even Joffrey. He is more of a knight than they will ever be. Sansa slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position, cupping his scarred cheek in hesitance. “You won’t hurt me.”

He sighed. “No, little bird. I won’t hurt you.”

Sandor pulled away, climbing off of her to stand on solid ground. He yanked the Kingsguard cloak from his back and draped it lazily over her trembling form. He crossed the room and scoffed at her irregularly placed vanity, leaning down to push it away from her bedroom door. Sansa realized that he intended to leave her as so many others had. Loneliness struck. She wished he had not stopped kissing her, wished she knew why he’d become so important so quickly.

“Wait,” Sansa called, and he paused. She pushed off his cloak and rose to her feet. “Please don’t go.”

He snorted. “Don’t go? I fuck your mouth with mine and you want me to stay? Don’t mock me, girl. I told you this was a place of killers and I’m the best of them all.”

“You won’t hurt me,” she said again, and it seemed to wound him the second time. The Hound visibly clenched his jaw from what she could see by the lantern light. “You saved me. When the mob wanted to hurt me, you came back. When Joffrey had me stripped, you gave me your cloak like you did just now. You protected me. You did that.” She crossed the distance between them and placed a hand on his arm, gently. “Stay with me,” she begged. “I won’t let the fire hurt you.”

His eyes glistened with sorrow and she saw her face reflected there. “Little bird,” he rasped, but she stopped him with a shake of her head.

“Please.” Don’t stay for Joffrey. Stay for me. Her voice began to waver. The fire is his fear, she thought, but what of mine? “Don’t leave me here alone.”
An explosion boomed through the open air, but Sandor Clegane did not seem to notice. All she cared for was the small nod of his head. He lifted Sansa into his arms like a bride and ignored her gasp of protest. He climbed back atop her featherbed but did not compromise her, and instead locked her tightly against him, his back resting against the headboard. He drew his blood-stained sword and sat with it gripped in his hand. The blade rested protectively in front of her and he said nothing, pulling her close to his steel chest like she was the greatest treasure he’d ever touched. She wiped his tears and nested into his armored embrace, and she knew that neither kings nor flames could harm them here. They were silent until long after the jade in the sky had died, and Sansa drifted to sleep in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

HOLY CRAP I AM SO EXCITED FOR THIS FIC DO YOU EVEN KNOW
Yay, here we are! First chapter! Dang. I've been so stoked to bring this to you guys. I see so many modern AU’s out there or fics that don't really get into the more canon-esque aspect of things. It's fun to play with. People should do it more!
Next chapter will be up on Tuesday, as stated! Can you guess who the POV will be?
Hint: it isn't Sandor!
Make sure to leave comments on this to tell me how you like it! I loooooove all things BotB-related so this chapter was a thrill to write. See you in June, my lovelies~ I hope you've had a great first half of 2015!
He supposed that half a face better suited half a man. The image Tyrion Lannister saw in the mirror’s reflection was one he had seen in himself long ago, brought to life by betrayal and a shitload of wildfire. He ran his fingers over the great scar and sighed, feeling the ridges and healing skin that disfigured his face. Yet another addition to my collection of deformities. At this rate, I’ll be uglier than the Hound in a fortnight. How many more jokes would he have to suffer? Could his immunity to them expand so far? There was no way to tell, for insults were cast at him like stones from the shadows. Joffrey’s court was vicious. Everywhere Tyrion went, stubbed legs and a savaged face would follow him on a trail of poison words. Since the great Tywin Lannister had returned to salvage what remained at the Battle of the Blackwater, Tyrion was no longer Hand of the King, or anything to anyone for that matter. All he had was his Lannister name and some gold. And Shae, he thought gratefully. For now.

Tyrion cupped his hands and dipped them in the basin of cold water, splashing it over his face to wash away the grogginess. He snatched a fresh towel to dry the wetness from his cheeks and turned back to the woman lying naked in his bed. She’s so beautiful, he noticed, not for the first time. Morning light peeked through the curtains and illuminated her smile, as if she needed any more encouragement to glow.

“It’s not as bad as you think,” Shae said with the accent he adored. “I like scars. They’re sexy.”

“Is that why you keep such an eye on the Hound? My lady, I should have guessed.” Tyrion chucked at his own joke, approaching the edge of the bed where she lay. Shae rolled over on her belly and grabbed him by the tunic, pulling him closer for affection. Her kiss was prison and he could never seem to escape, not that he’d want to. Her lips were iron bars of sanctuary. Shae let her
mouth linger for perhaps a bit too long, and then pulled away with a grin, much to his despair.

“The Hound is a dog. Dogs don’t fuck like lions do.”

“Maybe,” Tyrion replied. “But dogs are quite loyal.”

“So?” Shae kissed him again and pushed herself upright. She slipped on her dress before Tyrion could catch a proper glance at her body, moving to the vanity with a teasing sway of her hips. “Dogs are more loyal to wolves than lions. All these animals, it’s no wonder the city stinks.”

“Welcome to Westeros, my lady.” Tyrion flashed her a smile, knowing he would not receive any morning pleasure. There wasn’t enough time. Maybe tomorrow, he thought, but even then it was just a dream. Nights with Shae were rare and treacherous things, and he would need to take advantage of those blessings sparingly for both their sakes.

Tyrion buttoned a scarlet jerkin over his chest and tied the front laces. The clasps were made of little golden lion heads, much akin to his own, he liked to think. He slipped on a pair of black breeches and tied up his shoes, and when he looked up to Shae, she stood beaming near the balcony in a gown of pink and violet. “I like you in handmaiden’s clothes,” he observed. “What a genius I am, to put you in Lady Stark’s service.”

“I adore Sansa. If I ever have a daughter or a sister, I want them to be like her.” Shae crossed the distance between them, planting a sweet kiss to his lips and adjusting his collar. “I don’t watch the Hound for his scars, my lion. I watch him because he watches her. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Not particularly, but I can’t blame him. She’s probably the prettiest thing he’s ever seen.” Tyrion held up a hand when his lover gasped. “What? I see the appeal for a man like him. He protected her during the battle. Shame that he’ll have to watch Joffrey torture the poor girl for the rest of his life.”

“Joffrey won’t hurt Sansa. I won’t let him.”

“That’s not how this game is played.” He took her hand and kissed it. “Go on, then. Go see to our mutual friend, I’m sure she’ll have need of you. Father wants to see me this morning.”

“Fine. Say hello for me, won’t you?”

Even as a joke, Tyrion didn’t find it humorous. Shae kissed him goodbye and he watched her leave, and after a moment of somber reflection he quickly followed suit.

King’s Landing was recovering well from the Battle of the Blackwater. Repairs were constantly underway during the three weeks since the battle’s end, and Highgarden was keen on seeing the people fed and clothed, which came as a great relief to the City Watch. The fewer complaints from the poor, the less crime ran rampant in the streets. Blackwater Bay lay in ruin, carnage of burnt ships and death floating aimlessly on the horizon. It served as a reminder of the war to come. Tyrion could never look at it for long. The nightmares were still far too dominant. He waved up to a group of workers repairing the battlements and continued on, letting the morning sun kiss his skin for distraction.

Though Tyrion remained painfully bitter about his facial disfigurement at the hands of Joffrey’s orders, it solidified an odd sense of resolve for him. He loved his family, but moreso did he love outwitting and outsmarting his enemies. Now that the king found a spot on his list of offenders, the game would become much more interesting. And dangerous. I have to tread lightly, he thought, looking up to the Tower of the Hand as he walked under its shadow. I have to think of Shae, too. It isn’t just about me anymore.
The serpentine steps were infuriating and his muscles cramped to climb them. Tyrion waddled into
his father’s chamber shortly after the agonizing ascent, whistling the tune to Rains of Castamere quite
jovially. He felt uplifted for one who nearly lost his nose in a battle less than a month past, but there
was much to be thankful for. Tyrion eyed the Small Council one by one—Grand Maester Pycelle,
Petyr Baelish, Lord Varys, Cersei and his dearly returned father. A long sigh escaped his lips and he
climbed into one of the many chairs. It was clear that everyone had been waiting on him. “Why so
grim?” Tyrion asked with a mocking smile. “It’s a beautiful day. Singing birds, rolling waves. The
fresh smell of shit.”

“Robb Stark is on the move,” Tywin Lannister folded his hands on the table, sitting straighter than a
king. *Always right to the point.* “He’s staying at the Twins. Soon after, he will ride for Riverrun.”

“Should we be worried about that?”

“He’s getting married,” Tywin said louder, as if Tyrion should know why that was such a terrible
thing. “He’s marrying Walder Frey’s daughter, Roslin. This will bind the North and the Twins,
making his army larger. We need to act before he gets any closer to King’s Landing.”

“A good move on Stark’s part, considerably,” Varys chimed in. “My birds tell me that he almost
refused the match after an incident with the Westerlings. Betraying Walder Frey is never a good
idea.”

Tyrion shrugged. “What can we do about it? If the wedding’s already happened, there’s no stopping
it now. It’s a bit late to be sending flowers.”

“An alliance with Dorne has been established,” Pycelle said, followed by a long string of coughs.
“We could ask their army to assist the crown in this…dire time of need.”

“The Dornish loathe King’s Landing,” Baelish stated with a shake of his head. “They’ll more likely
kill us than fight Robb Stark, or maybe they’ll get the idea for a little rebellion of their own.”

“We can’t risk that while they have my daughter.” Cersei was firm on the subject. She folded her
hands and stared off into the distance. “This Young Wolf needs to be dealt with. He has Jaime, and
far more spirit than his headless father.”

“And we have Lady Sansa in our custody.” Tywin seemed to smile then, or as close to a smile as
Lord Lannister was capable of accomplishing. Tyrion hated the potential ideas brewing in his
father’s head. “Robb Stark wouldn’t be foolish enough to hurt Jaime while we have his sister. She is
everything to his cause should the King in the North fail.” Tywin tapped his knuckles on the table
twice in thought. “Since she won’t be marrying Joffrey, she needs to find a suitable husband. *She*
is how we strike at the North.”

“Great. How does this concern any of us exactly?” Tyrion picked at some dirt under his nail and
flicked it off, eyeing his father. “I hear a lot of ‘ifs’ and I don’t like making choices on a whim. We’re
assuming Stark will fail. If he doesn’t, what then?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Cersei chuckled. “Sansa still needs a husband regardless. She’s had her moon’s
blood, trust me. We’ve discussed it at length. She is fit to bear children.” His sister eyed him coyly.
“Blonde children, perhaps. Maybe a dwarf or two.”

The pieces fell into place. Dread filled the pit of Tyrion's stomach like poison. He met the gaze of his
father, then Cersei, then Lord Tywin once again.

“Oh, no.” Tyrion clenched his fists. “No. You don’t mean it.”
“You will marry Sansa Stark if her brother does not lay down his arms and surrender,” Tywin confirmed. “I’m sure Joffrey will agree that this is more than enough motivation for the North. The Starks are weak for family and Robb is the last male heir until Roslin bears him a son, which could take years. The threat of littering their homeland with Lannister rulers is not a thought they will stomach.”

“The girl has suffered enough!”

Tywin blinked, expressionless. “If the plans I have are set in motion, she will be the key to Winterfell sooner rather than later. We need her tucked away with the Lannister name before the Tyrells can claim her.”

“I won’t.”

“You will.”

“No. This is absurd.” Tyrion shook his head and pushed away from the table. “I won’t do it.”

“You are a Lannister,” Tywin exerted, voice and stare as sharp as Valyrian steel. Tyrion felt a reply melt away on his tongue. “You are my son, as you’re so keen on reminding me. You will do your duty to the family, even if it means wedding and bedding Sansa Stark. But the matter has yet to be final. We’ll speak more of this another time.”

The council went on to discuss other meaningless ordeals, but Tyrion was far too livid to pay attention. When the meeting was called to close, he stormed from his seat in a fit of frustration, speaking to no one as he took his leave.

Marry the Stark girl? That’s cruel, even for him. Lady Sansa was little more than a child who despised his family, for good reason. Marrying her to the enemy would do little to please the North. Did he want Jaime killed? Tywin Lannister had a plan and Tyrion could feel it, approaching from the distance like some great predator threatening to swallow them whole. A part of him was protective of Sansa regardless of what happened in their marriage, though whether or not that was due to Shae’s influence, he truly didn’t know. But if I have the power to keep her safe, he concluded, I will.

Tyrion leaned against a stone wall deep in the castle, exasperated. How was he going to protect Sansa now? He hoped that by treating her with the kindness she so deserved and intervening in Joffrey’s torment, he might spare his family great embarrassment when the Young Wolf came knocking on their door. Being polite to Sansa was no difficult task. She was a true lady, born and bred. Certainly the child had seen greater acts of service in her life and was frightened whenever he came near, but even that seemed to have lessened of late, ever since the battle. It was as if his scar made her more attentive to him in an odd way—sweeter, more understanding. Tyrion had considered asking Shae how Lady Sansa felt about him, but he didn’t think it appropriate. So long as Sansa was not secretly planning his murder, he supposed her feelings toward him mattered little. I shouldn’t be thinking about this. Nothing is set, and things can always change. He pushed out a sigh and prepared to move on.

A deep voice echoed in the distance.

“Enough tears, little bird. The more you cry, the more he likes it.”

Clegane? Tyrion narrowed his eyes and followed the sound, careful not to alert anyone to his presence.

“I’m sorry, my lord. I can’t…I can’t help it.” The reply of Sansa Stark was unmistakable. She
sniffled and cleared her throat, staunching tears. “Thank you. It seems I’m thanking you every day, lately.”

“Don’t. I said I’d stay for you.”

Sansa chuckled. “You’re very loyal.”

“Aye. As any dog should be.”

Silence followed and Tyrion wondered what was happening, until little sounds of affection told him all he need know. The glide of fingers brushing through thick hair was familiar, along with a lady’s joyful sigh and the gentle shift of fabric. What followed was something different entirely; the soft, sweet sound of lips on lips, hesitant at first but building into something more passionate.

Oh, he knew those sounds well. And he knew what they meant with just as much certainty.

Tyrion rounded the corner to confront them, floored by the sight. Innocent Sansa Stark had pulled the wide-eyed Clegane from their height difference and held his face to hers, planting a tender kiss upon his lips. The Hound seemed surprised by her action but did not push her away, and his hands rested on her upper arms, brushing his thumbs along the silk of her gown. They kissed thrice and she smiled against his mouth. Seconds passed and the fourth kiss was mutual, deepened only by Sansa’s sweet smile of consent.

Oh, shit.

“What’s going on here?” Tyrion asked, exposing himself from the shadows. Lady Sansa gasped and pulled away from the brute immediately, recognizing who had discovered her.

“L-Lord Tyrion! I—“

“Keep walking, dwarf.” The Hound gripped the hilt of his sword, stepping between Stark and Lannister. “Don’t want to be the Quarterman, do you?”

“Save your jokes, Clegane. Do you really think I could hurt her? Or you? Do you have eyes? ” Tyrion took cautious steps from the darkness and held up his hands to declare harmless intent. His care for Sansa outweighed his hatred of the Hound. “I’m not here to harm either of you. I’m...shocked, admittedly, but I’ve no ill will.”

“I said to keep walking, or I’ll—“

“My lord, please.” Tyrion was unsure to whom Sansa spoke, but she addressed him afterward all the same. “The Hound was just...comforting me. That’s all.”

Does she feel the need to lie to everyone? Tyrion sighed before he spoke. “My lady, I’m no fool. There’s no sin in snogging, though your septa might have disagreed. You don’t need to lie to me.” The Hound didn’t seem to believe the sentiment, but Sansa placed a gentle hand on his arm and it calmed him almost immediately. Shae was right about dogs and wolves. I should have listened more closely.

Sansa was hesitant and she wrung her hands. “Lord Tyrion, I know I you've seen us but I—I only ask that you find it in your heart…if you could find it in your heart to speak of this to no one?”

Her eyes are so pure and genuine, he thought. Breaking a promise to protect her would be a great sin. The thought of Lady Sansa and Sandor Clegane, of all people, running around the castle in the night as he and Shae had been doing for months was enough to make him laugh. What are the odds?
My intended’s handmaiden and the king’s dog, both secret lovers to the same miserable couple. He thought of the incredible humor of the situation, but reality quickly sobered him. The image of two ugly heads and two pretty ones left to rot under Joffrey’s wrath pulled him back into focus. The weight of self-preservation pressed harder on his shoulders now that the pressure of the Hand had been taken from them, and while he yearned to know why that was, time was running short. The war had yet to be won. He would remain quiet about his father’s plans, as well as Sansa’s secret, until the Young Wolf howled at their doorstep to deliver justice upon them all.

“Lady Stark,” he said respectfully, taking her hand in his.

“My lips are sealed.”

Chapter End Notes

TYRION IS GREAT IF YOU DISAGREE BYE
Silks and formalwear were far less comfortable than swords and armor. They felt strange and nonsensical to a king, to a warrior seasoned in battle as Robb had become, but he supposed that weddings lacked soldiers for a reason. Marriage was not war. Marriage was something else entirely, and he would treat it with the delicacy it deserved. *Still, I miss the comforts of a weapon.* He brushed a hand along his stomach and frowned, wondering if he would ever feel at peace without a blade at his side. He felt naked without one, exposed. *But isn’t that how marriage should be?*

Robb examined himself in the floor-length mirror and saw a stranger looking back—a dapper stranger, no doubt, but a stranger all the same. His beard had been trimmed and his curls slicked back, and robes of fine ebony encased his frame perfectly. Silver direwolves pranced along his sides and steel clasps of wolf heads were locked around his neck, holding the cloak in place. He took in a deep breath and released, trying to stay distracted from trembling hands that betrayed him. *I am a king,* he thought solemnly. *I shouldn’t falter in the face of marriage.* Roslin Frey was only a woman. His true fears rested with his precious sisters, locked away within the Red Keep’s walls.

“You are so handsome,” said his mother proudly, pulling him from such dangerous thoughts. Catelyn Stark placed the crown of jagged iron atop his head and adjusted it straight. “You look like a king. Lady Roslin will love you.”

“I hope you’re right,” he replied, “even though I’ve dishonored her already.”

“Physical temptation is…difficult to overcome,” she said, sighing. “But you have dishonored no one. You were not married to Lady Roslin when Jeyne Westerling stumbled into your bed.”
Robb couldn’t put the image of Jeyne to rest. Had he loved her? Certainly not, not so soon, but he could have and that haunted him. I don’t want to think about it. “It doesn’t matter, Mother. Today is for Lady Roslin. I owe her that much.”

“Yes, you do. And she will appreciate it. I promise you that.”

Robb had yet to meet his bride face-to-face. Roslin was said to be a proper lady, or what could be considered a lady by Frey regard. She was seventeen years old, only a year younger than himself, and a lover of the harp and singing. The maesters assured him that she could bear many children and her family spoke of her with the sweetest mentions. But could there be room for love in a bargain? Lord Walder had forced the King in the North to submit to marriage for the use of a drawbridge. That isn’t Roslin’s fault, Robb had to remember, straightening his cloak and sighing at his reflection. I will do my duty by her and put this mess behind me. It’s what Father would have done. Arranged marriage worked out for him, regardless of Jon. The king cleared his throat and turned away from the mirror, pensive.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Catelyn replied, slipping her arm in his. Mother and son stepped out into the hallway, nodding in greeting to those they passed. Grey Wind howled in the distance. Candles illuminated the Twins’ stone walls, bringing an eerie comfort that reminded him of home.

“It brings me joy to see you smile, Robb. You will find favor here with Roslin Frey.”

“Again, I hope you’re right.”

“Trust me.” She squeezed his arm in assurance. “I have prayed too hard and too long for your happiness to watch the gods fail you now.”

If happiness is the price I have to pay to win this war, I will pay it. He glanced to the path ahead, hearing Grey Wind’s restlessness yet again through the open windows. The direwolf seemed exceptionally anxious. “Has Grey Wind been acting—”

“—odd?” his mother finished, “Yes. I don’t like it.” Catelyn’s voice had become much quieter to avoid the possibility of eavesdropping. “I don’t like keeping him outside, away from you, but we will respect their rules here. We won’t be long at the Twins, only to see you married. The sooner we leave, the better.”

“I agree. Still, I worry for him. He sounds distressed.”

“It’s Roslin you should be worrying about, Robb. Not your wolf.” The statement was not bitterly spoken. She turned to him with a pitying smile and encouraged him forward. “Don’t fuss over it. He’s only nervous about being locked up. The night will go as planned and all will be well. It must be.”

She is kind as she is beautiful, Robb thought, admiring his mother’s jovial frame as she walked beside him. Catelyn’s smile lit up her Tully face with delight and sent blue eyes swimming with maternal love. Dark auburn curls bounced with each step and Robb was reminded briefly of Sansa, who was said to look just like their lady mother, only more beautiful at her age. I wonder what she looks like now, he thought, crestfallen. I wonder how happy she would be to see me married.

As if she could read his thoughts, Catelyn stopped in her tracks with an expression of sorrow. “Oh,” she said grimly, “there’s one last thing I forgot. Here.” Catelyn fumbled with a pin on her navy gown and removed it from the fabric. She offered him the little silver trinket in the shape of a leaping trout,
the sigil of House Tully. “It’s made for women’s gowns, but I hope it brings you luck all the same. Forgive me. A mother’s sentiment on her son’s wedding day.” Catelyn slipped the pin into his shirt, just over his heart, and ran her fingers over the cool metal. Robb felt his throat tighten. “I had hoped to give it to Sansa on her wedding day instead, but…”

But she may never have one. Robb knew her fears well, for he shared them infinitely. He placed his hand over his mother’s and kissed her forehead, sealing a promise he’d made many times. “You can give this to her too, when we find her and see her happily married. She will love it just as I do. Thank you.”

Catelyn’s eyes filled with tears, yet she smiled. The pair remained silent as they continued onward.

The hours before the wedding passed like a blur. The sept was decorated with white roses and satin ribbons, though Robb was never one to appreciate such things. He chatted amiably with some of Roslin’s family as well as a handful of his councilmembers; the Greatjon, Roose Bolton and Dacey Mormont, who all added their own spice to the night with delectable conversation that distracted him from his nerves. He moved about the room and introduced himself to those he had yet to meet, ensuring that the Freys of the Crossing would know of his companionship and honesty on a personal basis. Word hadn’t spread about Jeyne, which was just as planned, but he still wanted the Freys to know that his intentions with Roslin were pure. I will do right by her, he thought, and I will try my best to love her as Father loved Mother. I owe her that much, as any man owes his bride.

Wedding bells signaled the ceremony’s commencement. He stood beside the septon and folded his hands respectfully, watching the candles flicker along stone walls. I wish there was a weirwood tree. I would feel more at ease with Father’s gods watching over us. He found himself wondering what a Winterfell wedding would be like when a Stark said their vows. If Arya and Sansa were brought back safely, he hoped to find out someday.

Guests took their rightful places and formalities were spoken. Robb’s hand began to tremble as he realized the gravity of what he was giving away, knowing that this unknown woman would bear his children and his family name. She must have more fear than I. Not a single soul in the kingdom of the North could ease him then. Would he be worthy of her? Would he and Roslin have anything in common? Robb was quite the romantic as his sister was, and he couldn’t fathom a marriage where husband and wife remained strangers for the majority of their lives. He sent a silent prayer to the old gods and new that this match was indeed the right decision, and he hadn’t been too hasty in accepting Walder Frey’s proposal. I don’t want a life of misery.

Roslin entered on cue. Her features were concealed by a veil of lace, walking in tandem with her elderly father. They stepped down the aisle together until they reached the King in the North, and Lord Walder smiled deviously as he turned to his young daughter. He slipped the veil over her head and moved so Robb could see her.

The sight pulled the breath from his lungs.

Roslin Frey was enchanting, with soft doe eyes the color of chocolate and a small chin with lips forming a sweet smile. Her chestnut curls were pulled back in a flattering southern fashion and she knelt gracefully before her king, flicking an anxious gaze up to him. She’s as nervous as I am, he observed to his great relief. I’m almost glad of it, but gods, how could House Frey hide such a beauty from the world?

“I…I hope I am not a disappointment to you, Your Grace,” she said with a voice like shaken silk. Robb offered his hand, meeting her gaze with instant affection. Sparks shocked him as their skin made contact.
“Never a disappointment,” he assured. “You are wonderful, my lady. So wonderful I fear I am beneath you.”

Roslin’s giggle warmed him, and the ceremony proceeded. Vows were said and cloaks exchanged. When the gods saw fit to recognize them as one soul and flesh, he pressed a kiss to her lips and felt their covenant bind tight between them. *I am hers and she is mine. Perhaps this won’t be as terrible as I feared.*

The reception that followed the royal wedding was boisterous and lively. A grand feast littered the tables, filled with salted fish and stuffed turkeys beside cheese-covered seasoned potatoes, vegetable stews with leeks and carrots and spiced cider to drink. The wine ran red and the smiles were many, and Robb was oddly comfortable in Lady Roslin’s presence, even though their first meeting was only hours past. Her laughter was genuine and her manners fitting for a queen. She had a sense of humor and pleasantness about her that was addictive, and an innocence that attracted him. *She and Sansa would get along very well. I can’t wait for them to meet.* Husband and wife sat atop the dias and overlooked the merriment in the great hall, pleased to see that their union had inspired such joy. Robb paused to lace their hands together after the sweetcakes had been served, and met her eyes with glee.

“So,” Robb began tentatively. “Queen Roslin of House Stark. Does that sound strange to you, my lady?”

“Very much so,” she replied with a grin. “But I’ll become used to it as time passes, I think. Is ‘King Robb’ still odd to hear?”

“It’s the ‘Your Graces’ that get me, most days. I never thought I’d hear my father’s bannermen proclaiming me king.”

“That’s good. It shows you’re humble, and it’s clear that they love you.” Roslin beamed. His heart was stirred, almost painfully. “And now, the Crossing loves you too.”

“I will do my best to honor them.” He took her hand and kissed her knuckles, and she giggled effortlessly yet again. The sound was becoming precious to him. Robb felt confidence bubbling in the pit of his stomach—a confidence that someway, somehow, this union to Roslin Frey was truly the right choice.

“Your Grace!” called Greatjon Umber from the back of the dining hall. His voice echoed in deep rumbles, so loud that it silenced most of the chatter. “Give us a speech and be on your way to your royal bedding! We’ve a long march ahead of us and I need some shite words to put my drunken arse to sleep.”

“Do my words sober you, Lord Umber?”

“Aye,” he laughed. “Boring talks always do the damn trick. Let’s hear it!”

Men and women of all births and origins shouted in inebriated approval. Robb glanced over to his father-in-law, who gave a passive shrug as if to say “*they’re your people, not mine.*” Robb kissed Roslin’s hand again before standing from the high seat, raising his glass for a declaratory toast. The wedding guests followed suit.

“This alliance to House Frey brings two parts of the world together,” stated the king. “We have unfinished business in the south; business that we can end united.”

“Shear, hear!” cried a Mormont soldier. “Justice for Lord Eddard!” shouted another, to a long round
of applause. Robb lifted a hand to quiet them.

“The Lannisters have my sisters. They have a grip on our Northern lands that must be severed, and now, with the strength of our forces combined, we can put an end to their rule and rescue Winterfell’s daughters from a terrible fate. Joffrey’s head will sit on our gates until it is little more than a skull. Tell me, who wants to keep Cersei’s bastard atop their hearth when winter comes?”

Placed bets and raucous laughter erupted before him. Robb couldn’t contain his laughter. It occurred to him that the joy was genuine, not forced; for the first time in a long time, he felt at peace with his decisions. *Perhaps I am a better king now than I was when I left home*, he thought. *Listening to my councilors has done me well.* When the chaos of the party became too much for him to bear sober, Robb took Roslin by the hand and led her away while the crowd continued in their drunken merriment. The highest tower was reserved for them, and they consummated their marriage in sight of the gods.

Robb lay in bed with his new bride curled sweetly in his arms. A spark of that initial hope for his cause flared strong in his veins. He kissed the top of Roslin’s head and wished her goodnight before drifting off into peaceful slumber, knowing that he could bring justice for a kingdom that never forgets.

From the distance, Grey Wind howled in anguish to the stars.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, the calm before the storm. I smell heartbreak on the horizon...
Filler chapters are hard to write. Boo. I hope this turned out alright. Thanks for reading!
Chapter four will come on Tuesday. Prepare yourselves.~
*giggles maniacally and dances away*
She kissed him. Sansa Stark had kissed him. There was no blade poised against her throat, no demand for a song about the Mother and her gracious mercy. The little bird acted of her own volition and it haunted Sandor like a plague. Sansa was a true lady. He was nothing but a brute, a dog, the grandson of a kennelmaster bending to the lion’s will. He had treated her with cruelty unlike the knights in her precious songs. He’d been cursed with a face that struck fear in the hearts of those who looked upon him, a face that plunged a once-innocent soul into decades of violence and self-loathing. But she kissed me, he thought to his great despair. She kissed me all the same, and would have kept on doing it if the Imp hadn’t stopped her.

An impulsive part of Sandor wanted to strangle the dwarf when he’d made his presence known. He was close to drawing his blade and would have buried the little Lannister right there, had the sweet chirping of his bird not stopped him from rash action. A week had passed since the fateful meeting in the halls and Sansa hadn’t spoken of it since, but Sandor no longer felt safe, not with the enemy aware of his affection for the Stark girl. Affection? he thought, almost scoffing aloud. Am I so quick
to call it what it’s not?

But deep in his heart, Sandor knew he was a liar. Affection was what it was. Affection was what it would always be.

Evening light threaded into the throne room, casting a pale glow on marble floors illuminated by fire. Sandor hated how Joffrey had redecorated a perfectly fine hall with the taste of his Targaryen predecessors. Basins of flame rested around the circumference of every stone column, and it brought Sandor considerable anxiety. While he was assured that the fire was contained, it made him nervous to stand at the Iron Throne’s side and watch the flames flicker tauntingly. Not much longer, he thought, relieved. Soon I’ll be out of this fresh hell, if only for the night.

The final goings-on of a long day at court were nearing an end. He remained a patient gargoyle at Joffrey’s right side, silent and intimidating. Lesser lords came forward with their summons or inquiries for the king, but Sandor paid no mind to any of them. Political intrigue never held much interest. He tried not to glance over at the young maiden kissed by the same fire he feared, but he couldn’t help himself, could not keep away. She’s wearing that pink dress, he thought, sparing Sansa a look before turning to court again. The one with square patterns on it. Sandor never paid attention to fashion but he liked the way she looked in that particular gown, the way it hugged her waist with a silver belt, the way her orange hair shone brighter in the color’s presence. Sansa’s eyes looked softer when she wore pink. He knew not why. Something to do with colors, he suspected. Exposure to courtly women for most of his adult life meant he’d heard a thing or two about the importance of hue in a lady’s appearance, and he found himself wondering if it truly made a difference. Summer silks were not his forte. But I like the girls that wear them, he thought, giving another glance to the Stark girl. Even if I only get to look.

His thoughts were distracted when Joffrey drew in a long breath and released. The sigh was heard clearly through the growing silence in the hall. Tension rained upon them. Not a single courtier spoke a word, all waiting on the beck and call of a madman. Sandor nearly turned to ensure the cunt was still awake, but the king began to speak, a look of hunger in his eyes.

“Sansa,” Joffrey said. “Come here.”

Sandor inhaled, trying to keep his face expressionless as the little bird stepped cautiously down marble steps to stand before the king. Worry held his muscles tight. She carefully knelt, playing her part, and looked up to Joffrey with blue eyes of fear. “Is there something you need, Your Grace?”

“Me? No, no.” Joffrey rose from the throne and began to pace in front of it, confident and aloof, almost happy. “I am the king of the Seven Kingdoms. What more could I possibly want besides the Young Wolf’s head above my hearth?”

He gets more vicious every day. Sandor gripped his sword hilt.

“If…” Sansa began. “If this is about my traitor brother, Your Grace, you know I had no part. I don’t know what he’s been doing. I have been loyal to you and the crown ever since—”

“I don’t care about your loyalty!”

Sansa fell silent. Sandor feared she would begin to weep. Don’t cry, he begged, but she couldn’t read his thoughts and Joffrey was relentless. “Your brother married Roslin Frey, did you know that? He took the Twins from me and now he’s marching south, here. For you.”

A flicker of joy crossed Sansa’s face before she masked it. “I… I’m sorry, Your Grace. I will do everything I can to right his wrongs and pray for his defeat on the field.”
“Oh, it’s far too late for that.” Joffrey stepped past the Hound and stood tall before her, looking over to Ser Meryn Trant, a pig if there ever was one. “Help the lady stand.” Meryn gripped Sansa by the arms and yanked her to her feet. “If we want Robb Stark to hear us, we’ll have to speak louder. Draw your sword, Ser Meryn, and tell him that he needs to march back home. Maybe he’d listen if her broken body was the words…”

“No,” Sansa begged. “Your Grace, please—“

“Your brother took the Twins from me!” Joffrey shouted. “He took the Riverlands! They are mine!” His face was red and wild with hate. He took several manic steps back and thrust his hands forward in command. “Beat her! Break her, send him a message! I’ll cut her throat myself if he gets any closer to my throne!”

Sandor saw it coming. Mailed fists slammed into Sansa’s ribs and the flat edges of a sword smacked against her thighs. Her pretty dress began to tear and she screamed with each act of savagery, each strike against her. Sandor gripped the hilt of his blade so hard he feared his knuckles would burst through his skin. Promise me, Sansa had begged him weeks ago. Promise me you won’t interfere. If Joffrey hurts me, you can’t help. I won’t let you put your life in danger. He had agreed because he could not deny her anything, but Sandor knew he would regret it, knew Joffrey would give him a reason to. Sandor cursed himself. So fucking blind.

When Ser Meryn lifted his fist to strike another blow, Joffrey held up a hand to stop him. “Wait. I just had a better thought. Yes, much better.” Joffrey placed a gentle hand on Sansa’s cheek and ignored her tears, stroking a finger along the slope of her jaw. Sandor felt rage boil in the pit of his stomach. “Robb Stark took the Freys from me. Maybe I’ll take something of his, too. Something precious, something valuable.” He smirked wickedly. The hair on Sandor’s neck stood straight and he damned himself for not considering the king’s madness.

“Ser Meryn…hold her down,” Joffrey muttered, “and take her. Take her maidenhead and crush it.”

Sansa paled. Ser Meryn’s grin grew sickeningly wide. Cersei tried to corral her son into sense, pulling on his arm and begging for recourse. “Joff, don’t. They have your uncle Jaime, don’t be a fool!” But the king would not listen, not even as the courtiers squirmed and chatted nervously, nor as Tyrion Lannister shouted in her defense. Ser Meryn threaded his fingers through Sansa’s hair and she struggled when he gripped her by the waist.

“Take her to a back room,” Joffrey ordered. “Send letters to Robb Stark and tell him every detail of what I’ve done, because he dared threaten me! If he does not retreat home to Winterfell with his tail between his legs I’ll start ripping hers off! Send the ravens, send them now!” Joffrey’s eyes were wild and manic. Sansa screamed as Ser Meryn pulled her close to him, wrapping a hand around her throat and gripping tight.

Sandor’s resolve chiseled away and left him raw. He felt like a child of six once again, with Gregor’s massive hand shoving his face over a pile of burning coals in the brazier, only this time Sandor had a sword instead of a wooden knight and much more to protect. Sansa shot him a look that begged him to interfere, begged him break his promise and save her.

She didn’t have a direwolf for protection anymore, but she sure as hell had him.

Sandor drew his dagger and lunged. He shoved the steel into Ser Meryn’s armored side and felt blood rush over his hand, not caring whether the wound was fatal. He withdrew his weapon and yanked Sansa behind him, jabbing his blade in the direction of anyone who dared challenge him. The court began to scream as Meryn Trant cursed and keeled over, scarlet pooling around him.
“Dog!” Joffrey exclaimed, red-faced and screaming. “What are you doing, give her back! Let him have her, let them all have her!”

“She’s mine, Your Grace.” It was all he could think to say. He couldn’t form proper words, couldn’t grapple with language fast enough to come up with a reason to save their skins, but his gut took control of his tongue. Sandor snarled through the chaos around him. “The wolf-bitch belongs to me.”

He couldn’t possibly understand how backwards the statement truly was, but Sansa instantly played along. She screamed in terror as Sandor pulled her close. “No!” she wept, struggling as he tightened his grip. “Not him, please, no!”

Even as falsehood, the words hit him hard. Joffrey looked between the two of them before cracking a great grin, clapping his hands in jubilation. He’d fallen for it. “Yes! Perfect! Take her, dog! Rape her and rip her apart! But don’t kill her, don’t harm her face—you know how pretty she is. I would hate to take away her only asset.” The king’s smile was cruel and overjoyed to be so. “Tomorrow we’ll take her to the septas and make sure you did the job right. A dog and the princess of savages. Yes, I like that. The princess of savages…someone write a song!”

The courtiers struggled to laugh. They had no other choice. Sandor couldn’t compromise her further and he grabbed Sansa by the hair, dragging her viciously from the throne room to further the illusion. When he reached the stairs he threw her over his shoulder like a sack. She kicked and screamed, begging for mercy. Is she really that afraid of me? he couldn’t help but think. Suppose she should be. Though he knew her heart, his confidence would not allow him to believe she was acting falsely.

When he reached the first room around the corner, Sandor tossed her carelessly on the bed and she cried out in pain. Fuck, that one was genuine. Torment hovered over his heart like a vulture. He threw the door shut and locked it, resting his hands on the wood in desperate thought, head hung between his arms.

Rape her and rip her apart. Tomorrow we’ll take her to the septas and make sure you did the job right. Sandor trembled with a fury that would put the seven hells to shame, and it exploded from his soul like lava. Streams of violent curses shot from his mouth and he slammed his fist against the stone wall, once, twice, three times and a fourth until his knuckles shattered and the stone cracked under his power. Searing pain ripped through his right arm and it sobered him, but not enough. He stood still for several moments, chest heaving with forced breath and fire in his throat.

I couldn’t save her. I promised I would, I bloody promised.

The bed creaked softly as Sansa rose. Her little frame trembled like a leaf. Her lip was swollen and bleeding but she was still the most beautiful creature he’d ever seen, such a treasure to any who looked upon her. Tears stung his eyes and he forced them back by blinking up at the ceiling.

“You should be terrified of me,” he rasped.

“I could never be—“

“Shut up.” He turned on her and gripped her harshly by the arms. She cried out. “Look at me,” he growled. “Look at me!”

“You won’t hurt me,” Sansa whimpered, her voice soft and sweet. His grip on her loosened and his teeth clenched tight. Tears spilled down her cheeks and the two of them stood wounded in the center of the room, knowing what had to happen before either of them could leave it.

“I have to hurt you.”
“No. You won’t.”

“Did you not hear a single fucking word he said, pretty girl?” Sandor knelt before her. “The septas will check you like an animal to make sure the dog did what it was told. Your brother will put my head on a spike. He should. I’d let him.”

“Stop that,” Sansa said, wiping her tears with porcelain hands that she placed on his cheeks shortly after. “You saved me. I would rather… I would rather do this, with you, than forcefully at the hands of Meryn Trant.” Sansa smoothed the hair from his face and a sob left her lips. “This is how we survive, don’t you understand? He’ll kill you if you don’t. This is how I protect you.”

Oh, little bird. Will you ever stop singing? He captured Sansa’s mouth with his on sudden impulse. He didn’t move her, wrapping his arms tightly and protectively around her back, fingers slipping into her hair and cradling the back of her head. They kissed like the world was fire and they were melting into ash and bone. They kissed like they were desperate, for perhaps in fact they were, desperate for absolution and a saving grace. But this was not a dream or song. No gods would save him now, not after he spread such a precious girl upon a featherbed and fucked her bloody as he’d been told. He was a sinner through and through, tearing the wings from an songbird. He was doing a devil's work.

Sandor broke the kiss suddenly and the two of them gasped for air. She draped her arms around his neck, as tightly as broken bones would allow. “I’m frightened,” she admitted, “but not of you.” He clenched his jaw as she pulled back, resting her hands on his shoulders. Their faces were inches apart. “I’m not scared of you.”

“You know what I have to do.”

Sansa bit her lip. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t you dare. I dragged you into this trap without thinking. You’re the one that has to live with this for the rest of your sweet life, girl. Not me.”

“Shh, don’t say that.” She kissed him again, and he knew that she meant it. Passion shone through her eyes like prophecy. “You said I was yours, back there in the throne room. You can’t tell me you didn’t mean it.”

“I didn’t. I am yours, little bird, like I promised at the Blackwater. But you belong to no one.”

She smiled sadly. “After today, I’ll belong to you.”

“Girls don’t belong to men who rape them.”

“You’re not raping me.” Though her eyes glistened, there was resolve buried within. “You’re saving yourself, saving both of us.”

“Little bird—“

“Stop, please.” She placed her fingers over his mouth to keep him from speaking. “You are the only man here that I trust. You’re important to me, you’re my friend, and…”

And what? But Sandor knew, he had known all along. He pressed his forehead to hers and they rested in each other’s arms. Ghosts of sorrow danced around their hearts, waiting to consume them. He kissed her harshly before pulling away. “Lay down,” he told her, “and do it fast.”

Sansa drew in a breath and obeyed.
When the contact had broken, Sandor turned his back to her and yanked off his armor as quickly as he could. He tossed it carelessly on the table and stripped down to nothing but a tunic and breeches, wondering which emotion would rear its ugly head first, which beast he would face before committing this sin. He could only handle so much. Sandor tried to detach from the situation and pretend that she was just another whore, just a girl who would satisfy a need and be forgotten soon enough, but the thought was impossible to entertain for long. Sansa was precious. Sansa was everything, and he would have to abuse her like a criminal. He had disemboweled men for less. Gregor was always the raper, he thought, but today I’m him. Today I am those bastards from the mob, holding her down. Nothing could bring him greater misery.

Sandor grabbed a candlestick from the table and pitched it violently across the room. The clatter made Sansa gasp and he felt awful for spiking her anxiety. “More noise,” he grumbled, “less likely for that little shit to wonder what’s taking so long.”

Sansa was sitting upright on the bed, shaking horribly and holding her knees to her chest for comfort. She said nothing, only nodded, and the two met gazes once again.

I’m sorry.

I know.

Sansa brushed out her skirts and hesitated, wiping the tears that streamed down her face. She lay back upon the feather mattress shortly after. Sandor cursed the gods and climbed on top of her sweet frame, settling between her legs as gently as possible. Her body was so close to his, so soft and warm and perfect even when concealed by cloth. He yearned to look at her, to rip open the silks and drink in her flesh like wine, to explore every inch and discover what she liked. But Sandor wasn’t ordered to please her. Rip her apart, Joffrey had said. Take her maidenhead and crush it.

“You’re such a pretty thing.” He didn’t realize the words had spilled from his mouth. He swallowed the anxious lump in his throat and met her eyes, and Sansa smiled, the faint sound of a laugh barely audible under her breath.

“Th-Thank you,” she stuttered. “Thank you.”

Sandor stroked his thumb along her split lip, knowing she suffered welts on her legs and possible cracked ribs from Meryn’s fist. “I couldn’t protect you.”

“It’s alright. My brother will come for me and none of it will matter in the end. I’ll tell him what you’ve done for me and he’ll let you live. I promise.”

“I don’t care about living,” he spat. “I want you safe.”

“I’m not safe if you are dead.” Sansa drew in a trembling breath. “Joffrey will take your head if we don’t obey. If you don’t do this…”

“Be quiet.” He gave her a harsh kiss that she returned to the best of her wounded ability. “Let me pretend that this is your choice. Let me have that, little bird, and you’ll never have to look at me again.”

“My lord—“

“Fuck your courtesy.”

“But this is my ch—“
Sandor forced his mouth on hers and her reply was cut short. His tongue pried her lips open and her arms slid around his neck, her kiss as willing as his had been desperate. He ground himself on her and she gasped, no doubt feeling his body’s betraying ache for her pressed against the virtue he would steal. He repeated the movement and Sansa moaned—gods, she moaned, it was not a cry for escape as he expected. Sandor pried the thought from his mind and sat back on his heels to unlace the front of his breeches, hovering over her again when the task was done, sparing her the sight of him. He pulled his sex from the fabric and stroked twice, knowing that the sooner he forced into this wretched task, the sooner he could drown in a sea of Dornish sour and let Sansa Stark forget him. He yanked her smallclothes from under her dress and spread her legs further apart, and Sansa gasped sharply as he pressed his tip against her slit.

Fuck. She’s wet. Yet another thing he hadn’t expected, and for a moment he allowed himself to wonder if she was telling the truth. Maybe this was her choice and despite Joffrey’s order, Sansa wanted this. She’d kissed him and professed more than once that he was her only friend in King’s Landing. But Sandor could never think of himself so highly. I’m cruel and harsh and I’m not a damn knight. She can act all she wants, I know she doesn’t want me.

Sansa placed her hands on his shoulders and gripped them, eyes wide with urgency. He would never forget that face. Choice or not, he felt like a monster.

“Sandor,” she whispered.

“Scream, girl, if you know what’s good for you. Joffrey will want to hear.”

And he pressed into her without another word.

Sansa cried out as he knew she would. Nothing could stop it. Breaking her virtue this way wouldn’t be easy, wouldn’t feel pleasurable for her in the slightest. Sandor wrestled with that in anger. He could not stop, knowing the consequences if he did, but Sansa’s screams made him yearn for death more than anything in his life. Her weeping made him beg for the Stranger, or the Mother’s Mercy from Sansa’s hymn. She was the perfect little performer, the perfect bird, knowing what songs to sing to satisfy Joffrey’s bloodlust. She sang of fear and brutalization that would haunt Sandor until the end of his days. He clenched his eyes shut and dug his fingers into the sheets, desperate for his body to finish so he could leave and climb on the nearest ship for Pentos or Braavos or some other end of the fucking world, away from her, away from this nightmare he was creating. His body wouldn’t listen. Obsessed with escape, Sandor sat up on his knees and gripped Sansa by the hips, thrusting into her at a speed that would please him. The slap of skin accompanied her horrific melody. He wished he could see the way her muscles responded, how her tits bounced or her stomach clenched when he fucked her like this, like a sex-crazed animal. He wished he could see her smile and hear her cries of pleasure. But now wasn’t the time. Sansa’s whimpers left him joyless and her shrieks were nails in his coffin. She would be Sandor’s release in a matter of minutes, but hours later her memory would lead him to the Stranger’s door.

Something had changed. Sansa’s screams melted into sighs of ecstasy and her body tensed, gripping onto the sheets. “Mm—ahh,” she moaned, eyes fluttering closed.

Fucking hell, not like this. Sandor leaned over and clasped a hand harshly over her mouth. Tully eyes shot open. “None of that shit, little bird. Don’t make me think you want this.”

Sansa continued to whimper against his palm. A trembling hand reached up to caress his cheek, and her thumb brushed along the harsh ridges of his burns. She was driving a wooden stake in his heart just by being herself. He could never deserve her.
Sandor kept his pace, one anguished thrust after the other, not ungently. Sansa pressed her free hand over his heart and dug her fingers in his tunic. He gripped her knuckles and held her there, and he kissed away her tears, unable to bear the sight of them. Sandor pumped into her roughly for a few moments and sucked in a breath through his teeth, knowing he couldn’t last much longer. The sooner it was done, the sooner he could leave. Sandor groaned and spilled within her core when pleasure’s betrayal was too much to bear, regret washing over him in waves. They lay panting in each other’s arms and she lifted her head to kiss him, but he shoved her down on the bed with sudden force.

“Sandor—“

“Don’t,” he spat. “Save your lies.” Joffrey had what he wanted now, a savaged maiden and a dog with her flesh in its teeth. Sandor didn’t realize he was crying when he pulled away from her, relacing the front of his breeches in sudden haste and blurred vision.

“Sandor, please,” she begged, trying to pull him back but he yanked his hands free from her grasp. He stormed from the room and left Sansa crying, bleeding, sitting there with her gown and hair all askew, but it mattered not. Dornish sour would call him to forget his pain.

After a night of brawl fights and drunken sparring, Sandor shattered the evidence of his alcoholism on the floor and fell unconscious. He dreamt only of her screams, and a pretty wolf head mounted above the gates of the Red Keep.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter hurt me so much to write, wow. I really hope I got the message across that I was going for. I know that the subject matter is quite sensitive, so I tried my best to ensure that you as readers know that Sansa is consenting in the situation. Sandor refuses to believe it, but she's entirely on board with the idea of sleeping with him. She's just terrified of the repercussions, of losing her virginity under circumstances that aren't her own and the fact that Sandor seems so broken every step of the way, not to mention Joffrey's taunting that will surely follow. Please don’t send me hate, I tried my best.

**You did not just read a rape scene. Sansa consented.** Sandor did too, but he's just stuck in his own headspace trying to make himself believe that he's a monster. That's easier for him to face than the reality of her affections. IT’S ALL SO COMPLICATED.

Sorry if I fucked it up, but whatever, I love it.

Please, it'd be great if you could leave a comment and let me know how you felt about this chapter/the way it was written and the events that unfolded. It'll give me tips about how to use a situation like this in the future for my career and whatnot (since, you know, portraying actual rape is apparently "the thing" in television these days and we all know that can't keep happening). I put a lot of work into this chapter and I'm so happy to finally have gotten to this point. To those of you who are saying "nope I'm done with this fic bye," I'm sorry! Don't watch season five of Game of Thrones. It's way worse. See you Saturday with another pretty heavy update! Thanks for sticking with me so far, sorry for breaking your hearts~

EDIT: Forgot to mention that this chapter was influenced in a very very small amount from a fic called *Always Find Me Here* (aka my favorite Sansan fic to date). TW: for actual rape content.
River winds threaded through curls of ashen brown. Roslin stood peacefully by the open window, excited as a child to see all that lay before her. She’d been fascinated by Riverrun ever since their arrival three days past, and Robb didn’t have it in his heart to blame her. Emerald hills and sparkling Tully rivers had inspired songs for generations. The Riverlands were half of his heritage and he was glad that she cherished them as such. When the war is over, we’ll have to come back. Mother would like that. Sansa and Arya would too.

The afternoon sun shone upon Roslin’s violet gown and crowned her head with gold. She took her husband by the hand and squeezed, beaming out to the glistening water surrounded by thick forests and brush. Tents accompanied by Stark, Frey and Tully sigils dotted the horizon. “Isn’t it beautiful?” giggled the queen. “I’ve never seen a river move as gracefully as this, nor lands as rich and green. I wish we could stay here longer.”

“My mother loves it too.” He slipped a hand around her waist and pulled her close to him, unable to stay away. “She always talked about sitting in this window and waiting for my grandfather to come home. He would wave to her from the river. That’s how she knew he was safe.”

“Our children will wave at you from the windows of Winterfell too, someday.” Roslin leaned on his shoulder and warmth spread through his veins. The promise of having a family with his new bride filled him with an odd sense of longing. He craved a child to call their own. They’d been married less than a fortnight yet already he was devoted to her, wholeheartedly in love and ready to build a future absent of war and violence. Destiny was a strange thing. Queen Roslin was sweet and kind, the most generous of women, and she took her duties as a king’s wife quite seriously. The Northmen
adored her. *Why did I ever doubt this marriage?* he thought with a sigh of peace. *She is a blessing to me.*

“How hopefully I won’t leave our children often,” Robb said at last. “Or you.”

“A king has his duties.”

“He does, but family comes before everything. Family, then duty and honor.”

“You truly are your mother’s son.” She turned to face him and pressed a kiss to his cheek, and he responded by kissing her full on the mouth. Roslin smiled into the contact and he held her by the hips, treasuring her innocent gesture.

“Robb,” came his mother’s voice. *Bad timing.* He broke the kiss and turned to Catelyn Stark, red-faced and slightly embarrassed. *She looks happy,* he thought, *even when mourning her father.* Riverrun must fill her with a joy I can’t understand.

“I didn’t know you had come,” the king said. “What are you doing here?”

“Telling you that you’re standing in front of an open window for all to see,” she replied with a knowing grin, “and that breakfast is ready.”

“Apologies, Lady Stark.” Roslin gave a shy bow of her head. “I didn’t mean to keep the king from eating.”

“You kept him from nothing. He seemed quite happy where he was.” Catelyn chuckled and gestured for the two monarchs to follow her, and they did so without question, for food was impossible to resist.

Breakfast was boiled eggs, seasoned pork and lamb, peppered potatoes and various fresh fruits. Clean water was the greatest of those blessings. The king, his mother and his bride chatted about all manner of things as they broke bread together, from daily goings-on to advice about married life, to the promise of grandchildren and the future that lay ahead of them at Winterfell. It amazed Robb, how well Roslin and his mother got along. There was laughter and friendship between them which he admired above all else. For a moment, Robb allowed himself to believe that there wasn’t a gruesome war demanding his attention. He drew in a deep breath and let a sense of tranquility wash over him. He hadn’t felt so relaxed since before Bran fell from the Broken Tower, before all of this turmoil began. *I wonder if this peace is partially Roslin’s doing.* As if she heard his thoughts, the queen cast him a gentle smile and squeezed his hand under the table. He would be a fool not to squeeze back.

Their stay in Riverrun would be brief, but gratefully so. Robb planned on marching the following morning in hopes of catching Tywin Lannister off-guard with an early arrival to King’s Landing. His men thirsted for the vengeance he’d promised them. Blood and death lay on the road ahead, and perhaps justice as well, but there was no guarantee and war had no rules. Robb’s doubt lingered in his heart like a great beast threatening to tear him asunder. Roslin was comforting in those anxieties as he had been prone to an occasional attack in the night, but his fear only seemed to grow worse despite how well he masked it. *I hope I don’t lead us all to our graves by marching at King’s Landing head-on.*

A soldier knocked on the doors to the dining hall. “Come in,” Robb called, and the man did so, a leaping trout emblazoned on his breastplate. His expression was stressed. “Your Grace,” he announced. “I’m sorry for disturbing your breakfast, but there’s a matter of urgent business that needs your attention.”
“What’s wrong?”

“A group of young boys snuck past our scouts this morning.”

“What?” Robb felt his appetite disappear, scowling at the news. “How could that happen?”

“I’m not sure, but they’re demanding to speak to you. They say it’s important.”

“Robb, don’t,” Catelyn pleaded. “They could be spies. Let someone else handle it.”

Robb shook his head. “Regardless of what they are, I should meet with them if they came all this way. Did they kill anyone?”

“No, but a few scouts were knocked unconscious.”

_Interesting_. “Boys, you say? How old?”

“Can’t say, Your Grace,” the man replied. “The oldest one looked sixteen at best. The youngest, maybe…thirteen?”

“Were they armed?”

“Three castle-forged swords. We took them, don’t worry.”

Robb sighed, dropping the napkin on his plate and pushing away from the table. “Bring them into the main hall. Make sure they’re unarmed and unbound, I’ve no reason to take them hostage yet. I’ll be there shortly.”

“At once, Your Grace.” The messenger took his leave.

“How could three boys have slipped past our men?” asked Roslin, setting down her knife and fork. “They must know the area rather well.”

“Whoever they are, they want to see me and made a point of doing so at the risk of their lives.” Robb felt his hand begin to tremor. _Not now_. “I’ll hear what they have to say and decide what to do with them later. Mother, you should come with me.” Robb stood and kissed his wife on the cheek. “Stay here and finish, it’s alright. This won’t take long.”

“Good luck.” Roslin waved to the king and his mother, and he closed the doors behind them as they left.

“Three boys,” Catelyn stated, deep in thought as she walked by her son's side. “What on earth could they be after?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like the feeling I have.” He clenched his shaking fist and released. “Something bad is going to happen, Mother. Even Grey Wind feels it.”

“He was howling rather oddly last night,” she recalled. “But perhaps you’re overthinking it. What news could three boys bring that would change so much?”

“It took a raven with a piece of paper to tell us that Father died. I’m not taking any chances.” He stopped before the entrance to the main hall and squeezed her hands. “The only way to go is forward.”

“I know,” she replied. “You’ll do whatever needs to be done.”
Robb pushed open the doors to Riverrun’s Great Hall, where the three young strangers in question stood waiting. It was clear that they were orphans of some sort, or bandits, perhaps escaped thieves from a caravan. Their attire was ratted and filthy. He frowned as he looked upon them one by one, their scraggily faces blinking up at him from what he could see at a distance. One was rather large around the middle, another as thin as a stick and fidgety, and the last built for battle with broad shoulders and a muscular frame. He examined them each in turn and took a few steps closer.

“We found them by the river,” stated a Tully soldier. “Dirty as shit, they were. Wouldn’t talk to us. Demanded to speak to you.”

“They seem harmless enough,” Robb observed, stepping aside to let his mother have a look at them. “Do you think they could have come from Harrenhal? We had reports that—“

Catelyn burst into sudden and violent sobs. Her eyes were fixed on the children, expression lightened in inconceivable joy.

“Mother?” Robb gasped, but was left no time to ask questions. Catelyn scrambled across the room and fell to her knees, pulling the smallest child in her arms and weeping so loudly that those in the other halls could hear her. The child’s tears joined hers and they embraced so tightly that Robb could not discern between the two of them. “Mother, what—“

“Thank the gods!” Catelyn cried. “Oh, thank the Mother! Thank the Mother, thank you, thank you…”

The little boy in Catelyn’s arms lifted his head and she smoothed back his short dirty hair. The face underneath was not a boy’s at all, but that of a young girl, a girl from a past of wooden swords and archery lessons, a girl who liked needlework of a different sort. A girl with dark Northern hair and eyes.

A girl named Arya Stark.

“Robb!” she exclaimed, a cry so sweet he could drown in it. “Robb, is that you?”

“Arya?” Gods, it can’t be. Robb hurriedly stumbled to his youngest sister and lifted her up in his arms with brute strength, letting her legs wrap around him as he held her tight. Arya buried her head in his neck and he fell to his knees, pulling her impossibly closer in the sweetest embrace he’d ever expended. The siblings wept to be one, to be whole. The Stark blood in their veins cried out for family. When Catelyn stood, she embraced her two remaining children and cried praises to the old gods and new.

Perhaps I was wrong, he thought, bottling his anxiety and setting it aside for times less joyous.

Perhaps this could all end well after all.

…”and when we left the Brotherhood, I led us along the Trident to get here.” Arya smiled, resting against their mother’s shoulder. Catelyn’s arms draped around her daughter and the remnants of the Stark family sat happily on a balcony, overlooking Tully rivers in the moonlight. Roslin had fallen asleep comfortably a while back, leaving mother and children alone to reconnect. “We heard you would be here, marching south for Sansa. So we came.”
“Those other boys are your friends?” Robb asked. “They’ve been with you this whole time?”

“Mhm. Hot Pie’s a baker, he makes really good bread. He’s been with us since King’s Landing. And Gendry…” Arya smiled just to say his name. “Gendry’s a smith.”

She likes him. Robb knew that look in a girl’s eye. Sansa had shown it many times, though Arya would protest if he said it aloud. “A smith on his way to the Night’s Watch?”

“I don’t know why Joffrey wanted him, but he can’t have him now and the Night’s Watch can’t either. He’s staying with us. With me.” Arya lifted her head from her mother. “We’re not letting him go.”

“No, no.” Robb almost chuckled at how determined she was. “We’re not letting him go. He brought you back safely. He’s welcome to stay as long as he likes.”

“Good. He’ll love Winterfell. I told him as much. He’s a good smith, and a good person too. You’ll like him.” Arya shuffled her hands, grinning to herself before she calmed. The subject changed to one of greater importance. “Why did Littlefinger say I was still at King’s Landing?”

“To deceive me, most likely.” Catelyn frowned and brushed Arya’s short hair from her face. “I expect he wanted me to release Jaime Lannister. He is not the man I used to know. I don’t think there’s a single part of Petyr left in that sad little body.”

“If he lied about Arya, what if he lied about Sansa too?” Robb rested his elbows on his knees. “I need her to be safe. We all do. With Bran and Rickon dead, she’s all that’s left of us. She’s my heir.”

“What about Jon?” Arya asked, ignoring their mother’s sigh.

“He’s a part of the Night’s Watch. He can’t inherit any lands or crowns. If something happens to me, Sansa will be queen.”

It wasn’t a thought any of them wanted to stomach. Robb didn’t like the vision of Sansa in a crown, and not because he believed her to be inept. Sansa would be the greatest queen the North had ever known. She would be benevolent and loved by all, but if the rightful heir to his kingdom was held captive by Lannisters, there was no telling what Lord Tywin would or wouldn’t do to see the North under his hand. She would be a tool for his gain, if she wasn’t already. “I don’t want to think about it,” Robb said at last. “We’ll get our kingdom freed, and that’s all that matters.” He carded his fingers through dark hair. “We’re gonna march south and gut those fucking Lannister dogs if it kills me.”

“Your Grace!”

The king glanced up from his family, caught off-guard by the intrusion to his room. Roslin jolted awake and nearly screamed. Greatjon Umber came barreling in through the king’s bedroom door, rage-filled and angry, clutching a letter in his right hand. “We’re gonna march south and gut those fucking Lannister dogs if it kills me.”

“What’s happened?” Robb exclaimed, standing from his seat.

“It’s the princess,” he panted. “Sansa. It’s Lady Sansa, gods be damned.”

Despair festered in his gut. Robb turned hastily to his sister and mother with a look of horror and gestured for them to follow. He pressed a panicked kiss to his wife’s cheek and left her in their chambers, hoping that she might return to sleep, or better yet that he might wake from a nightmare.
Robb followed the Greathon’s lead with Catelyn and Arya close behind.

The council chamber was filled with only necessary ears—Brienne of Tarth, Dacey Mormont, Roose Bolton and Smalljon Umber. Robb looked at their faces for something, anything with information until he was offered the letter by Lord Umber, bearing the broken seal of House Lannister. He snatched the parchment and feasted his eyes upon the words, reading aloud for all to hear.

**Your Grace,**

I suspect this message will seem strange coming from me, but I feel implored to firsthand. I know I have a bad reputation with your mother, but it is because I respect I’m sending this letter behind my father’s back. Trust me. It is better to hear such words rather than my nephew or his pets. They would turn it into a threat or a joke, an empty matter.

Joffrey was enraged by your marriage to Roslin Frey. He ordered the Hound, Sandor Clegane, to forcefully and violently take Lady Sansa’s virtue as punishment. All of us heard her screams. I begged Joffrey to reconsider, but he is not a man for mercy and this place has died. I daresay that my nephew enjoyed the crime. He is a monster of a man.

I will do my best to protect Lady Sansa. I’ve no ill will toward your House, see her in the hands of family than at the mercy of the people here. I ask for a trade personally give you Sansa Stark in exchange for my brother Jaime, and your quick — Winterfell. Do not strike at King’s Landing. Joffrey will only use your sister against come to battle, and I have no desire for more bloodshed. Consider this and reply in haste running out, and Lady Sansa cannot last forever.

**Sincerely,**

**Tyrion Lannister**

Robb’s hands began to tremble. No one said a word for a long time, Robb least of all, the fire in his chest spreading infernally. Sandor Clegane, he thought in anger. We housed that man, we housed all of them under our roof when King Robert came to Winterfell. They know how delicate Sansa is.

“The courier who brought this letter told me that what the Imp says is true,” Lady Brienne stated sorrowfully. “He said that Lady Sansa hasn’t eaten in days and refuses to leave her chambers. She sees no one.”

“The Mother gave us Arya,” Catelyn whispered, “but Sansa was the Maiden’s price. Will it ever end?”

“Outrageous!” spat Dacey Mormont. “It’s a crime to do something like that to a poor girl, and with the Hound no less? Gregor Clegane’s little brother? The poor girl may be ripped in two or scarred beyond repair!”

“He heard her screaming from the throne room,” Arya muttered, a look of sorrow on her face. She pulled away from her mother and stood beside Robb, firm and determined. “We have to go. We have
“I agree with the princess,” stated Roose Bolton rather dryly. “We can’t give up the lands we’ve taken. Leave King’s Landing behind and you’ll never get this chance again.”

“I’m not talking about some stupid lands!” Arya shouted. “I’m talking about killing the Hound, killing Joffrey, killing all of them! We can’t just let them hurt her and walk away like we’ve forgotten about it, about Father and Jory Cassel and all the others who died for us! You weren’t there,” she choked. “You didn’t see what happened, didn’t see Father on those steps with Joffrey and Ilyn Payne and the queen. I did. We have to go.”

Robb placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. Arya looked up at him with tears in her eyes, and he saw the same fire in her that he felt in himself, raging to a boiling point that would burst and consume them. “We’re not turning around,” he said in a cracked tone. “They can’t kill Sansa, she’s too important to them. And she’s strong, she’s a Stark of Winterfell and she can’t be broken.” Robb tried to steady his breathing, hoping those words were true, but his calm aura burned away and left nothing but indignation. “This cannot go unpunished. They can’t abuse her and expect me to turn around and go home. We’re not cowards in the North. Joffrey did not think this through, and he’ll suffer for it.”

Arya clung to his side. With eyes as cold as Northern snows, Robb met the gaze of his counselors. “Bring the Kingslayer outside,” he spat, “and fetch me a block.”

Rain thundered on the courtyard of Riverrun. Neither Robb nor Arya felt the chill. Grey Wind howled in the distance and clattering chains accompanied the downpour. A single lantern illuminated the center of his counselors’ circle where the prisoner stumbled into view, smothered in mud and shit and grime from months of imprisonment. Karstark soldiers shoved him to his knees before the chopping block. Lannister eyes stared up at the King in the North through the darkness.

“Finally going to kill me, Stark?” Ser Jaime laughed despite his obvious misery. “Thank the gods. I stink of wolf piss.”

“My sword,” Robb stated. The king took his weapon from his squire and drew the blade, gripping it tightly by the hilt.

“A clean cut, boy. Don’t want you to make a mess of it.” The Kingslayer hung his head over the block and drew in a breath. “Do it, come on. Do it!”

“Do you know what your son did to my sister?”

Ser Jaime blinked and looked up to him. He paused before responding. “I don’t have a son,” he said defiantly. “And you’re sister’s right there. Wonder how that happened.”

“Oh, come now. We’re done playing your games.” Robb gripped the Kingslayer by his hair and yanked his head backward, reveling in the groan of pain pulled from Ser Jaime’s lips. They stood inches apart. “Joffrey raped Sansa,” he snarled, rain dripping down his face. “He was upset that I married my queen, so he decided to put Sansa in danger as punishment. He ordered the Hound to rape her so that I might leave him alone.”
Jaime Lannister paled, and said nothing.

“I love my sister, Kingslayer. I spared you harm because I love her so much, but clearly your son
doesn’t think so highly of you.”

“You going to kill me, then?” The words seemed a struggle. “Take off my head to avenge the one
between your sister’s legs?”

“No,” Robb replied. “I’ve a better idea.”

He gestured with his chin to the surrounding soldiers, who forcefully gripped the lion’s right arm and
held it tight on the wooden block. Only then did the Kingslayer protest and beg mercy, knowing
what was to happen, knowing the cost of King Joffrey’s folly.

“Arya,” Robb said as she wrapped her arms around his side. “Don’t watch this.”

“I will,” she replied. “Father always said to never look away.”

With a stroke of justice, Robb sliced the Kingslayer’s swordhand from his wrist. All of Riverrun
heard his screams.

Chapter End Notes

SHIT IS GOING DOWN. I love this chapter sooooo much omg
I really love where the story goes from this point on, eeee~! I was so thrilled when I
came up with this idea. It’s still so satisfying to write. Ah. I can die in peace <3
As always, the next chapter will be yours on Tuesday! I hope you all survive the season
finale on Sunday, for those of you who still watch the show!
See ya soon, lovelies. Thank you so much for reading. I hope I got all the
characterizations right in this chapter, so many. xoxo Cheers~!
Cersei paced the council chamber with a glass of wine in her ring-crested hands. Varys and Pycelle watched in anticipation while Lord Baelish scanned over the dreadful message they’d received that morning. After a moment of silent reflection, he placed the parchment back on the table with a look of neutrality. "This can’t get any more complicated," Tyrion thought, "but it will certainly get worse.

The King in the North had delivered a love note.

I should have grabbed Joffrey by the balls and thrown him into the Narrow Sea. Each day that passed saw his family’s cause slipping further and further through their fingers while the wolves closed in around them. He was at a loss of what to say. Cersei broke the silence first, her voice poignant and frustrated.

"Jaime Lannister sends his regards. Winter is coming.

‘Jaime Lannister sends his regards.’ What have they done? They could kill him."

“The Starks have…always been savages,” added Pycelle with several nods of his head. “They are entirely unpredictable. We should prepare for the worst.”

“Agreed,” said Tywin. “The Young Wolf fights for vengeance. That makes him relentless. He will stop at nothing to see us brought down. We need to act before this rabid pack of beasts marches on our doorstep.”

“Are you telling me that you fear Robb Stark more than your own grandson?” Tyrion was entirely out of patience. Every head in the room turned to stare at him, but he did not back down, forced to his wit’s end. “None of you seem to remember that this is all Joffrey’s doing. If he hadn’t so carelessly chopped off Ned Stark’s head and abused Lady Sansa, we would be having an entirely different conversation! And, may I point out, that not a single one of you has inquired to Sansa’s wellbeing. Have you visited her? Have you made sure she is comfortable? Have any of you lifted a finger in her protection?!”

Silence pierced the room. Tywin glared daggers at his son from across the table. “Why should her happiness be any of my concern?”

“If we want Jaime back in one piece, it should be our primary concern. Regardless, she’s a child, or have you forgotten? She’s just a girl.” Tyrion felt his heart ache, remembering the way she screamed. “I knew the lot of you were heartless pigs, but not to this degree.”

“I went to see her the day before yesterday,” Varys said with a saddened smile. “She did not say much, only that the pain had subsided and she wanted to be alone. I agree with Lord Tyrion. Stark or not, she is only a young girl in need of protection. The king’s order was…less than humane.”

"I, too, went to see her." Littlefinger gave an odd smirk. "I believe she's holding up."

“I would sell her to the Hound myself if it meant getting Jaime back,” Cersei muttered, standing by the window with her cup of wine. “Even to Ser Meryn, when he heals. I would rip her apart for Jaime's sake.”

Tyron shook his head. “I suspect if the situation were flipped backwards and Myrcella was raped by a Dornish brute, you would not be saying the same thing.”

“How dare you—“

“How dare I? No, we’re past the point of blaming.” Tyrion climbed down from his chair and made for the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“None of you want to face the fact that we have a monster for a king," he spat. “Fine. Live in your denial, but keeping Sansa safe was the only key to less bloodshed when her brother comes. Now that we’ve lost everything at the hands of a madman you raised, someone has to do something. I’m going to see Lady Sansa and try to right these wrongs as best I can. If Robb finds victory here, this may save our heads, or at least mine. Quite frankly, dear sister, I’m not very fond of yours.”

He ignored every protest. Tyrion slammed the door as he left the Tower of the Hand, descending serpentine stairs and storming out into the daylight. Clouds rolled through the skies and smothered the sun, casting a gloomy grey hue across the Red Keep. *There’s a storm coming*, he thought with a shiver. *I hope we’re all prepared when it does.*
A week of chaos had trudged by since the incident with Sansa Stark. Most of the nobility pretended it never happened. When asked, the majority would simply frown and mention that such “nasty business” was “disappointing,” and they dared not speak out against the king who ordered it. Few people were concerned enough with Sansa to visit; Varys and Littlefinger of their own admission, Shae, and Margaery Tyrell by the side of her grandmother were the only ones to see her. Cersei had done her best to keep Joffrey occupied and away from Sansa’s chambers, but on occasion he came to throw taunts and make jokes. Never once was the Hound present for those confrontations and Sansa wasn’t harmed, at least not physically, not yet.

Still, there was more to this tragedy that met the eye. Tyrion was convinced of it.

It was Tyrion who’d discovered Sansa weeping after the rape, covering herself with her damaged gown, dried blood on her pale thighs. She looked horrified to see him standing in the doorway. He’d held up his hands to show innocence, promising to fetch her handmaiden and ensure no one else disturbed her, but the sight of Sansa was enough to sicken him and he couldn’t tear it from his mind. The loss of innocence struck his frayed nerves. She was brutally taken against her will, and it made his blood boil fiercely. He’d tried to confront the Hound hours later to make him fully aware of what he’d done, but when he found Sandor Clegane he was passed out drunk in his chambers. Shattered glass from a wine bottle smothered the floor, and bruises from a long brawl dotted the skin that showed.

Tyrion couldn’t understand it. A fortnight past he’d seen the two snogging in the halls, yet days ago the Hound grabbed her by the hair and dragged her from a horrified throne room. What had changed to cause the animosity? Was gaining her trust a part of Joffrey’s sick plan? No, he thought, my nephew is far too foolish to orchestrate something like that. I have to get to the bottom of this. Saving Sansa Stark could mean saving all of us.

Before making the climb to Lady Sansa’s chambers, Tyrion stopped at the kitchens and put in an order for lemon cakes. He knew they were her favorite. Shae constantly complained about eating so many of the damn things in her lady’s service. If Sansa needed anything at this moment, it was comfort, and perhaps a simple dessert would do the trick. When the cook offered him a fresh platter of the little treats, Tyrion thanked him before turning in the opposite direction.

“She’ll get out of bed for lemon cakes, he hoped, just as Shae gets out of bed for chocolate and good wine.

Tyrion climbed the steps and came face-to-face with Sansa’s door. Deep breath. He knocked softly and cleared his throat. “Lady Sansa?” he called through the wood. “Lady Sansa, it’s me. Tyrion Lannister. I brought you a gift. Could I come in?”

Seconds passed before he heard her broken reply. “Come in,” she said, and he obeyed.

Sansa Stark was still abed, sitting upright with her knees close to her chest. Auburn hair fell about her shoulders in tumbles of wild fire and her eyes were puffy from tears. The poor girl, he thought, for looking at her was heartache. He held up the platter of lemon cakes so she could see them. “I hear that these are your favorite,” he said rather poorly. “I’m not partial to lemons myself, but I thought I’d offer you some company.” He set them on the small table by the balcony and flashed her a smile. “Please, my lady. Sit with me a moment.”

Tyrion wasn’t sure that telling her to do anything was a smart idea, but before he could recall his words Sansa climbed down from her bed with a sniffle. She drew a blue robe from her dresser and slipped it over her shoulders, padding cautiously over to the table. He pulled out a chair for her.

“Thank you, my lord.”

“Tyrion,” he replied. “My name is Tyrion, Sansa. You may call me such.”
“…Thank you, Tyrion.”

“You’re welcome.” He stared at her in contemplation, wondering what sort of horrors she might be replaying in her mind. *The girl has so many traumas to choose from, now.* He moved around to his own seat and sat back in the chair, drumming his fingers along the edge. “How are you feeling?”


“Good. And you’re sleeping well?”

“Well enough.” Sansa picked at a lemon cake, taking a much smaller bite than a happier Sansa would have. She bit her lip before speaking. “Uhm…my lord, might I ask a question?”

“Of course.” Tyrion offered a friendly smile.

“Have you seen him, by any chance?”

“Seen who?”

“The Hound.” She bit her lower lip. “I haven’t seen him since…”

Tyrion furrowed his brows. “Why do you ask?”

“He’s been avoiding me, I think. He was so broken.” Tears formed in her Tully eyes. “I only want to talk to him, to tell him that he’s innocent, but he won’t even look at me.”

“Why—hold on, I’m rather confused.” Tyrion leaned forward and captured her gaze. “This man savaged you, raped you, held your trust and betrayed it, and you want to make sure he’s alright?”

“No, he didn’t—we just—” Her eyes went wide. “Lord Tyrion, you knew, you saw us in the hall weeks ago. Sandor and I, we…”

Tyrion’s stomach fell through his feet. “You what?”

The bedroom door forced open. Shae stepped in with a fresh chamber pot and towel, closing the door behind her, but she gasped to see her lover sitting across from a terrified Sansa. “What happened?” she asked sternly, eyeing both of them. “Sansa, what is he doing here?”

“It’s alright, Shae. Lord Tyrion was just leaving.”

“No I wasn’t.” *I’m not backing down from this one.* Tyrion glanced from Shae to the lady and leaned forward. “Sansa, what are you not telling me?”

Her hands began to shake. “I can’t—I can’t, you’ll hurt him, Joffrey will hurt him—”

“Why would he do that?”

“Stop it,” Shae demanded. She placed the chamber pot on the floor and rushed over to Sansa, wrapping a protective arm around her. “You should leave, my lord. She is very tired and—”

Tyrion held up a hand to silence Shae, though his expression was not one of bitterness. She cut off her words and glared at him. He managed to capture Sansa’s gaze and hold onto it. “My lady, I said I would never hurt you. You can trust me to some degree. I might be a Lannister, but I don’t think hurting young girls is the right answer to furthering my family legacy, and I’ve no intention of betraying that. What are you hiding in regards to Sandor Clegane?”
“I can’t trust you,” Sansa replied. “I never will.”

*I should have known better.* Tyrion exhaled and rapped his knuckles on the table in disappointment. “Ah. I see. That’s unfortunate.” *Maybe I was wrong,* he thought. *This truly can get more complicated.*

Awkward silence flooded the room, interrupted only by chirping birds and distant city noise. After a few moments, Shae spoke. “Sansa, you can trust him.” She gave Tyrion a look he didn’t quite understand. “You can trust my lion because I do. We are going to protect you together, no matter what.”

_Are you mad?!_ Tyrion shot up from his chair to warn Shae what she was doing, but he could offer no reprimand that wouldn’t scare Sansa into disbelief. His heart thundered in his chest, horrified to make his secret known. He met Shae’s eyes and found sympathy looking back at him. _She only wants to protect her,* he realized. _She sees herself in Sansa. How could I expect her not to?_ He couldn’t fault her for such devotion. Tyrion drew in a breath and forced it out, wondering what fresh hell he was about to enter. He reached for Shae’s hand and she gladly offered it.

“A secret for a secret, then.” Tyrion clenched his jaw, grappling for the right words. *May as well just say it.* “Shae, she…she’s my lover. I put her in a position as a handmaiden to stop my father from finding out about her. He threatened to have her killed. I love her too much to see that happen.”

Shae’s smile was warm and sweet. He yearned to kiss it were they not in young company. Sansa’s mouth fell open and she looked from Shae, to Tyrion, to Shae once again. “How long?”

“Since I returned from your mother’s custody,” he replied.

“The whole time you were Hand of the King?”

“Yes. And before then, too.”

“But how, how did you…” She stopped her inquiry then.

“How did we hide it? Similar to you and the Hound, I’m sure, for whatever reasons you find him desirable. But that’s a conversation for another time. I’m more concerned with your safety.” Tyrion let go of Shae’s hand in favor of Sansa’s, but she flinched away from him, causing his confidence to waver. “My lady, we can’t help you if you don’t tell us everything.”


“But you told me not to trust anyone,” Sansa replied. “You said it was safer that way.”

“For a thirteen-year-old whore running away from Lorath, it was. For you, it’s not.”

Sansa considered that a moment, eyeing Tyrion suspiciously with blue eyes full of tears. “You can’t tell anyone. I’ll tell you only if you promise to save him.”

“I can’t make that promise,” said Tyrion with a frown. “But I can guarantee that my lips will be sealed, as I said before.”

Sansa slowly ate the lemon cake in her hand, pausing to think. He couldn’t say what fears and anxieties she must be pushing past for the sake of her heart’s well-being. Sansa was silent, the wheels in her head turning so fast that he thought they might burst. By the time she was ready to speak, Tyrion had relaxed in his chair and Shae placed a hand on the lady’s back, rubbing in slow circles for comfort.
“Sandor,” Sansa began. “He’s my protector. During the Battle of the Blackwater, he came to my chambers and asked me to leave with him. I begged him to stay. He kissed me and kept me safe. We haven’t been together, or hadn’t been, until…” She sighed, looking down to her hands. “We only spoke a few times, but he would bring me gifts when Joffrey hurt me. Like lemon cakes or fresh water, a cloth for my tears. When you found us in the hallway, Lord Tyrion, do you remember? That was the first time we’d been alone since the battle. And then Joffrey…” She wiped the tears that spilled from her cheeks. “Joffrey made that awful order. Sandor hated him, I saw it, but we had to do it or else the septas would know and he’d lose his head for betraying the king. I only screamed because I had to. He didn’t hurt me. I’m not afraid of him. I care for him. I want him here.” Sansa fell into gentle weeping that shook her like the wounded girl she was, wiping her eyes with a suspiciously familiar handkerchief. “But he won’t even talk to me, he thinks he’s done something terrible beyond repair and that I’m scared of him just like the others.”

Oh, fuck me. Tyrion wished he could shoot the bird out of the sky that sent his plea to Robb Stark, or travel back in time to stop his foolish hand from writing. He gave Shae a look of anguish before reaching across the distance between them, taking Sansa’s hands in his whether she willed it or not. “What if I plan a way for you to meet outside the castle walls?” he asked. “To talk things out, convince him from his drunken stupor. If you write him a note, I’ll make sure he gets it. As much as I loathe the man, Shae hasn’t killed him yet for laying a hand on you, which means he must be of great importance. You need protectors here, Sansa. Joffrey will want to hurt you even more now that your brother has decided to march on King’s Landing.”

“I know.” She let out a sigh. “I can be brave, I’ll survive. But I worry for him. I heard that all he does is drink and fight, and it’s my fault.”

“No it’s not.” Tyrion locked her gaze. “Do you love him, Sansa?”

She bit her lip and gave no reply. It was the only answer he needed.

“Well, that settles it. Write your note. Bring it to me before nightfall and I’ll see that he gets it.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Sansa hugged herself, perhaps ashamed of her confession, but there was nothing Tyrion could do to comfort her that he’d yet to offer. Shae gave him a look that said he should leave the lady to her grief, and he obeyed, standing from the chair.

“I’ll tell you when the time comes, my lady. Until then, please eat something. Even if it’s only lemon cakes. Wipe your tears, take a walk with Lady Margaery. Something to lift your spirits until I return.”

“I’ll try.” For the first time in days, he saw her smile, even though it was small and forced. “Thank you, Tyrion.”

“You’re welcome.” He knew she was still suspicious, as she had every right to be, but the only way forward was through a sea of doubt. Tyrion had no idea if a note would work, but he had to try for all their sakes. He left his lover and Sansa Stark alone in her chambers, sending a silent prayer to whatever gods listened that somehow, someway, this would all lead to a positive end.

Chapter End Notes

*squints at this chapter through a microscope*
*squints harder*
I have no idea why this chapter feels odd to me, but I've been staring at it for 87 years so
I might as well just post it and see what you think. Characterization maybe? I could have made this chapter longer...I JUST DON'T KNOW. TAKE IT. *shoves chapter at you* Saturday's update will be a good one. <3 Until then, my dears, have a good week!
Warm autumn breezes breathed half a life into Sansa’s veins. She drew in deep from her lungs and exhaled through her mouth, letting a sense of refreshment wash over her like rain. Though her joy was broken in Sandor’s absence, it was nice to leave her chambers as Lord Tyrion suggested and walk through the gardens with Margaery at her side. It offered a pleasant distraction from her misery. *I still bear the bruises from the way he held my arms,* she thought, *but he didn’t hurt me. He never could.* Though fresh wind brought her comfort, nothing could dull the ache in her heart that Sandor Clegane left behind.

Sansa hated the way others looked at her with pity and fear. She was used to being a prisoner of the Red Keep and the snakes that lurked within, but knowing Sandor suffered equally was far too much to bear. He ignored her at every turn and drowned himself in drunken fighting when he wasn’t at Joffrey’s side. Gossip suggested that he was becoming a glutton on the power rape had given him, that he was truly craven just like Ser Gregor. But Sansa knew better. Joffrey’s order had condemned them both, yet Sandor refused to believe he was anything short of monstrous. Many would call her a fool for her devotion, but she’d long since stopped caring for the opinions of others. All that mattered was how he felt. She would have to prove his innocence to him. *Somehow. Some way.*

News of Robb’s march was all the encouragement Sansa needed. The thought of reuniting with her family brought more happiness than romance ever could. She ached to see Robb and meet his new wife, to pet Grey Wind again and bury deep in her mother’s warm embrace. She thought of her father’s bannermen and the summer snows of Winterfell, of warm hearths and Stark smiles. *Oh, how sweet it’ll be to see home again. And Sandor will be there too. One way or another, he will be.*

She’d become so lost in her mind that Sansa hardly listened to Margaery’s words. The future queen’s
chipper laugh pulled Sansa from her thoughts and she blinked, feigning a look of interest.

“And then, Lyra fell clean off her feet! Poor dear. We all laughed at her like the wicked little girls we were, but I felt terrible after that and brought her flowers later.”

“I bet she liked them,” said Sansa dryly. It wasn’t that she disliked Margaery’s company. She simply wanted to be elsewhere. “Tyrell flowers are said to be the most beautiful.”

“I hear that winter flowers are just as pleasant.” Margaery chuckled and slipped her arm in Sansa’s, walking side-by-side despite odd looks and glances. “I’m glad Lord Tyrion could convince you to come walk with me. I quite missed your presence, I hope you know that.”

Sansa tried her best to smile. “As I’ve missed yours.”

“You’re too kind. I’m nothing special. I’m so exhausted from all the wedding preparations and councils, I fear I’m not good company these days.”

“Any company is good company,” Sansa replied. “I don’t get many visitors anymore.”

“So I’ve heard. It must be awful.”

“It’s alright. I like the quiet.” There’s only one person I want to see, anyway. Margaery reached forward to curl a strand of auburn hair behind Sansa’s ear, but she flinched. Margaery’s smile soured. “Oh. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have been so forward.”

“No, it’s alright.” Sansa never liked being touched so openly, not after what Joffrey had done, but her sensitivity was heightened of late and she knew precisely why. Sandor’s avoidance made her believe that all physical touch was unwanted. Sansa couldn’t explain it. She curled her hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have moved away.”

Silence passed between them. The future queen looked to her guards, then sorrowfully back to the wounded girl. “Do you happen to have a sworn shield?”

“Yes.” Sansa bit her lip. “I mean, no. I used to.” I just want to go back to my room. Sansa hugged herself and stared out to the water, wondering how many more days it would take for Robb to set her free.

“House Tyrell has some of the finest knights in Westeros. I’m sure one of them would be honored to guard the heir to the North.”

Sansa knew Margaery would believe her to be a frightened victim of sexual violence when the truth was far from it. Nowhere else made her feel safer than in the arms of Sandor Clegane, for nowhere else was safe. None other had proven their devotion or stoked a fire in her heart she didn’t know was kindled. She didn’t want anyone but him to look after her. “Thank you for your offer, but I can’t. Joffrey would be offended. I don’t want to make him hate you.”

Margaery seemed to understand. She rubbed Sansa’s back in soft circles and the Northern girl did not move away. Instead, she accepted the hug that the young queen offered, letting the comforts of human contact soothe the sadness in her soul. Sansa wished she could tell Margaery the truth, tell them all the truth and spare Sandor the humiliation of being treated like a beast. He put himself in danger for me, she thought, but I can’t do the same for him. It isn’t fair.

“Lady Sansa,” came a high voice from behind, and she turned. Lord Varys smiled to her and the pity in his eyes was not missed. Sansa pulled away from Margaery and regained her composure as
quickly as she could.

“Lord Varys,” said Margaery politely. “Is there something you needed?”

“Yes, actually. Lady Sansa’s presence is requested by Lord Tyrion. I came to accompany her, seeing as I was in the area. I do hope you don’t mind.”

Sansa had almost forgotten about the note, about Lord Tyrion’s promise. Her sadness had become so familiar. “I—yes, of course.” Margaery did not seem thrilled to let Sansa go with the infamous spymaster, but she didn’t care, for once letting concern for the Tyrell’s feelings slip away. Sansa hardly offered a goodbye as she followed Lord Varys rather eagerly.

The letter. I forgot all about the letter. Thank you, Lord Tyrion, thank you.

“You look well today, my dear,” Varys said as he walked with her into the Red Keep. He gave her a genuine smile. She had seen so few of those lately. “The open air agrees with you. It is always a tragedy when beauty remains locked behind closed doors, even of its own will.”

“Thank you, my lord. You’re very kind.” Sansa agreed that her appearance was quite lovely. Light blue silks hugged her frame, with silver birds stitched along the bodice and a belt of the same hue. Auburn curls tumbled freely down her back. She met eyes with a courtier, who stared sadly until she passed. “It’s nice to be outside again.”

“And the pain has subsided, too?”

“Yes. For the most part.”

“And the bleeding?” he asked in a quieter tone.

Her heart sank. “How did you know?”

“They don’t call me the Master of Whispers for nothing, my dear. Though it concerns me, I don’t think you should send for a maester just yet. It could simply be the moon’s turn that causes such an effect.”

“It’s really nothing to worry about,” said Sansa. “Just a little bleeding. It might not be him that caused it.” She curled her hair behind her ears, uncomfortable.

“If it gets any worse, send for someone. You should be healed, but the female anatomy has always been a mystery. Most of the maesters are occupied with Ser Meryn anyway. Forgive me. I did not mean to make you feel unsafe.”

But you did, Sansa thought, hugging herself close.

Varys gestured for her to follow him down a set of descending stairs, and she realized she knew not where they were headed. Sansa glanced back to the empty hallway before hesitantly following. She walked down the steps with him in silence until the surroundings grew so dark that she could barely see his outline. “We may speak freely here,” he said. “You needn’t worry.”

“Lord Tyrion,” she stuttered. “He’s not here, is he? Where are you taking me?”

“Oh. I’m sorry, forgive my ill manners. I’ve walked this path so many times. I forget most people aren’t accustomed to it.” He pulled flint from his pockets and approached a nearby torch, striking it to life and taking it by the handle. The flame’s orange glow filled the halls around them. “Here we are. Some light, is that better?”
“Yes,” she lied. “Where are we going?”

“To Flea Bottom, my lady. To an alley off the streets where you will meet with Sandor Clegane.”

Sansa’s mouth fell open. Varys noticed her pause, frowning back to her. “Is something wrong?”

“You’ll tell Joffrey,” she panicked. “Lord Tyrion said he would meet me, he promised and Shae did too—”

“Lord Tyrion thought it would be too suspicious if he came himself, and would not send Shae for her own protection.” Varys stepped forward but did not invade her space, giving her a pitiful look she’d seen so many times. “My lady, listen to me. I’m going to tell you a secret; I don’t serve Joffrey.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I’ve no intention of betraying you. If a man like Sandor Clegane can be brought to his knees by a young girl from the North, she must have a love of legends.” His smile was earnest. “I serve the realm, you see, and your sadness doesn’t better Westeros. I’ve no desire to see it continue. Thousands will die when your brother makes war with Tywin Lannister at our gates. There will be much suffering then. If all goes as planned, you and your sworn shield will both be safe from it.”

Somehow, every word that came from the eunuch’s mouth felt genuine. She believed him. Sansa had become excellent at detecting liars. “You’ll…you’ll take me to him?”

“Yes.”

“Unharmed?”

“Of course. Do you know me at all?” He gave a snide little chuckle, turning away without another word.

By the time they reached the end of the catacombs, night had fallen on King’s Landing. Sansa peered out of the small iron gate to the streets of Flea Bottom, admiring how the moon’s glow illuminated the cobbles and painted walls. “It’s not safe,” Varys said, “but it’s safer, which is what matters. Here. Take the lantern and this cloak, put on the hood.” Sansa took the robe he offered and fastened it around her neck, covering auburn hair with the fabric. She held the lantern in her hand. “The Hound should be waiting for you down the third alley to the left.”

“Thank you,” Sansa said, feeling anxiety and joy fill her at once. “You don’t know how much this truly means to me.”

Lord Varys chuckled. “No, my lady. I don’t believe I do.” He gestured for her to leave, and she did so without looking back.

Third alley on the left. It was hard to discern what qualified as an alley and what did not, but Sansa was confident in her ability to navigate. The light of her lantern guided the way. She took the third left as Varys instructed and walked down towards a small bench pressed up against the wall. No one was nearby, not even Sandor. She took a seat and placed the lantern beside her to wait.

Twilight melted to darkness. Ten minutes passed, which faded into twenty and thirty while stars glittered overhead. Drunken lovers and gamblers passed by. Candles flickered to life in open windows and slurred chatter filled the silence. A few guards of the City Watch walked by on patrol, but did not recognize her. She clutched the cloak closer about her shoulders as a chill ran down her spine, watching the moon rise higher in a diamond-studded skyline. The poor of King’s Landing retreated into their homes for rest, leaving the criminals and partiers to litter the streets with rum and
He isn’t coming. She’d been sitting for an hour by the time reality struck her. Sandor must not care. She thought of her note and what it said, wondering if perhaps she made some sort of error that pushed him further away from her. What had she done wrong? Was it so difficult for him to see his innocence?

What am I thinking? Of course it is, Sansa realized. He has known nothing of love his entire life. He doesn’t know what it looks like, doesn’t know how unconditional and pure it is. He didn’t grow up with a mother and father in love like mine, nor brothers and a sister to protect him. He sees me as a victim because that’s what he expects.

A note wouldn’t summon Sandor Clegane from his drunken stupor. Words were wind, crumbling in the absence of lips to whisper them. She had to face him. She would not let her confession blow away into dust.

Sansa gripped the lantern and stood from the bench. If Sandor would not come to her, she would have to go to him, no matter how long it took to search.

At first she didn’t know where to look, frightened by the glaring faces in the night. Luckily her cloak concealed the richness of a dress that would identify her as nobility. Sansa was a walking target for the thieves and perverts who lurked this far from the castle, far from guards who would give her honest protection. Men looked at her like starving wolves to fresh meat. But they are wrong, Sansa thought with a burst of pride. I am the wolf here, and the hour is mine.

A brothel was Sansa’s first guess. She did not think it past Sandor to seek physical affection where she was forced to deny it to him, but when she asked the young man in charge, he said he hadn’t seen the Hound. “You’re his type though,” he added as she turned to leave. “He always likes the girls with red hair.” She blushed like mad and fled.

Her next guess was a brawling pit. Sandor always liked to fight, but when she approached an area similar to what she imagined one to look like, two massive men gave her such terrifying glances that she was instantly scared away. She dashed into the next alley while her heart leapt to her throat. Sansa was a brave girl, but still a girl, alone in Flea Bottom nonetheless. She had no protection here. Still, she had to think that Sandor would not enjoy being around men as frightening as those, so she continued on to her final stop in hopes of finding him without trouble.

The tavern’s name was Dunk & Egg. She’d heard it was rather popular with the locals. Shae had spoken of it often, though it was rare for her to spend a night out. This must be right. It has to be, or I’m lost. Sansa gripped her lantern close, knowing she couldn’t take it inside, so she left it atop a barrel in an alley nearby before taking a deep breath and pushing open the tavern door.

Sansa had never seen an inn so lively. The growing crowd sang and danced to the tune of “The Bear and the Maiden Fair,” drunk and merry. She was thankful for the distraction. The jovial surroundings meant she could remain unnoticed. Sansa snuck around the group of dancers and crept to the very back of the room, turning to watch them when she reached a safe place. A young woman and an older man played the role of the maiden and the bear. He pulled her in and she squirmed when the chorus played, but as they began to dance she laughed in delight and kissed him. Margaery would like this. Sansa couldn’t help but chuckle at the scene, leaning against the back wall to watch and keep her heart calm.

“Something funny, girl?” came a familiar voice. Sansa turned to look at a shadowed figure in the corner, chugging from a skin of wine. His laugh was dry and bitter. “A bunch of fools and their cunts. Come ‘ere, I’ve need of you.”
He’s not wearing any armor. Bruises covered the skin she could see and his movements were lazy, almost pained. She stepped closer to him. “I was just enjoying the song, ser,” she said with the faintest of smiles. “‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ is one of my favorites.”

“Piss on the bloody song,” he spat, grabbing her by the wrist and yanking her closer. “Come on, girl, pour me some more wine or I’ll—“

Dark eyes met hers, wide and horrified. They stared at each other in recognition. Where Sandor was frightened, Sansa felt only joy, if a partial sense of irony. The grip on her wrist did not loosen and his mouth wore a tight frown. She could not smile while he looked so traumatized. The wheels in his head turned at a fierce speed, trying to catch up with his understanding that Sansa was standing there, hooded and happy to see him. Don’t be afraid, she wanted to say, reaching out to touch his face. He cringed.

The tune of “The Bear and the Maiden Fair” continued to play. Sandor snatched her by the arm and she gasped in pain, following him as he dragged her from the inn with a fierce grip. He pulled her out of the tavern and into the streets, down the alley where she had left her lantern sitting atop a barrel. He slammed her back against the wall and snarled.

“What the hell are you doing here, little bird? Come to get fucked again?”

“You’re drunk,” she said in a trembling voice. She didn’t like the look in his eyes. “You’re drunk and you’re trying to scare me. It won’t work.”

“You think you know me so well. Spit on that, you don’t know shite.”

“I know you’re not a monster,” she replied. “No matter how hard you pretend to be one, you’re not. You never have been.” She placed a hand over his heart and gripped his chest, fingers curling into his tunic, just as she’d done before. “I know you, Sandor. I know who you are and who you aren’t. You won’t hurt me.”

“Little bird—“

“Please. Please listen.” Sansa reached up and placed her fingers delicately over his lips to quiet him, tracing their softness. She felt his muscles slowly begin to relax and his grip on her loosened. Rough hands slid delicately around her back, holding her like she was something precious and breakable. Perhaps that was how he saw her, though she was no longer made of porcelain. “You can’t run from me,” Sansa whispered. “What Joffrey ordered was terrible and cruel, and it hurt me, but you didn’t. Couldn’t you see that I wanted you? I still do. I care for you. Stop drinking, stop fighting and punishing yourself for a sin that isn’t yours. Listen to me, please,” she begged with a voice like summer silk. Sansa gripped at his heart and cupped his cheek. “Do you know what I’m trying to say? Can’t you see how truly loved you are? Not even Joffrey can take that away. Not even you.”

Sandor’s expression was confused, tormented yet tamed. She’d stripped away the mask of animalistic aggression, leaving nothing but the two of them. He kept her pinned against the wall and met her gaze with tear-filled eyes that melted like pools of warm steel. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came forth. Instead he moved her hand from his face and pressed his lips to hers, for action came to him quicker than words ever could.

He tasted so sweet when they kissed this way, absent of any pressure. He tasted of innocence lost, of wine and forbidden love and intoxicating heat. The hesitance of their kiss was quickly ignited with the rekindled passion they’d always held, no longer bound by the concept of virtue and virginity. How foolish were those things? Had her purity not been taken so highly, perhaps they would never have had to do what was done. But it didn’t matter now.
She cupped his burned cheek and his fingers slipped into her hair, gliding along her scalp and making her sigh. His tongue met hers and she hummed at the wholeness that overwhelmed her, knowing he desired her, knowing she was truly cherished. Sandor threaded through her hair and cradled the back of her neck. She felt him smile against her mouth and the gesture was returned.

His hands removed from her and gripped her at the waist. She let out a gasp as he lifted her from the ground, pressing her back against the wall to kiss her easier. The change of position made her chest feel light and bubbly. His lips came crashing down upon hers and they parted for his tongue, inviting the heat of his mouth to return where she craved it. Sansa’s hands slid into his shoulder-length hair and her legs wrapped around his waist. He gripped the back of her thigh and his free hand cupped her cheek, oddly tender. He bit her lip and pressed kiss after kiss down the slope of her jaw, sending shocks through her fragile skin. His beard tickled her neck and she giggled happily, kissing his stump of an ear, relishing in the openness he so sweetly offered. He took her mouth with his own and they kissed like fire, wrapped up in each other, tucked away in an alley where Joffrey and Cersei and Meryn Trant could never find them. Finally he understands, she thought when their kiss broke. Finally.

Sansa cupped his face, feeling more joy in his arms for a moment than she’d felt in an entire year within the Red Keep’s walls. She nuzzled her face to his. “Please,” she asked. “Don’t leave.”


“You didn’t.” Sansa rested her hands on his chest and looked him in the eyes. “If you’d bothered to speak to me, I would have told you.”

Sandor tensed his jaw, suddenly serious. “I went straight to Flea Bottom for a damn drink when the job was done. Found a crossroads instead. A sept to the left, and a tavern to the right. Do you know what I did, little bird?”

“No. Tell me.”

"I lit a candle and I prayed for you," Sandor rasped. She felt her heart sink through her feet. "I prayed that you’d hate me and forget me, forget this face. And I’ve been praying it ever since. Get that in your pretty head, girl. I lit a fucking candle, and I prayed for you."

Her stomach flipped. It was a confession of “I love you” if he ever made one, and Sansa wanted to weep and kiss him all over. She cupped his face and brushed her thumbs along his cheekbones, searching him for any shred of doubt. “Why?”

“That cunt king mistook me for Gregor,” he said angrily. “My brother was always the raper. I’ve killed women, aye, and hated it. But I’d never touched a woman unless she was a whore and I paid her good and well.” He blinked away the glisten in his eyes. “You were too much. Gods, your tears killed me. And the bloody screaming. I thought I’d damned you for good. Like the scars on my face, only yours were inside. Don’t know which is worse.”

“I’m sorry.” She pressed a trembling kiss to his lips. “Truly, I am. I was just trying to make it believable so he wouldn’t kill you.”

“I know, little bird. I know.”

And they kissed again, more passionately and lovingly than before.

When their confessions were said and done, the moon had risen high and the nightlife began to fade. He picked up her cloak from the ground and draped it over her shoulders, clasping it around her neck.
before scooping her up in his arms like a bride. “To keep you safe,” he said, and she did not protest. She nuzzled into his neck as he carried her through Varys’s tunnel and up serpentine stairs. The castle slept and Sandor was careful to avoid any patrolling guard. He reached Sansa’s chambers with ease and placed her gently atop the bed, and though she wanted him to stay, they knew it was far too risky. They kissed a moment longer and offered promises and goodbyes, and Sansa went to sleep feeling as though nothing could harm her.

The morning sun peeked through her tapestries. Sansa stretched and climbed from her bed with a bounce in her step, remembering hungry kisses and sweet words. Though her belly began to cramp and her back ached, she awoke in a mood far superior to any she’d felt in days. *He’s not a monster at all,* she thought, brushing out her hair in front of the mirror with a silly little grin on her face. *Harsh, yes, but gentle and kind. Robb will pardon him, I know it.*

A soft knock came at her door. “Who’s there?” Sansa asked.

“My lady,” said a servant who clearly wasn’t Shae. “The queen wishes to see you.”

Fear filled her in an instant. This was far too early to be called a normal visit. She and Sandor must have been seen, must have been caught and now was the end. Sansa tried to swallow the lump in her throat and not make her worries obvious. “Alright. Let her in.”

The door slowly opened. Queen Cersei glided into the room, all beauty and confidence and rich grace. Scarlet silks adorned her. “You look well-rested, my dear,” she said in a soft tone. “Much better than your previous condition, I take it?”

“Yes,” Sansa replied. *I still need to act like a victim.* She had plenty of experience doing so. Sansa shifted her feet nervously and hugged herself, glancing up to the queen with a bowed head. “Is there something you needed, Your Grace?”

“Yes,” Sansa replied. *I still need to act like a victim.* She had plenty of experience doing so. Sansa shifted her feet nervously and hugged herself, glancing up to the queen with a bowed head. “Is there something you needed, Your Grace?”

“Yes, actually. I had a dress made for you that I thought you might like, as an apology for my son’s behavior.” Cersei folded her hands respectfully in front of her. If Sansa didn’t know better, she would have fallen for the act. “What Joffrey ordered was rather drastic. Now your brother believes we have all treated you like an animal.”

You have. Sansa steeled herself. “When my traitor brother comes, I will make sure to clarify what was done to me.” She met Cersei’s eyes. “He will know the innocent ones from the guilty.”

The queen stared at her before cracking a snide grin. “As it should be. Come, little dove. I want to see what you think of my gift.” She gestured with a hand, and Sansa stood.

Queen Cersei allowed two handmaidens to enter with the gown, laying it out upon Sansa’s featherbed. The dress was dyed the color of rose gold, stitched in swirling patterns with ruby-colored gems interwoven along the chest. The embroidery was fit for a queen, smothered in prancing lions and direwolves. Sansa reached out and took the silk between her fingers to feel the quality.

“It’s beautiful,” Sansa said, astonished.

“Yes, it is. Would you like to try it on?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t—“
“Don’t be shy, Sansa. I insist.” Cersei snapped her fingers and the maids pulled Sansa this way and that, braiding her hair and guiding her into the elegant gown against her will. Any protests were lost on deaf ears. She lifted her head to the Lannister queen, panic bubbling in the pit of her stomach. Cersei smiled sweetly to her.

“You look stunning. I’m sure your husband will be pleased.”

Sansa blinked. “My husband?”

“Every bride ought to look beautiful on her wedding day, so I’m glad you approve of the gown. I’m sure you will look even more radiant when my garish little brother drapes a cloak around your shoulders.” The lioness curled Sansa’s hair behind her ear and met her eyes with fire. “It’s a shame your parents can’t be here to celebrate this most auspicious day.”

“You don’t mean it,” Sansa begged. “Please, Your Grace. My brother will—“

“—be dead very soon,” Cersei said with a shrug, “and if he is not, he will fall upon my father’s blade. The Young Wolf’s days are numbered. Did you truly think that your northern kin would find easy conquest here, little dove?”

“If you marry me to a Lannister, they will hurt Ser Jaime.” Sansa’s desperation seemed to faze the queen. “If you do this, you can’t guarantee his safety.”

It’s not her choice. Sansa’s eyes widened as Cersei looked away. It was clear that she worried for her twin brother, the supposed father of her children, but Lord Tywin’s decision was made. He is behind this. Not her. Not even Lord Tyrion.

“Joffrey will escort you to the sept,” spat the queen at last. “The High Septon will be waiting.”

Chapter End Notes

♫ Oops I did it again ♫
♫ I played with your heaart ♫
♫ Got lost in the game ♫

This chapter could be more perfect, but what is effort. I love it. Idk, I hope it’s good enough. I wanted their reunion to be sweet and sensual, which is basically everything they’ve had to live without while falling in love. Poor babes.

See you on Tuesday with another update, my lovely readers! Happy early Father's Day, to those who celebrate!

EDIT: Someone sent me an ask on tumblr asking me why I reply to every single comment, and wanted to know if it was only to raise the comment count?? But no, that's dumb. I reply to all of you because I want you to know how truly appreciated your comments are, and I want to be available if you have any questions, comments or concerns about something I write. Also, sometimes you guys catch things that my beta and I miss. I just love talking to you all. So that's that! ❤️
“It’s alright, my love.” Roslin’s voice was soothing as she rubbed his back in slow circles. He could barely hear her over the panic. “I’m here. Shh, I’m here.” She breathed in a pattern that he tried to replicate, but hysteria dragged him under and he spiraled. It’s no use. Robb trembled despite how exhausted he was, desperate for a good night’s rest to conquer the nightmares. Sweat dripped from his forehead and Roslin dabbed it away with her sleeve. Too much breathing. Dizzy, so dizzy. Robb blinked back tears and stared up to the ceiling of their tent, fighting the terror that washed over him. Pass, damn you. Pass and move on. Thousands looked up to him to do right by his kingdom, to defeat Tywin Lannister and bring peace to a broken realm, but those duties were far too heavy on shoulders as young as his. I’ve taken too long. I’ve already failed them, Father and Sansa both. If only I were stronger. He buried his face in his hands and allowed Roslin to hold him, knowing he couldn’t overcome this on his own.

Robb’s breathing fell from sporadic to soft and slow as time passed. Roslin stroked his hair to calm him. She hummed a little song, one he didn’t know the words to, but it was soothing all the same. When strength returned to him, he lifted his head to look sorrowfully upon his bride. “You married a
“king,” he told her. “Not a child.”

“Don’t blame yourself for feeling pain and fear. Those are some of the things that make us human. Sometimes strength means admitting weakness.” She smiled in a way that made him fall in love all over again.

“But this weakness doesn’t make me stronger.”

“I think it does. Any other man would drink his problems away or drown in the Stranger’s kiss. You’re stronger than them because you know how to survive when fear comes knocking, and still be a great leader through it all.”

“Maybe you’re right. I should listen to you more often.” He chuckled, and it felt damn good to do so. She was his energy, his refreshment when the world went wrong. Roslin kissed him and he pulled her into his lap, letting the warmth and the taste of her ease every nerve under his skin. They held each other for a long time, silent and contemplative. “I love you,” he muttered.

“And I love you,” she replied. “Always.”

Despite Roslin’s comfort, Robb knew that sleep wouldn’t find him no matter how hard he searched. “Get some rest,” he told the queen. “I’m going to walk around camp a bit. Try to loosen up my mind.”

“Do you want me to come with you? I’d be glad to.”

“I know,” he said, “but if either of us can get some sleep, I’d rather it be you. I’ll be back soon. Don’t worry.” Robb kissed her tenderly and slipped from the warmth of their bed, dressing enough to feel decent. He offered a somber smile before leaving her and stepping out into the autumn night.

Harrenhal was just ahead of them. One more day and he could begin the last stretch of his journey, the final marker that would bring him closer to justice than he’d ever been before. The thrill was intoxicating. When he was a boy, Robb dreamed of being a knight or a great lord that would rescue a beautiful princess from her prison. Sansa would always play that role, but those were children’s games from a time of innocence. Now, the roles were quite literal, only he was a king and her dangers were worse than any their young minds had conjured. Don’t worry, Sansa, he thought as he looked up to the stars, knowing she could see them too. I’m coming.

Though his heart was heavy with the weight of the future, his men were boisterous and prepared. He would not appear imperfect for them. Robb greeted every man he passed amiably and ensured that all were healthy and well. The siege weapons were in their best shape and the horses well-fed. He passed through an hour chatting with Dacey Mormont about anything besides the war, sharing a drink with a few battle-torn soldiers who could not find peace from their own nightmares. When those distractions went to sleep as well, Robb walked on, drawing in a deep breath of fresh evening air. Breathing was an incredible source of tranquility. He came across his direwolf snoozing beneath a willow tree, and smiled to see him so relaxed.

“At least a part of me can find rest.”

“Grey Wind,” Robb muttered, letting out a small whistle to summon him. The wolf instantly perked his ears and stood, trotting over to his master with a curious glance. “Come on. Let’s take a walk.” He scratched the wolf’s ear before continuing along a small path smothered by dirt and crisp autumn leaves. There was silence for a time, with nothing but the chirp of crickets to accompany the sound of his footsteps.

The clatter of wooden swords pulled his attention. Robb furrowed his brows and patted his thigh to signal Grey Wind to follow him. They traversed through parts of the surrounding forest, off of the
path and through thick pines and firs, until two sparring figures came into view beside a rushing ravine.

“You’re too big,” Arya huffed. “You don’t fight like Syrio did.”

“Perhaps that’s a good thing,” Lady Brienne said in her defense. “The more fighting styles you learn from, the more unique yours will become.”

“I don’t care about being unique. I care about being good.”

“You’re on your way, princess.”

Arya sighed and groaned to the sky, shoving her wooden sword in the ground. She always hated being called “princess.” She opened her mouth to complain more, until she laid eyes on her royal brother watching from the top of the hill. “Robb! Come here!”

He couldn’t help but smile as he walked down to their level, unable to refuse her. Grey Wind trotted up to Arya and sniffed her pockets for food.

“Your Grace,” Brienne said with an amused grin. “I was just teaching the princess what I was taught at her age. My father knew I had the talent for swordplay, just as she does.”

“And?”

“She’s learning remarkably well. I’d say you’ve got a talented fighter in the making, once she checks her fiery spirit.”

“Really.” Robb chuckled, offering to take Brienne’s wooden sword from her. “If you’d like the night off, I can spar with my sister. I haven’t been able to sleep anyway. It’ll give me a good chance to see what she’s learned.”

“Of course.” Brienne handed over the practice sword. “I’ll go and check on the Kingslayer, if it please Your Grace.”

“Yes. Thank you very much.” The one-handed Lannister was far from his current concerns. Robb watched Brienne leave before turning to his spark of a little sister. “Well, Princess Arya. Show me what you’ve learned.”

Her smile grew mischievously wide. “I’d hate to take the king out of battle before it even starts.”

“You think so! Father wouldn’t want you boasting.”

“I never kicked Father into the dirt.”

“Striking your king is a crime,” Robb warned, “and I’m a seasoned warrior now. If you want the victory you seek, I suggest you come at me with all your strength.”

“Oh, I will. Swift as a deer.” Arya gripped her wooden sword and prepared to lunge. Her stance was perfect and her grip, spot-on. It occurred to him that she was not the little girl he used to play with in the courtyards of Winterfell anymore. She was thirteen, nearly a woman grown, and far beyond the skill of playing come-into-my-castle or monsters-and-maidens like they had as children a lifetime ago.

Gods, he thought mournfully. I’m not ready to watch her grow up.

When Arya charged at him, Robb dropped his sword and scooped her up in his arms, throwing her
over his shoulder like a sack. “Ah,” he laughed. “Much better.”

“Hey!” Arya exclaimed, flailing her limbs. “That’s not how sword fighting works! Robb, you’re a cheater!”

“You threatened to harm the king,” he said rather casually, adjusting so he could walk without fear of dropping her. “I can’t stand for that, not with battle so close.”

“Robb!” she shouted. “Put me down!”

“Not yet. I want to watch the stars by the ravine, and I’m taking you with me.”

Arya stopped her struggle and her laughter died, falling quiet for several moments. “You could have just said so instead of picking me up.”

“I know.”

In the past of some other life, the Stark children would watch the stars on nights when none of them could sleep. They were so clear in Northern skies, so bright and beautiful. Stargazing was a family tradition for six siblings scared of monsters under the bed or of Father and Mother’s punishments. Winterfell was their sanctuary, and they would climb atop her roofs on cold summer nights and lay back to gaze at the stars, talking nonsense to each other or pointing out shapes in the sky. Robb’s heart ached for those times. Their family was whole then, not broken by crowned lions or krakens from the sea. Brokenness had become so familiar that he’d almost forgotten what true family was like.

He reached the ravine and gently placed Arya down on her feet, laying back in the grass after she did. The stars weren’t the same this far south, not as dazzling, but he had Arya by his side which made them the most wonderful stars he’d seen in years. Grey Wind snuggled up beside them. They lay in silence as clouds passed lazily overhead, reminiscing the past and fearing what lie ahead.

“Do you think Sansa is okay?”

Robb drew in a breath. “Truth be told, I’m not sure. I want to believe that she is, but…” He sighed. “I don’t know what they’re doing to her. The Hound is Joffrey’s dog. I don’t think he has a leash in the Red Keep.”

“I’ll put Needle through his eye and out the back of his skull.” Arya’s voice darkened. “He won’t be able to stop me. I don’t care that he’s bigger than Brienne. I’ll climb on his back and stick ‘im with the pointy end.”

Robb had to laugh at that. “Is that what Jon told you?”

“What?”

“The ‘pointy end’ thing.”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

“Because he said the same thing to Ser Rodrik when we first started training.” Robb smiled at the distant memory. “Ser Rodrik asked if he knew anything about swords. Jon said rather loudly, ‘you gotta stick ‘em with the pointy end.’ Rodrik teased him about it for years. I’m surprised he remembered.”

“Really? That’s funny. Jon said it to me when he gave me Needle, before he left for Castle Black.”
Robb heard her adjust among the grass before coming to rest. “I miss him,” she said. “A lot.”

“Me too.”

“Does he know about Sansa? And me and Mother?”

“I sent a raven before we left Riverrun,” he replied. “I got a letter back saying he was beyond the Wall on a mission and hasn’t returned. He’ll know soon, though.”

“Good.” Arya rolled over on her side to look at her elder brother, and he turned his head to face her. Worry filled her eyes. “I’m scared of marching on King’s Landing. I’m scared of what they’ll do to Sansa.”

“Arya—“

“Joffrey’s the worst. He could do anything to her and we’d never know. Raping her could be the least, what if they lock her in a tower and beat her? Joffrey would. If he’d let Lady die, he’d kill her too.”

“Arya, stop.” Robb reached forward and took her hand in his, squeezing softly. His apprehension returned. “We’ll save her, alright? I promise. Let me worry about all that.”

“I believe you. I just…I feel like I abandoned her.” Arya released a trembling sigh. “I never hated her. Not really. We just fought a lot, you know? I wish I could have taken her with me, with Gendry and Hot Pie. She never should have stayed there with the Hound and the queen and all those other killers, or I never should have left. I would have protected her.”

“You can. We can.” Robb felt his throat tighten. “It’s as much my fault as yours. I could tell that Joffrey was a prick, but Sansa was so happy to be queen. It was all she’d ever wanted. I didn’t want to say anything to Father and dash her hopes.” The king let out a stressed sigh and fell on his back again, eyes cast to the stars. Heartache grew within him. “How could I have known? Theon betrayed me, Joffrey betrayed Sansa, Lord Baelish betrayed Mother, King Robert betrayed Father…will it ever end?”

Arya adjusted in the grass a moment, and Robb looked at her just as her head rested on his chest. She folded her arms over her stomach and looked to the stars with him. “We won’t betray each other.”

He smiled. Grey Wind lifted his head and sniffed at both of their faces, causing them to laugh, before nestling into the crook of Arya’s side and Robb’s shoulder.

“No,” he said at last. “We’ll never betray each other.”

Days of riding led the Stark host through Harrenhal, beginning the final segment of the journey to King’s Landing. Robb’s soldiers began to plan how many Lannisters they would bury, which famous knights they would slay and what treasures they would steal from the Red Keep. It was all talk, of course, or so he hoped. Many believed that the King in the North would sit the Iron Throne
himself, but his only desire was for Winterfell, and to lay down his sword at last. He didn’t want to be remembered for bloodshed and savagery. *I hope my men have the same sense of honor.*

Robb dismounted his horse when the march came to a halt, finding their current location decent enough to rest for the night. He gave Roslin a kiss of temporary farewell as he made his way toward the small council tent, slow from how fatigued he’d become. The sooner he caught up on the state of affairs, the sooner he could retire for a long night’s rest. The king nodded to those who greeted him as he made his way through camp, though he stopped to watch Arya and Gendry arguing over something rather passionately in the distance. His sister had her hands on her hips and barked something indiscernible to her tall friend, who replied with the same angry fervor. Before Robb could investigate, a large hand clapped him on the shoulder and pulled him from the scene.

“We’re gettin’ closer!” shouted Greatjon Umber, beaming down at the king from his massive height. “Soon we’ll have the lions in our teeth! Come on, Your Grace, let’s get these plans all settled so we can sleep. Gods know we could use it.”

“Agreed,” Robb said, glancing back to Arya and Gendry’s argument. *I’ll have to ask her about it later.*

Robb stepped into the tent and welcomed the members of his council, taking his seat at the head of the table. *I can’t wait to put this damn map away,* he thought, looking at the lions and wolves placed upon the map of Westeros in intricate places. *I just want this to be over.*

“Your Grace,” stated Roose Bolton. “Good news. My son has retaken Winterfell from Theon Greyjoy.”

“Good. I’ll reward him in person when we return.” Robb stroked his beard and reached across the table, placing the cross of House Bolton atop Winterfell on the map. “He has done an incredible service, my lord. If there is something he would ask of me, name it and I’ll see it done.”

“He is looking forward to it,” Roose said with a small grin. “Ramsay has always fancied the idea of becoming legitimized.”

“You want to make him a Bolton?” The king couldn’t help but smile at that. Though he had never met Ramsay Snow, his efforts told Robb that he deserved the title he asked for. “Fair enough. He deserves it after what he has done for me. I will write up the order when I write Jon’s.”

Catelyn tensed at his side, but said nothing. Other members began to bring up secondary issues that couldn’t be avoided, such as the various trivialities of war, but before long the conversation grew redundant and the group impatient.

“Are we about done here?” the Greatjon asked. “I’ve got to piss, and we’re all tired. If there’s nothing else, I’d like to—“

Brienne of Tarth burst into the council tent, clutching a stranger by the arm. Blonde hair and green eyes claimed him as a Lannister, and a young one at that, perhaps no older than the King in the North himself. Robb rose from his seat as did the others, and Dacey Mormont flipped over the map so the messenger could not memorize troop movements.

“We found this one lurking just outside camp,” stated Lady Brienne, shoving the Lannister boy forward. “He says he has news for you.”

“Say it.” Robb furrowed his brows. “You came here for a reason, I’m guessing?”

“Y-Yes, Your Grace. It’s…it’s Lord Tywin,” stuttered the boy. “He sends his well-wishes…”
“And?”

“…and told me to…to tell you that…”

“Spit it out,” Robb barked, clutching his fists so no one could see them shake. “I’ve no time for this. If you want to live I suggest you keep talking.”

The unnamed Lannister lifted his head, frightened. “He told me to tell you that Lady Sansa and Lord Tyrion have been wed.”

“What?” Robb snarled. “When?”

“Four days ago, Your Grace.”

Rage swelled in the pit of his stomach. It did not take long to burst. Robb shouted in frustration and shoved himself from the table, storming across the tent to grab the Lannister by the neck. “Robb!” his mother pleaded, but he did not listen, didn’t care what anyone could tell him in that moment. Sansa was clearly a toy for Tywin to manipulate and torment as he pleased, and Robb could stomach it no longer.

“Remind Lord Tywin that I have his son,” Robb spat, gripping hard and choking the messenger. “I cut off his sword-hand. You can take it with you as a gift. Tell him that if he makes another strike against my sister, I’ll make sure the Kingslayer comes back home piece by golden piece.”

“B-But Your Grace, but there’s more.” The messenger swallowed hard. “There’s something else, Your Grace. S-Something else…rumors about the Lady Sansa…”

“Speak,” Robb commanded. “It might save your life.”

The words from the messenger’s mouth were whispered so only the king could hear, and hear them he did. It can’t be true. The tempest in Robb’s chest came to a sudden halt. His blood ran cold as the Northern air, eyes focused on the Lannister in hopes of weeding out a lie that was nowhere to be found.

“Robb?” asked Catelyn quietly. “Robb, what’s happened?”

“…Nothing.” He drew in a slow breath and tried to remain calm. “Get this man a horse and see him off.” Brienne nodded, dragging the messenger away without another word.

“Lord Bolton,” said the king.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“Spread the word. Whoever brings me the heads of Sandor Clegane and Tyrion Lannister can consider themselves a lord with a few acres and a holdfast.” Robb forced out an angry breath. “Pick up camp. We’ll march through the night and reach King’s Landing early, right under their noses.” His fists clenched as he turned back to his council.

“This has become far too personal,” he said with tears in his eyes. “We’re not playing the game of thrones anymore.”

Chapter End Notes
You know that feeling RIGHT before an orgasm that's like "OHGODIT'SHAPPPENINGIT'SSOCLOSE" but it's not quite there yet? That's me for the next few chapters. We're so close to the breaking point guys, ohhhh lordie.

I feel like my writing quality has gone down, but maybe that's just because I'm meeting deadlines so I don't have the time I'd like to dedicate to making things as A+ as possible. I just threw it at my beta like "TAKE IT I CAN'T LOOK AT IT ANYMORE WAHH." But that's the thing about fanfiction, you know? I'm only doing it for practice and you guys. <3 why put 110% of my time and effort into something I'm not getting paid for? It's all just for fun. xoxo

OH. I had to add three chapters. The way this was going, I just couldn't cram it all into sixteen chapters, so now there will be nineteen. SORRY. I don't feel like writing 20 page chapters so I had to break it up a bit. Even my beta is getting anxious about where I'm taking this, she has no idea, so she's like "IS THE NEXT CHAPTER DONE YET?? WHEN CAN I READ IT!" and my reply is usually "when I'm fully awake at like 8pm" omg

Anyway, here's another installment. Saturday's posting will be earlier in the morning as I'm busy the rest of the day, so expect that. See ya soon!
The Scarred Men

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The open box in the center of the table held all that was left of Lannister hope. Tyrion, Cersei and Lord Tywin sat staring at the rotten remnants of Jaime Lannister’s right hand. They were silent for a time, all sense of language lost on lips so typically eager to speak. What was there to say? The nameless bastard Tywin had called from Lannisport stood beside him, hands fumbling nervously.

“Tell me it isn’t true.”

“I-It is,” said the boy. “I saw Ser Jaime myself. And the wolf princess, Arya. The King in the North s-said that he would send more pieces back if you h-hurt Lady Sansa, m’lord. He says he’s coming no matter what.”

“Let him,” Tywin snarled. His demeanor had changed, and it dawned on Tyrion that he had never seen his father so openly vicious. He glanced to the foul flesh before gesturing in disgust. “Take this infernal thing away from me. Burn it if you have any sense about you.”

“Y-Yes, m’lord. Of course, m’lord.” The boy closed Robb Stark’s gift and took it with him as he left.

“Jaime,” Cersei muttered in sorrow, hugging herself. “I can’t imagine what they’re putting him through.”

“He’ll live.” Tyrion tapped his fingers on the table. “It’s just a hand. Not his head, not yet.”

She drew in a breath and sighed. “The Starks will be here soon, then?”
“Scouts say they’re less than a few days’ ride from our gates.” Tywin folded his hands in his lap. “Pity he isn’t here, I’d put his head beside his father’s. It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter?” Tyrion scoffed. “Arya Stark and an army at our door doesn’t matter?”

“It does to those who are foolish enough to die,” said Tywin dryly. “We will crush them like any others who seek to challenge us. Perhaps then the North will learn what happens when they march on the south.”

“I’m not sure that’s going to happen.”

His father glared at him. “Are you uncertain which side you’re on?”

“Robb Stark is my brother-in-law,” Tyrion spat. “You married me off, remember? Sansa is my wife. My nephew killed my father-in-law. My own father cares more about killing my brother-in-law than he does about his own children. I’m starting to wonder if it’s less about sides and more about right versus wrong.”

“If you think Robb Stark will let you keep your filthy little head,” spat Cersei, “you’re mistaken.”

“Maybe. But I’ve a better chance than you.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” She turned to face him, eyes sparked with malice. “You’d like my head on a spike above the Red Keep. You would laugh as you looked at it.”

“And you would summon a whole party to laugh at mine.” Tyrion frowned, feeling the familiar ache of his family’s blade deep in the pit of his heart. “For once, I don’t know what’s going to happen. No matter who wins. The entire future is unreadable.”

“Then we’d better make one that favors us, and soon.” Tywin pushed away from the table and stood. “Out. Both of you.”

Tyrion left without another word, not before observing his father’s hateful look from the opposite end of the room.

The grim, clouded morning bit his skin as he stepped out onto the battlements and toward the Red Keep. Tyrion felt the threat of death loom over him with the snarl of a wolf’s fangs. *Jaime and Sansa may have a lot in common by the time this is all over, he thought bitterly. Prisoners of war usually do.*

Sansa Stark had been Tyrion's wife for an agonizing fortnight. He’d made it clear to her that they were both forced together as a way to strike against the King in the North, and by some blessing she understood, but her support wasn’t good enough on its own. Gossip tore at them like beasts. In truth, Tyrion had entirely forgotten about his father’s plans when the time for the wedding sprang upon him, but he remembered the intentions well enough. *Littering the North with Lannister rulers is not a thought they will stomach,* his father had said. Tyrion and Sansa shared a marriage bed, but he never touched her, never wanted to. Most nights he felt like a sinner for even looking at her in a nightdress. *At least the battle gives the snakes in this pit something else to focus on instead of my sham of a marriage.*

“Congratulations, my lord.”

Tyrion stopped and turned. Petyr Baelish approached him in that slithery way of his, a crooked smile on his lips. “Have I done something worth congratulating?” Tyrion asked.
“Plenty of things,” chuckled Petyr. “Your marriage to Sansa Stark, first of all.”

“Ah. That.” Tyrion cleared his throat, thankful for the breeze that passed through. “Liked my father’s scheme, did you?”

“Not quite, but I suppose it has proven rather fruitful.” Petyr smiled again. “Of course, it’s better that she marry you than, say, King Joffrey’s rabid Hound?”

Tyrion froze. He glanced up to Lord Baelish, who looked at him with a sense of triumph as if he’d just won some great battle. *The bastard knows.* “That would have been cruel indeed.”

“My friends tell me that it might be less cruel and more of a blessing for our sad, lovely Sansa.”

“She is my wife,” said Tyrion protectively. “You have no claim on her.”

“Don’t I?”

“What do you want, Littlefinger?” Tyrion scowled up at the viper before him, a blot against the hueless sun. His patience was running thin. “I’ve no time for your games.”

“This is not a game, my lord. I simply want to know why Sansa Stark was at my brothel a fortnight past, looking for Sandor Clegane. Or perhaps why her handmaiden visits you late in the night, or why Varys is so interested in their safety.” He stepped closer, intimidation rank with him. “Knowledge will be the difference between life and death when Robb Stark comes.”

Tyrion ground his teeth and shot daggers through his eyes. “Perhaps. But you promised Lady Catelyn both of her daughters, didn’t you? Shame. I wonder what she thinks of your knowledge now that Arya Stark has returned to her.”

Petyr’s smile fell. Malice was potent in his gaze and Tyrion was almost surprised to see it there. “She will think a great deal more of my knowledge than the words of her daughter’s Lannister husband.”

“We shall see.” Tyrion left him there, impatient and angry. Littlefinger spoke in circles and he had no desire to deal with such frustration. He wished Robb Stark would come sooner rather than later and put them all out of their misery. *I don’t know how much longer I can bear waiting,* he thought, ascending the steps to the castle’s third level. *If we’re all going to die, get on with it.*

Tyrion reached his chambers shortly after. He sighed to see his heavy oaken door at the end of the hall and moved to open it, until a stranger did so from the other side. An unnamed maester stepped from the room and smiled at Tyrion pleasantly.

“Congratulations, my lord.” The maester bowed low to him before taking his leave. Tyrion watched him go, a deep scowl on his face.

“Sansa?” he asked, rushing into their chambers and closing the door behind him. He walked to the bed where his sickly bride sat upright, clutching a chamber pot against her stomach and breathing hard. Shae rubbed her back in small circles, but the look in her eyes was not one of concern. *Pity. She pities her.*

And his heart sank to his feet.

“Sansa…”

“I’m sorry, Lord Tyrion.” She sniffled and held her chamber pot close. “I couldn’t stop the maester from coming. The queen sent him. She’ll know by nightfall. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…”
“Nonsense, my lady.” How much more trauma could befall her? He had put the pieces together. It wasn’t hard. The morning nausea should have been the biggest clue, and he damned himself for not noticing it sooner. *No one ever thought to bring her moon tea.* Tyrion climbed atop the bed and sat beside his young wife, placing his hand on her arm and speaking in the gentlest voice. “Don’t blame yourself for something you did not cause.”

“Don’t worry,” Shae soothed, but Tyrion did not miss her jealous tone. “The child will never suffer a day in its life. It’ll be a Lannister child. The heir to Casterly Rock.”

“A bastard,” Sansa corrected. She rubbed her abdomen, letting a shaky sigh slip through her teeth. “How will we survive this?”

Tyrion knew she did not speak of him. “I’m not sure. But if Joffrey remains on the throne and my family in power, your child can’t be the Hound’s.” He met her eyes with urgency. “I’ll have to claim it as my own, do you understand?”

Sansa’s mouth fell open. *She’s already as protective as a mother should be.* He saw it in her eyes, the look that said she would do anything to live another day for the sake of the child growing within her. A look that reminded him so much of Catelyn Stark. “You would do that?”

“Of course I would. I’ve no desire to see you hurt, how many times have I told you?” Tyrion felt like crying—*gods be damned, Sansa Stark made him want to cry.* She was far too sweet to endure such a predicament. “If I can protect you, I will. We will.” He looked to Shae, then back to his prisoner bride. “The Hound needs to understand that this child can’t be his. Not unless your brother wins this war, and you can explain the truth.”

“I know. I’ll tell him, I will.” Sansa drew in a trembling breath, and he wondered if the poor girl could possibly have any more tears to shed.

*She’s terrified.* Tyrion watched her try to curl her hair behind her ears, but her hands were shaking too much to properly do so. Shae soothed her and encouraged a small nap, and Sansa obliged, setting the chamber pot on the bedside table and slipping beneath the blankets for rest. Tyrion and Shae broke bread together while she slept, speaking of anything but the battle ahead, and it occurred to him how much he loved these two women in such different ways, but equally as fierce.

*I’ll keep them safe,* he thought, more prayer than declaration. *What else do I have left?*

The darkness couldn’t lull him to sleep. Tyrion lie awake in frustration, staring up at the canopy with a heavy heart and a heavier mind. Battle loomed on the horizon. He did not think he could survive another one. And what of Sansa, what of Shae? What of Jaime and the fate of his House? So many dire matters rested on the shoulders of this war’s winner, and Tyrion wasn’t certain who he would fight for. Did he betray his family, or betray his other family? *When did it all become so complicated?* He tried to close his eyes to catch some semblance of sleep, but his body refused even in the attempt. Not even Sansa’s breathing could soothe him.

His eyes opened at the sound of her sniffling. He looked over to where Sansa lay with her back facing him, buried beneath thick blankets and curled up in a tiny ball. Her body trembled as sobs wracked through her core and she tried to remain quiet for his sake, quickly covering her mouth to keep from weeping aloud. Tyrion felt a piece of himself crumble away as he watched her, certain of
nearly every emotion scrambling through her head.

_Ned Stark didn’t die for this._

“Oh, fuck it.” Tyrion sat up, striking the bedside candle to life and turning to face her. She wiped her eyes and blinked over to him. “Sit up,” he told her. Sansa swallowed and pushed herself upright at his command, auburn hair falling about her shoulders like curtains of the sweetest shade. “I won’t stand for your tears. Go to him.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” Tyrion met her eyes with insistence. “Your brother marches on the King’s Landing in a few days, maybe even tomorrow. I might not survive it. I don’t want to die without having a final night with the woman I love, nor would I wish that cruel fate on anyone else. Not even the Hound.” He reached out and touched her pale cheek with his hand. She did not flinch. “Sansa,” he said softly. “Bring Shae to me, and spend the night with Sandor Clegane. It may be his last.”

Her expression changed from one of sorrow to immense affection. Tyrion didn’t know which was more unbearable. “Are you sure?” she asked. “What if we get caught?”

“Don’t,” he advised. “Take a cloak and be cautious. His chambers aren’t far. You have something to tell him anyway, don’t you? I don’t expect he would like to die never knowing he’s to be a father.”

For the first time in his life, he saw Sansa Stark smile; truly smile, the way a girl should, like she’d never known pain a day in her life. He wanted that for her. Sansa pulled him in and kissed his cheek, saying “thank you” so many times he began to forget the meaning of the phrase. She scrambled from the bed and pulled a cloak over her shoulders, expressing gratitude a final time before rushing excitedly from the room.

_Perhaps this is a bad idea_, he thought. But what outcome could possibly take away the joy of making her smile? He dared fate to try.

A few minutes later, Shae stepped into the room and closed the door, a somber look in her dark eyes. They said nothing, only stared for a moment to drink in the sight of each other still alive and breathing and perfect, the way it should be. “Be my wife,” he blurted without thinking.


“A lioness, a cat, a dog, a pig, whatever the hell you want. Just marry me when this is over, my lady. Marry me in secret. Marry me even if I don’t have a head.”

Shae giggled tearfully. He didn’t know if his heart could handle Sansa’s smile and Shae’s laugh in the same period of time, but his lover’s kiss distracted him when it met his lips with desperate fervor. He pulled her close and the two crawled under each other’s skin, claiming their bodies as treasured territory.

“I’ll be your lioness. And I’ll love you like it’s your last night on this earth,” she whispered sweetly against his lips.

“If the gods are good,” he replied, “it won’t be.”

Chapter End Notes
SOOOOOO CLOOOOOOOOSE <3 See you on Tuesday, my dears! Sorry this chapter is so short. Tell me what you think of this interesting little development. Did you figure it out beforehand?

I had to skip one of my steps of editing because I'm at my family reunion with no wifi. It's 104°. If I don't update on Tuesday, it's because my face literally melted off or my conservative relatives burned me at the stake. Whichever comes first.

OKAY SEE YOU xoxo
Sansa rushed through the corridors with fate at her back. She slipped past patrolling guards and used the shadows' advantage to keep out of sight. Anonymity was paramount. If the queen discovered Sansa’s adultery, there would be no safety for her. *For the child. I have to protect us.* Already she loved the little life growing inside her, impractical though it was, but she would risk everything to keep safe her precious gift.

*The time for fear is over.* She drew in a deep breath and bravely opened Sandor’s door, closing it behind her.

The room was pitch black, illuminated only by the moon’s pale glow bleeding through the open window. *He’s not here.* Sansa leaned against the door and hugged herself, worried. She couldn’t return to her chambers while Tyrion and Shae spent the night alone. Lord Varys would not risk himself and take her in, and Lord Baelish frightened her. There was nowhere else to go. *I have to stay here.* Sansa allowed her eyes to adjust to the darkness, fumbling for some matches on a side table. She struck one and began lighting various candles in the close quarters, feeling more at ease when the darkness had been chased away.

Sandor’s chambers were less than accommodating. He was given no riches in the way of décor, no balcony, no fine furniture or plush rugs. The room was half the size of hers with two large windows draped in simple tapestry, a hearth with a single chair, and a bed that was much larger than the average size to accommodate him. Sansa removed the cloak from her shoulders and draped it over the edge of the chair, glancing around the room for something to occupy herself. *He’s quite messy,* she observed. Various clothes and utensils were tossed this way and that, and wine bottles both empty and full sat scattered on random surfaces. It was clear that he wasn’t very good at taking care
of himself, probably because he never had a reason to.

Well, Sansa thought, now he has two.

Sansa began by organizing his daily devices, setting them on the table in a way that pleased her eye. She threw away the bottles of wine, both empty and full. She never liked it when Sandor was drunk. It’s not good for him. Sansa folded his clothes and put them away in their proper drawers, unable to resist pressing the fabric to her nose and inhaling deep. The scent of him made her entire body tingle and suddenly she missed him more than anyone else in the world, if only for a moment. Her final task was to polish his armor and make sure it suited well for battle. Sansa was unusually calm about the coming war, for knowing Sandor would soon be with her wiped away all apprehension. She placed her hands over his Hound’s helm and struggled to lift it, looking deep into the lacquer eyes of the beast that stared back at her. I wish I could throw this away too, she thought, but Sandor would need all the protection his persona could provide.

An hour passed. Sansa sat on his massive featherbed, feet dangling off the edge and swinging. She reached over and picked up a book from his bedside table, tracing her fingers over the filigree title. “The Dance of Dragons,” she muttered aloud. I remember reading this with Robb when I was young. Sansa opened the book and skimmed to pass the time, wondering if Sandor secretly enjoyed reading as well, even if he didn’t seem the type.

Sansa reached the third chapter before the door opened. She closed the tome in haste and placed it back on his sidetable, watching Sandor enter lazily into the room. His dress was casual but Sansa knew the sorrowful way he held himself. He pushed out a stressed sigh and dragged a hand down his face. He looks miserable. Sansa said nothing. She observed him standing there and wondered what was going through his mind that made him so heartbroken, so ready to drain the nearest liquor bottle.

Then he saw her. Sandor’s expression passed from one of disbelief to irritation, and she was suddenly uncomfortable.

“Congratulations, Lady Lannister,” he said rather bitterly. “I guess the dwarf has a working cock after all. Well done.”

The words hit her like the bolt of a crossbow. Sansa inhaled, trying not to let his anger crack her resolve. “Don’t say that.”

Sandor closed the door and furrowed his brow. “Why are you here, little bird?”

Sansa’s hands began to tremble. She stood from the bed and met his pained eyes. “I came to speak to you. You’ve been avoiding me since the wedding.”

“What do you want me to say?” Sandor barked. “Aye, Lady Lannister, let me brush your pretty hair and lick your sweet cunt when your husband’s drunk. Is that what you want from me?”

“No,” Sansa said helplessly. “Tyrion and I never— we never—“

“What do you want me to say?” Sansor spat. “I heard the news. Didn’t take you for a liar.”
“I’m not! Don’t do that, don’t—don’t cast your fears onto me like that.”

“Cast my bloody fears?” Sandor stormed the distance between them and snatched her by the arms. Agony shone through his eyes and Sansa flinched. “You think I’m some wounded animal, girl?”

“I think that’s exactly what you are;” she replied, letting porcelain harden into steel. “A wounded animal who’s too scared to be loved, even when I’m standing right here for you.”

He froze. His hold on her did not loosen. “…what did you say?”

“You heard me.”

Sandor’s eyes were desperate, afflicted. He said nothing.

Sansa swallowed, cupping his face in her hands. Any anger she felt towards him melted away to passion and mercy. “Stop fighting me so much, Sandor. Stop trying to turn me into someone that will hurt you or stop loving you. I won’t. Not ever.” She took his massive hand and placed it over her belly, praying that he understood. “We won’t.”

The sorrow in his eyes nearly killed her. He looked like a scared little boy, one that had been punished and came crawling back for forgiveness. Sandor had seen too much horror for any one man, and Sansa knew that his demons would never be fully vanquished. But she saw understanding in his eyes and knew her words truly reached him. Sandor tried to form words but couldn’t, not initially, and he kept his hand steady on her stomach while the other touched her hair. “Sansa…” he muttered. “I don’t…”

She felt the wetness on his cheeks and knew his intentions. Sansa’s heart stirred to see him vulnerable, and she wondered how long it had been since he’d opened so wide, so deep and allowed someone to see him for who he was. “This child isn’t Tyrion’s,” she whispered, wiping his tears. “How could you believe that? You need to stop doubting that I love you. It’s not your place to tell me I can’t.”

Sansa sighed, staring at his hand over her abdomen with a look of curiosity, like a broken man too scarred to reach for salvation when offered. “This isn’t some joke?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“The first time you’re ever touched and you end up with a dog’s bastard.” He scoffed. “That’s some piss poor luck, little bird.”

“I don’t think so.” Sansa placed her hand over his. “I think it’s wonderful luck. Better to be the child of the man I love than anyone else.”

Sansa could tell that referring to him as “the man she loved” would take some getting used to, but at least Sandor didn’t deny it. I don’t think he knows what to do with himself, she thought, amused, watching him grapple through countless expressions to find the right one. “Your brother,” he said at last. “He won’t be thrilled.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll tell him you’re innocent. My marriage to Lord Tyrion will be annulled.”

“And?”

“And no one will tell me who to marry again. My heart is spoken for.”

A frown settled on Sandor’s face. “They don’t care about your heart. They want your claim and
everything that comes with it.”

“Well, they can’t have it. I’m not going to give my life to someone who doesn’t deserve it like you do.”

Sandor’s eyes were doubtful, but he fought past it for her sake. He leaned in and pressed little kisses all over her face, filling her with giddiness from the moment his lips met her skin to the second they left. “I’m not worthy of you,” he murmured into her hair. “But I can try to be.”

“You are.” Sansa smiled lovingly.

“Someday, perhaps.”

Sandor’s kiss took her with fierce passion and his fingers slid into thick auburn hair. He pushed her gently backwards, hovering over her as her back hit the surface of the bed. Sansa gave no complaint. Her breath sputtered as he kissed all over her neck and cheeks, knowing where the night would lead and wanting nothing else. She laughed as his beard tickled her skin. His affections were endless apologies for his behavior, his words, his actions and anything else he believed to be a sin in her eyes. But Sansa knew that if the man she’d fallen for were any different, the love that consumed her would cease to be.

Sandor pulled eagerly at the ties on her nightdress, and Sansa ached for what they had never given one another—passion, consensual and whole. Sansa felt his hands creep up her thighs and she didn’t fight it, reveling in the friction of roughness on soft skin. He broke the contact to pull his tunic over his head and toss it to the floor, leaning over her for another kiss. Sansa had never seen him shirtless before, but it reminded her of how much of a man Sandor truly was. Coarse dark hair covered his chest and his muscles were strong from toil. Scars dotted his skin like freckles and it drove her wilder somehow. Sansa slipped her fingers into the hair on his chest, biting her lower lip.

Hunger showed through his gaze, tempered and tethered by their confessions. Sandor hooked an arm under her back and lifted her with ease as if she were a ragdoll, carrying her with him as he moved to the center of the bed. Sansa chuckled into his mouth and they kissed like sweet fire, burning past every hesitation with headstrong joy. He kissed down her neck again and pulled her nightdress up around her hips, desperate to expose her, and it occurred to Sansa that they’d never looked upon each other naked. This is no place for modesty, she reminded herself. Not with him. Sansa lifted her arms and allowed him to pull the fabric over her head and to the floor, and she blinked shyly up at him as he looked upon her form.

Sandor didn’t hold her gaze for long. He was transfixed by the vision of her, of soft curves and pale skin. Sansa had to fight the instinct to cover herself. She wanted him to see, wanted him to touch her and kiss her and do whatever lovers did with each other’s bodies, and that left no room for restraint.

“Gods, Sansa,” he breathed, tracing his finger along her side. His touch was like a hot knife, punishing her for something she’d yet to do. “I’m fucking dreaming.”

“You’re not,” she assured. “At least, I hope you’re not.”

“If I am, I’ll gut the bastard that tries to wake me.” Sandor kissed her hard and she returned his passion, feeling his chest press against the nakedness of hers. Sansa hummed against his lips as she reveled in how secure every cell in her body felt, knowing his strength was around her, destined to protect her. His hands moved from her hips to cup each breast, brushing his thumbs along the peaks. Her resolve came crashing down.
Sparks of lust ignited under his touch and her sex began to throb. Sansa never knew her breasts could be so sensitive, so receptive to contact of this kind. She couldn’t breathe evenly and gripped onto the sheets when he took her nipple in his mouth, flicking his tongue over the nerves in ways that made her body thunder. His free hand wandered southward and his fingers spread the folds between her thighs apart, tracing over the wetness as if they’d been made to do so. The tips of her toes began to tingle and Sansa lost herself in her lover’s touch, letting him shower her in physical affection. He slipped a finger into her opening and Sansa felt sparks fly, her skin nearly bursting. Sandor’s lips trailed between her heavy breasts and down to her lower abdomen, where he spent considerable time kissing her. Where the baby is. Sansa felt like crying and her smile grew so wide that even Sandor noticed. He chuckled against her skin and continued even lower, but before Sansa could ask what he was doing her entire body spasmed.

“Ah—ahh!” Sansa gasped, clutching onto his hair as her back arched upwards. Her toes dug into the sheets as Sandor’s tongue tasted her with lustful hunger. She couldn’t seem to control anything. No muscle in her body would listen to command. Every atom was jolted to life and her moans were unstoppable. Whatever Sandor was doing was incredible and irresistible and her body responded in accordance, trembling against her will. His fingers set a pace within her, and the pleasure wracking Sansa’s core was almost too much to bear. Sandor’s eyes lifted to meet hers and she looked down at him, unable to keep from pleading for mercy.

“S-Sandor,” she moaned. “Sandor, please…” Sansa wanted him more than anything, and he knew what she was begging for. Sandor removed his fingers from her and teasingly sucked the sweetness from his skin. Sansa had to laugh. He was being ridiculous and he knew it, but Sandor seemed satisfied as if making her laugh was his true intention all along. He unlaced his breeches and dropped them to the ground, returning to her lips for a kiss. Sansa giggled breathlessly, feeling the wetness of her on his beard and the taste on his tongue. She gasped to feel how hard he was against her thigh, but he pulled her curious hands away before she could test the limits.

“Not this time,” he said, voice a low rumble.

“Why not?” she replied with a pout.

“Because I want to fuck your pretty cunt, not your hands.”

Her cheeks flushed and she said no more, though his words stirred something sinful within. Sandor chuckled at her shyness as he teased her opening, cutting off any thought of reply. Sansa bit her lip in anticipation, draping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. She smiled sweetly in consent and he entered her without further hesitation.

The lovers groaned together as pleasure spiked. Sandor filled her with his entirety and Sansa gasped, clinging to him as every nerve caught fire. Simply resting there brought pleasure, keeping him inside where she wanted him most. It had been weeks since the first time but she felt the familiar tightness, absent of pain. Sandor kissed her face from jawline to forehead before settling in a lazy rhythm, speeding only when Sansa begged him for more.

“Fuck, you’re too much. Too good.” His breath was hot against her neck and his voice drove her insane, reaching right into the depths of her soul and gripping tight. She would obey anything he asked of her in that moment, and she trusted him, which made her submission that much sweeter. His pace was slow and steady. Each thrust was more fire-filled than the last. Sansa couldn’t trap the little sounds that escaped her lips, sweet and soft and all for him.

“Mm—S-Sandor, ah—ahh,” Sansa moaned. Her voice spurred him on. Sandor pushed faster, striking her deepest point and each push sent her higher and higher, closer to the brink of oblivion. He growled possessively in her ear as he claimed her as his own, thrust after thrust, making her
belong to him. As he belongs to me.

Coherent thought slipped away. Sandor rocked his hips against hers and she was teetering on the edge of the floating world. Sansa gripped his shoulders and gasped to the ceiling as the friction of their union sent her body begging for release. “Look at me,” he growled, gripping her chin and tearing her gaze from anything else but his. Sansa felt like he owned her, and she wanted him to. Her mind struggled to grasp what was happening as he pounded into her, scattering her sensitive nerves, until ecstasy crashed upon her like water on rock. She cried out his name and her muscles lost their will, watching the hunger in his eyes until she could no longer keep hers open. Sansa’s world was shaken and shattered. Her toes curled into the sheets and she felt like flying, reaching the highest peak of carnal bliss that any one person could feel. Sandor continued to pump into her as the extreme nature of her climax continued and continued until she was utterly spent. Sansa’s voice slowly died and her gasping fell to a minimum. Her muscles found the will to move, though too exhausted to do much. She threaded her fingers through his dark hair and smiled up at him with the greatest affection.

“Fuck, Sansa,” he groaned, tasting her smile for the beauty it was worth. She hugged him as his pace sped, and somehow it was just as pleasurable as before, just as gratifying. Sansa sighed and let her voice be heard, kissing his burned cheek before he buried it in the crook of her neck. He inhaled deep, filling himself with scent of her skin and hair, and Sansa found it flattering. Sandor embraced her tightly and pumped into her time and time again before groaning against her skin. His thrusts came to a lull as he spent himself within her. Sansa weakly draped her arms around him, sweaty and panting and entirely exhausted. After placing a few lazy kisses to her neck, Sandor lifted his head and smoothed the hair from her face. “You’re not real,” he mumbled sweetly.

Sansa giggled. “For a man who claims to be bad at romance, you’re quite good at it.”

“Very funny.” He kissed her again before laying on his back, pulling Sansa against his chest and she snuggled up in his hold. He traced nonsensical shapes on her back as they lay in each other’s arms, talking about everything and nothing until the passage of time graced them with a deep and dreamless sleep.

Morning light bled through the tattered curtains. Sansa wished the sun would dip back behind the horizon and grant her a few more hours in her lover’s arms. She hated that they were forced to part, thrown back into a lie that neither one of them asked for, one that might never end. Sansa lifted her head from the warmth of Sandor’s strong chest, gazing down at him as auburn hair draped around her bare shoulders and back. She touched his scarred cheek and he frowned up at her with those grey eyes she loved.

“I’m sorry, Sandor. I’m so sorry it must be like this, if only for a short time.”

“What else did you expect?” he replied sourly. “Do you think Ned Stark would have given you to a dog like me, little bird?”

“No.” Sansa frowned. “But I wouldn’t care. I would have married you anyway.”

“Horseshit.”

“It’s true. I would have. Lord and Lady Clegane…” Sansa smiled, stroking his cheek with lazy
affection. “It has a nice ring to it.”

“You sound like one of those damn ladies from your songs.” He curled her hair behind her ear, toying with it between his fingers. “You said ‘The Bear and the Maiden Fair’ is one of your favorites.”

“It is.”

“You used to like songs about knights and fair maidens. What happened to that?”

“I met some bad knights,” she said, “and a particularly nice bear.” Sansa was prideful in her cleverness and kissed him. His sly grin did not go unmissed.

As much as Sansa wanted to stay with him, she’d already been absent from her chambers for far too long. The expectant mother climbed from the bed and swallowed the morning sickness that festered in her belly like a beast. She slipped on her nightgown and refastened the cloak, and Sandor redressed as well, enough to properly wish her farewell. Before she could open the door, Sandor spun her around and kissed her hard, pressing her back against the oaken wood. She gasped and giggled into his open mouth. Sandor held her sides and she clutched his tunic over the left side of his chest, as she had so many times before.

“Do you know why I always do this?” Sansa asked when the kiss broke, gesturing to her hand.

“No. Tell me.”

She toyed with the cloth in her fingers. “It’s where the heart is. That’s how you save a man, by touching his heart.”

He scoffed. “You saving me, little bird?” Sandor tapped the underside of her chin, and she lifted her eyes to him.

“I like to think so.”

“Aye,” he replied. “Me too.”

By the time kisses and goodbyes were said, Sansa was grinning from ear to ear as she quietly slipped from his chambers. Robb will be here soon. I can’t wait to introduce them as friends instead of enemies, one the battle is done. She felt giddy and bubbly as she hopped up the stairs, prepared to meet with Tyrion and express how grateful she was to him for risking everything for their sakes. Sansa was happier than she’d felt in years, knowing she loved and was loved in return. Knight or not, Sandor is sweeter than any song.

Sansa’s thoughts were interrupted as she bumped into glittering armor. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “I’m sorry ser, I was just…”

Sansa looked up to apologize, coming face to face with Ser Meryn Trant.

“Guess my lessons haven’t been enough for you, ay?” he sneered through the darkness. “Maybe we’ll have to pick up where we left off.”

Sansa’s spirit cracked. She turned on her heels and bolted in the opposite direction, heart leaping to her throat as her hair whipped behind her. She didn’t make it far before Boros Blount slammed his fist into her ribs. She buckled down to her knees, clutching her swimming stomach and gasping for air. No, not there, anywhere but there!
“Ah, the princess of savages awakens!” Sansa recognized Joffrey’s laugh. Fear coiled around her throat and tightened as she watched his feet step closer to her. Sansa dared not look up. “You’re underdressed to be out wandering the castle. Tell me, my lady, where have you been?”

_No, please._ “I was…”

“It’s a great crime to lie to a king.” Joffrey knelt before her, gripping her chin and lifting her gaze to his. She shivered from the ice in his glare. _“Tell me.”_

“I was—I was finding Shae, Your Grace,” Sansa lied. “My handmaiden. I-I needed her to—“

Sandor’s shouts echoed down the hall, accompanied by the clash of steel and streams of thick curses. “Sandor!” she cried at the top of her lungs, but Joffrey’s mailed fist backhanded her across the face and she fell to the stone. She tried to scramble to her feet and make for her lover’s call. Ser Meryn was too quick. He hooked an arm around her waist and yanked her back against him.

“My grandfather doesn’t want her harmed,” spat Joffrey as Sansa fought. “If what rumor says is true, she has my little cousin inside her.”

“Or a bastard pup,” commented Boros.

“Either way, we need her and the baby alive. For now.” He turned to the two knights.

“Please!” Sansa begged. “Please, Your Grace, please don’t—“

“Take her to the tower and lock her inside,” Joffrey ordered, looking back to the end of the hall with a malicious grin. “As for the Hound…bring him to the throne room. I’ll get a confession from him before I take his head.” Sansa screamed and fought and pleaded for mercy, but it was no use when tested against the strength of the Kingsguard.

Before Meryn’s fist struck her vision to black, the last thing she heard was Sandor roaring out her name.

Chapter End Notes

WELCOME TO MOFFNAT’S BUS CRASH. LET THE CHAOS BEGIN. It's all a shitstorm from here, folks. Fasten your seatbelts and prepare for the hell I've unleashed. Did you expect there to be smut this chapter? I bet not, I was so stoked to give you this little surprise. I hope you enjoyed it. <3 Consider it a gift since I need a ten day break. Feel free to contact me on Tumblr with questions. Maybe I'll post a teaser? You'll have to wait and see! Make sure to leave kudos and comments. <3 See you on the 11th!
THINGS TO NOTE BEFORE READING:

- HOLY CRAP I'M BACK AND I LOVE IT????
- The thing to remember from here on out is that I promised apple juice and a puppy at the end of this. If you can hold on during this insanity I've prepared for you, you definitely deserve them.
- Violence warnings from this chapter for the next, like....bunch.
- I've never written war before. Be nice to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The full moon’s glow reflected off the glittering castles of the Red Keep. Like Roslin's eyes, he fondly recalled. The breeze was as soft as her touch and distant Lannister soldiers bustled like her mind, always moving, always rushing from some predetermined goal to the next.

The city of King’s Landing lay before him, but Robb Stark thought only of his queen.

His mind should have been elsewhere. His thoughts belonged to Sansa’s safety, the war that lay ahead or all the ways he’d deliver justice and bring the lions to heel. But I miss my wife, Robb thought to his misery, watching crimson banners rise above the Lion Gate in the distance. I miss my family. I may never see them again. Even with an army at his back and Sansa’s fate resting on his success, Robb yearned only for Winterfell. He let the memory of home be the fire that fueled him.
The king drew in a deep breath of fresh air and released, closing his eyes into a final moment of tranquility that would soon dissolve. He rediscovered that safe place in his mind, consisting of Northern stars and Roslin’s laugh and Sansa’s peaceful sigh, of his mother’s smile and Arya’s look of triumph. *I’ll die for that future,* he thought, opening his eyes to the fields ahead. *I’ll fight until there’s nothing left, and continue from the grave if need be.*

“Your Grace,” said Dacey Mormont, approaching him from behind. He was relieved to see the encouraging smile of a dear friend. “The siege weapons are prepared. We’re ready.”

“So soon?” Robb asked without thinking.

“Do you want to wait and let the Lannisters come to us?”

“No, no.” The king shook his head and sighed. “Sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me.” He glanced to his shaking hand before clenching it into a fist.

“Does this battle frighten you?” Dacey’s expression fell to one of concern as she stood at her king’s side. The look in her eyes was maternal. Not for the first time, he felt as if she were the elder sister he never had.

“I’ve won plenty of battles, Dacey. That’s not what scares me.” He turned to her, forcing down the sting at the back of his throat. “I’m frightened of what I’ll find here, of what they’ve done to my sister. I don’t want my mother to lose more of her children. All these men, thirty thousand lives, they’re risking themselves for my cause. And Roslin…”

Dacey’s hand rested on his armored shoulder. The gesture brought comfort, but not enough. “We’ll protect you, Your Grace. Have a little faith in us. Princess Sansa will be safe, the queen will be happy, and Lady Stark will smile to see her children together again. All these people, your people, have come too far to lose now.”

“Thank you. I needed to hear that.” Though Robb didn’t feel entirely assured, he would remain strong for his soldiers and take a leap of faith as Dacey suggested. She was always a strong warrior. If he couldn’t believe her, he was truly doomed.

“Good. Now get on your horse, Your Grace. The men are ready to rip some Lannisters apart, and so am I!” The woman gave a great laugh before leaving the king to prepare. Grey Wind nudged his hand affectionately and Robb felt his resolve return. *Vulnerability doesn’t belong in war.* He scratched the wolf behind the ear and knew that time was of the essence. He mounted his great stallion, sitting tall as the king he was, and cantered out of the small forest to walk the front lines.

Thirty thousand soldiers stood at his back, armed and ready for battle. The reality was daunting. Robb encouraged his steed forward and parallel to the vanguard, examining the faces he saw at a glance—the scared expression of a young lad, the red hair of a Tully loyalist, a man with a bull’s head helm and a younger soldier sharing his saddle, a warrior from the Twins proudly displaying his sigil. Each soul he passed felt the impact of Lannister rule, and if luck favored them, they would bring it to an end. *But not without some final words from their king,* he considered, *for many of these men will die at my command. Perhaps I will die too. The war ends here, no matter who wins.*

Robb settled into a trot back and forth along the front lines. He cleared his throat to make his words resonate, mentally shaking the anxiety from his bones.

“My father was a great man,” he called over the wind. “He was strong. Valiant. Honorable and gracious to those he called his friends. Many of you had known him for years, and some of you only heard stories of his triumphs in King Robert’s rebellion. But I would not ask you to fight for him.”
Confidence lifted his voice in crescendo. “You chose me as your king. You proclaimed the North a free kingdom when my father was killed on the steps of that building, there.” He pointed to the Great Sept of Baelor, where it stood looming over the city like a fatal reminder. “But don’t fight for me. Don’t fight for either of us, not the Starks or Tullys or any other great house. Fight for yourselves! It was you who took up arms when Lord Eddard Stark was taken prisoner. You stood by me and marched south from Winterfell, you came to my aid when I needed each and every one of you. It is your lands that the Mountain burns and pillages, your princess that the Hound rapes! It’s your villages, your hometowns, your liege lords and bannermen and fellow soldiers that have suffered directly at the hands of the lions on their damned iron chair! Fight for your rights, gentlemen, for your homes and your women and children. Fight for your kingdom, your honor and the glory of the North, and we cannot be defeated!”

The bells of King’s Landing rang for Robb’s war, and all he heard was vengeance. Thirty-thousand voices cried out their acceptance, so loud it was almost deafening. The king felt his skin prickle into gooseflesh under the steel of his armor. His men clattered their swords and shields, jabbed their spears into the ground to prepare for charge, their voices raised in unison. “The King in the North! The King in the North! The King in the North!”

“Grey Wind,” Robb muttered. “Remind the Lannisters who we are.”

The direwolf lifted his head and howled at the moon. The signal was given. The floodgates shot open and the North was unleashed.

Thousands of men and horses thundered across the field in the king’s charge. Adrenaline pumped through Robb’s heart, thicker than blood. He felt pressure build as they galloped closer and closer to the army that stood between him and King’s Landing, armored in Lannister and Tyrell colors. The wind whipped at his face but indignation would not let him falter.

When the charge met the opposing vanguard, King’s Landing’s outer field collapsed into the pits of the seven hells.

The warriors of the North plowed through the front lines. Screams and the crunch of bone added to the cacophony of a battle that had just begun. Grey Wind maneuvered between soldiers and was lost among the bodies, but Robb knew the wolf would resurface when he needed him. The king sliced his sword along the face of the nearest assailant and urged the horse onward through the mass of violence, cutting down those who leapt in his path. He slaughtered anyone that dared challenge him, dodging arrows and shouting for justice until he reached the city’s outer wall, and turned for a second assault. “Rally to me!” he cried over the chaos, waving his sword in the air to signal formation. “Bring in the ram’s head! Get the ladders up, there’s no time to waste!” When most of his mounted soldiers had lined up behind him, Robb jabbed his sword forward and dug his heels into the side of his steed, galloping forth for another strike to the heart of the Lannister garrison. Arrows flew and swords crashed. Boulders soared overhead from catapults and laid waste to any foundation it collided with. The roar of thousands of men was overwhelming, more so than any battle Robb had been part of and rightfully so; this was the endgame, the determining factor that decided the fate of thousands. By the time Robb and his company reached the adjacent hill after the second attack, nearly a third of the Lannister forces were obliterated center-field.

“Something’s wrong,” panted Robb as his horse brayed nervously. “This is too easy.” He watched his men lift the ladders against the outer walls and thrust the battering ram against the Lion Gate, but it would not give. Ladders alone would not be enough to penetrate the city walls. Robb scrambled for a second plan, examining the battle from atop the hill by the water. He glanced up in time to witness a single flaming arrow sail through the sky toward the gate. He furrowed his brow. “Who shot that?”
“Shot what?” called Brienne of Tarth over the noise, but when her eyes met the blazing arrow she came to a frantic conclusion. “Your Grace, get down!—“

*Boom.*

Violent quakes shook the ground at his feet. Mass explosion shattered his eardrums and Robb’s horse stumbled and fell, plunging him into the dirt. Robb quickly shielded his eyes from the sudden light. White noise crackled through the air that reeked of blood and fire. Viridescent flames licked the stone walls of King’s Landing and hundreds of soldiers burned on both sides, smothered in jade fire and flailing. The inferno made ash of all it touched. Sheets of rock fell upon the innocent and dotted the fields with crushed men.

“Your Grace!” exclaimed Lady Brienne, taking hold of Robb’s arms and pulling him free from the trap of his fallen horse. He groaned in pain, laying back against Brienne as he looked down to the outcome of the carnage.

The Lion Gate was demolished, leaving rubble and fierce flame.

“Wildfire,” Robb gasped. It was horror to breathe in. The fields were littered with burning bodies, the flesh of men who deserved cleaner deaths. Lannister forces had taken the brunt of the damage. *A trap.* He furrowed his brow, studying the horrid scene from a distance, but he didn’t have the luxury to ponder for long. He had to make a decision quickly. Robb thanked Brienne for her help and pushed himself to his feet, making a quick assessment to rule out broken bones before retrieving his sword. “To me!” he shouted over the blaze. When he found his strength, Robb broke into a run across the fiery fields with his trusted men and women beside him. “Don’t give them time to prepare barricades! Push through while we still have a chance!”

On his order, thousands of Northern soldiers flooded through the breach in the outer wall. Robb remained by his closest warriors; Greatjon and Smalljon Umber, Brienne of Tarth, Dacey Mormont and Roose Bolton. The six rebels climbed quickly over the rubble that was once the Lion Gate and followed the thrum of battle into the city, past the Great Sept of Baelor where the war began. Robb spared the steps a vengeful glance before turning east, rushing further into the heart of King’s Landing and clashing blades with whoever crossed his path. He slit the stomach of a City Watchman and ran another through with the tip of his blade. The third assailant he did not see, but Grey Wind leapt from the shadows and tackled him to the ground, tearing his throat to bloody pieces. He ducked under the force of a battleaxe and plunged his sword through the chest of another soldier, pulling it free as the body fell to the ground. When he looked up to the Red Keep in the distance, a single candle illuminated a window in the tallest tower.

“Your Grace!”

Robb turned. A dark-haired woman had called to him from the shadows. She was dressed as a handmaiden, armorless with bare arms and sandals, standing at the head of a hidden alleyway with a bloody knife clutched in her palm. The wind whipped her black hair about her face. “You’re Robb Stark?”

Robb stared at her a moment before nodding.

“Come with me, hurry! We don’t have much time.” Her Lorathi accent was heavy and unrestrained.

“Who the hell are you?” shouted the Greatjon, puffing his massive chest and glaring down to the small woman. “Get out of the way. I’m not afraid to bury you.”

The woman wasn’t fazed. “I’m Sansa’s friend. That girl is like a sister to me, which makes us allies.
You can trust me. I know my way around the castle and you need to get inside.”

“That candle,” said Robb, pointing to the tower. “That’s her up there, isn’t it? Who else would be there in the middle of a siege?”

“I don’t know. They won’t let me see her. But we must hurry, Tywin won’t wait forever and I have someone that needs saving.”

Who would that be? Robb yearned for more time to consider, but already the night was timed. His commanders could manage the field of battle without him, though it was disheartening to leave them behind. They knew this was coming. This was a part of the plan, minus the envoy. He begrudgingly gave his consent and the woman gestured for him and his guardsmen to follow, racing quickly through the back alleys towards Flea Bottom, or what remained of it. The poor sector of the city was a bloodbath. Peasants slaughtered each other in the streets and ransacked every store and home. There was nothing he could do. From the beginning, Robb’s plan was to find a tunneled entrance into the castle while the bulk of his army distracted the Lannisters, but he certainly hadn’t expected to be welcomed into massacre. He held doubt close to his heart.

“Through here,” the stranger ordered when they stopped before a shadowed gate. She retrieved a ring of keys from between her breasts. Dacey snorted. “What?” the woman shot back. “This dress doesn’t have pockets.” She found the right key and unlocked the hidden entrance, showing the six inside before shutting the exit behind them.

“Turn left at the end of the corridor,” said the foreigner, “then go up the stairs. It’ll take you to the west wing hallway. You have to hurry. I don’t know how long she has.”

“Thank you,” Robb replied with a tightened jaw. “Give me your name so I might remember it when the battle is over.”

“It’s Shae, Your Grace.” The handmaiden smiled. “You and Sansa have the same eyes. She will be thrilled to see them again.”

“Where are you going?” Brienne asked from behind. “Why not come with us? It’ll be dangerous to go alone.”

“I can handle myself.” Shae lifted her dress to expose two daggers strapped against her bare thigh. Robb believed she knew how to use them. “I can’t go with you. I have to free someone.”

“Do what you must,” panted Robb. “But I have to ask—the Hound and the Imp, what news of them?”

Shae paused. “Why do you want to know?”

“Both of them have forced themselves on my sister, and they’ll answer for it if they’re here. If you are Sansa’s friend, you’ll tell me true.”

Her lip twitched. “…The Hound is dead,” Shae said with finality. “Lord Tyrion went off to Casterly Rock to manage things in his father’s stead. They’re not here.”

“How do we know that isn’t a lie?” asked Roose Bolton, rightfully skeptical.

“You don’t.” Shae narrowed her eyes at the Northern lord before turning away. She fumbled with flint and steel to strike a torch to life, gripping the shaft and turning to the group. “What are you waiting for? You’ve nothing else to learn from me. Get Sansa and kill Tywin, and don’t go looking for your wanted men. That’s not why you came here.”
“Hey, you can’t—”

“Let her go,” Robb instructed Lord Umber, who stepped down from his defensive stance. The woman rushed off with her keys and her torch, leaving them in darkness with more questions and not enough answers. Grey Wind whined as the last remnants of light faded away.

“Right. Torches,” said Dacey, making fire for three of them to hold. Robb took the rarity of a lulled moment to wipe blood from his sword and gauge his wounds. Minor bruising, he observed, a few cuts here and there. Nothing dangerous. He kept his blade wielded as the six of them commenced down the dark tunnels, following Shae’s direction.

She didn’t lie about this, at least. Robb ascended the staircase and slipped out into the quiet darkness of the west wing’s main hall. The open space was empty save for a few thieves stealing vases. They have no idea who I am, Robb thought, though the servants took one glance at Grey Wind and bolted in the other direction. He couldn’t help but grin. They were unaware that the direwolf was at a disadvantage, for the southern climate made him extremely uncomfortable and weary, but the thieves fled all the same. Robb was grateful for it. He stood in the hall and relished in the triumph of truly being there, physically present within the Red Keep after all those speeches and long days of marching. But this isn’t over yet, not even close.

“We should split up,” he instructed. “The more of us there are, the more likely we are to find her. I expect Lord Tyrion and the Hound will be wherever Tywin is.”

“You don’t think Shae told the truth about them?” Brienne asked.

“No. At least not all of it. Why say ‘they’re not here’ if only one of them is still alive? But that doesn’t matter now, saving Sansa and putting an end to the Lannisters are our top priorities.” He turned to his group. “Dacey, you go with Lord Bolton. Lord Umber, stick with your son. I’ll take Lady Brienne with me.”

“I would prefer to stay with you, Your Grace,” said Roose rather firmly. “I have medical knowledge. If we find the princess, I will be of the greatest use to her.”

Brienne opened her mouth to argue, but Robb shook his head. “No, you’re right. Brienne, go with Dacey. It might be easier that way.” The king sighed and readjusted his plan. “Whoever finds my sister first, take her to the godswood and stay with her. That’s the safest place to be. No one would think to find her there.”

“Makes sense,” said Smalljon.

“If you come across Joffrey or Tywin Lannister, restrain them. Do not kill them unless you have no choice. That’s my duty, not yours. We’ll meet again here, in the west hall by sunrise. Any questions?”

“None.” Dacey grinned. “Good luck, Your Grace. And to you, Lord Umber, both of you.”

“Aye,” replied the massive warrior. “We’ll all be needing it.”

When the group split and made for their separate paths, Robb took a moment to mentally evaluate his plans, fishing through the stress to rediscover the goals. That tower, he thought, that’s my best lead and the strongest one thus far. He glanced quickly to Lord Bolton, who gave a nod signaling that he was prepared. “Let’s go.”

Robb sprinted down the corridors with Grey Wind and his general behind him, stopping for no one. He thrust his sword through the chest of the first guard they encountered, yanking it free to block and
parry with another. They clashed blades thrice before Robb struck at the assailant’s stomach and sliced through his spine, ascending the steps to the next level of the keep. Grey Wind ran ahead of them. The wolf’s snarls echoed through the staircase followed by shrieks of terror from Tyrell soldiers, only amplified when Robb emerged to shove his blade angrily into the man’s belly. Roose snatched the final survivor by the collar and held him close. His calm demeanor was one to be feared. “The princess,” he demanded. “Tell me where she is.”

“T-T-Tower,” the soldier stammered. “That way.” He pointed his finger in the right direction before Roose opened his throat. There are hardly any men here. Is this a trap? Robb wondered, but turning back was hardly an option. Robb and his trusted general climbed the Red Keep’s interior against better judgment until they came to the mouth of the tallest tower, poorly guarded by four men. They met death on Stark and Bolton blades. The king frowned suspiciously at the corpses he’d made. “They barely fought,” he said, astonished. “Why imprison a princess with such poor guards?”

“Perhaps all the better ones are out looking for you.” Lord Bolton sheathed his blade. “Is this the tower you saw?”

“I think so.” Robb glanced up at the winding staircase, swallowing the bile in the back of his throat. He assessed his emotions before facing his companion.

“Wait here,” Robb ordered. “If more of them come, call for me.”

“I will.” Lord Bolton patted his shoulder. Robb thanked him in haste and hurtled up the stairs, frantic and paranoid, horror rising in his stomach like poison. Sansa was so close, just beyond a wooden door, but Robb didn’t know what he would find on the other side. Was he rescuing a girl who was a shadow of Sansa’s former self? Was he rescuing a broken heart? Or worse; had he sacrificed so much only to lay eyes on a pretty corpse?

Enough anxiety. Enough waiting. Robb kicked down the door at the top of the stairs and charged into the room, searching frantically for red hair and blue eyes.

The chambers were a disaster. A broken vanity rested against faded stone walls. Shredded rugs smothered the floor and cobwebs dotted the corners of the ceiling. A single candle lay resting in the window. Distant wildfire cast a jaded glow upon a girl wearing nothing but a nightdress, pale arms exposed and covered in bruises. She curled up on the small bed of straw and did not move, weeping softly.

He stumbled backwards. “Sansa…?” he whispered. His voice cracked and his hands trembled.

The girl gasped, sitting up instantly. Wild hair fell in ratted tumbles down her back and shoulders. Tully eyes were red from tears. “R-Robb?”

“Gods, Sansa.” Robb dropped his sword and ran to her. He pulled Sansa desperately into his arms as he met him halfway, and he held her firmly against his armored chest as tightly as he could. Sansa wept against him and her knees gave way, giving him no choice but to fall with her, sitting on his shins as his heir went limp and strengthless. He was distraught and overjoyed all at once. Robb felt tears pour down his cheeks like rain and he tugged her even closer to his core, burying his face in her sweet-smelling hair that reminded him so much of home.

“You came,” Sansa cried. “You actually came.” She broke into deeper sobbing but Robb heard the smile buried underneath.

“Of course I did,” he replied in earnest. “I could never abandon you, not with these people. I only wish it could have been sooner.” Robb kissed her cheek and temple before pulling away, keeping
ahold of her arms. “A candle in the window. Genius.”

“The old woman who brings me food said it might get your attention.” Sansa chuckled despite herself. “I can’t believe it worked.”

“Don’t tell me this is where they’ve been keeping you for the past—“

“No, no. I’ve only been locked here for a few days.” Sansa sniffled and beamed. The expression filled him and broke him all at once. How many years had it been since he’d held her, comforted her like this? What has she suffered here? Robb brushed the tears from her cheeks with dirty thumbs, kissing her sweetly on the forehead.

“I heard what happened,” he said, trying to regain composure. “I know what they did to you. I’m so sorry, Sansa, I should have come sooner. I won’t let anyone hurt you again, do you hear me? Never.”

“I know. I believe you, I know.”

Robb glanced to her neck, observing blue bruises made by another man’s mouth. He scowled. “Who did this to you?”

Sansa bit her lip. “Ser Meryn, he…he touched me, but only until Lord Tywin stopped him. Don’t worry. It was nothing I couldn’t bear.” Sansa’s soft little voice had suddenly turned to one of iron, and for a moment Robb wondered who he was talking to. She’s been so hardened by this place.

“Sansa—“

“Don’t,” she interrupted. “Please. I’m alright. Ser Meryn can’t hurt me, no matter how hard he tries. I’m not some weak princess locked in a broken tower, like the games we played as children. I’m strong now. I’ve had to be. The thought of you and Mother kept me from faltering, and…” Sansa placed a delicate hand over her stomach. “I have to fight for two, now.”

Robb felt anger flurry in his heart. “So it is true. Tywin sent a scout just to tell me, but I didn’t believe it, not all the way…but it’s alright,” he assured through gritted teeth, cupping her face in his hands. “I’ll bear the child no ill will should you choose to keep it, I promise. I’ll even make him a Stark if you wish. He won’t bear the sins of his father nor will I hold them against him.”

Sansa blinked. “What do you mean? Of course I—“

“Your Grace!” came Roose Bolton’s shouts from below. “Reinforcements, we need to move!”

Robb cursed. “Come on. I’ll keep you safe.” He kissed her forehead once more before wrapping his arm around her waist, helping her stand. The Stark siblings hurried down the stairs and toward the adjacent corridor with Roose Bolton and Grey Wind behind them.

The godswood will keep her from harm, he thought, if we can make it there in time.

Chapter End Notes

ARE YOU SHITTING YOUR PANTS YET?
Okay, some disclaimers--this is actually the first time I've ever written a battle scene. Ever. Like, in my whole life. This is super intimidating but I hope I pulled it off well
enough. Fighting is boring to write because it's like "DEATH, MORE DEATH AND SWORDS AND STUFF" but whatever. I just hope it flows well and doesn't seem like I'm the war-writing infant that I am.

Wow, so this is basically where all the crazy shit happens if you haven't already guessed. You guys have NOOOO IDEA what's gonna happen and it's so great because I love love LOVE being the asshole that holds all the cards, and doesn't show anybody.

Did you miss me? <3 I missed you guys. I'm so glad this wait is over so I can finally finish this fic and move on to the next one I'm planning (~spoilers!).

Leave kudos and comments if you love me. If you don't love me, leave kudos and comments anyway, because writing is hard and I do this shit for FREE

See ya Tuesday, lovelies! *laughs maniacally and rides off into the sunset*
The passage of time became a blur of what was and could be. The black cells offered no companions, no source of light, no food or water to keep him healthy. Only Darkness and Silence, two entities that never let him rest. When Silence became unbearable, Sandor would talk to Darkness about his sorrows until he felt less alone, less angry, but eventually Silence would return and claim its space at his side. He ached for another soul nearby. He ached for Sansa. I don't even know if she’s alive. He desperately tried not to think of it, but the truth was as persistent as the stone prison around him.

If Sansa Stark had perished, his purpose in life would die with her.

Sandor Clegane was never a man for affection, but Sansa...Sansa. She changed that. He would give anything if she could be beside him, to sing him a song and curl up in his arms. He would toy with the soft auburn hair he loved so much and breathe in the comforting scent of her skin. But Sansa can’t be in a shithole like this, he thought when Silence returned. This isn’t where she belongs. She needs a soft bed and platters of those little cakes, and enough rest for two. A pillow for her back, maybe. He hoped that wherever Sansa was, she was getting all she needed to help their child grow, no matter how unlikely. They had become the most important things in the world to him. Moreso than his own life.

If I lose them, gods help whoever stands in my way. Joffrey had promised as much. The bastard king humiliated Sandor before his court after the affair with Sansa was discovered. He threw names and jokes and revolting threats, and ordered the Kingsguard to beat his once-loyal dog until he broke. But Sandor was far superior than the menial fear of pain. He grit his teeth and bore the things they did to him, until Tywin Lannister stopped the embarrassment and took Sandor to the black cells where he
awaited trial.

But where was Sansa? He’d heard her crying out his name, then nothing. Silence. Sandor spent the first several hours of imprisonment shouting and cursing, beating his hands bloody against the stone and begging whoever listened for mercy upon her. But after days without nutrition and constant exposure to his invisible cellmates, he became too tired to be violent. Physical aggression once equaled release. Now he had nothing, not even the sweet songs of a pretty little bird. He held his face in his hands, defeated. *I should have known that loving her was a damn mistake. Now she’ll have to pay for it.*

A distant boom made his cell shudder. Dust fell from the ceiling and Silence fled in its wake. Sandor furrowed his brow and listened closely for further disturbances, wondering if he was slowly slipping into the clutches of madness. He heard that people often went insane in the black cells. Even Ned Stark had a touch of paranoia about him when the goldcloaks dragged him to the steps of Baelor.

*Stark. Not Ned, Robb.* He’d forgotten about the war somehow, so focused was he on obsessing over Sansa’s fate that her brother’s coming army became unimportant. Sandor kept still and hoped they would come for him once Sansa was safe. She would tell them the truth and wash the stains of rape and murder from his name. *Damn, I really believe how much she cares for me.* He couldn’t help but grin.

Keys clattered in the distance. Sandor lifted his head from the wall and looked to the door of his cell, or where he assumed it to be. The lock clicked. Sandor rose to his feet in haste, but the rush made him dizzy and he stumbled backwards against the stone.

The door opened. Darkness dispersed. His vision remained blurred and he struggled to adjust to the torchlight, but eventually the sight of a woman became clear. Sandor took a moment to recognize her.

“…Sheila?” he asked, blinking.

“Shae,” scoffed the maid. “You still don’t know my name?”

“Wasn’t important.” Sandor glanced wearily to the open door, then back to her. “The fuck you doing here?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” she snapped, though her voice fell softer when she spoke again. “Sit down. You’re not ready to fight yet.” Shae placed the torch in an iron fixture and pulled a small sack from around her shoulders. Sandor sank to the floor, not wanting to stand longer than he needed to. He was overwhelmed and grateful for light and company, though his mind was slow to process them. “Here,” she said, offering him hard bread and cheese. “It’s all I could find. Everything is chaos up there.”

Sandor took the food gratefully. “Better up there than down here.”

“Many would disagree.” She closed the sack and sat beside him. “Are you hurt at all?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” said Sandor, grimacing. “How long has it been?”

“Three days.”

*Felt like hundreds.* He took a bite of bread and swallowed. “Thought I heard an explosion.”

“You did,” Shae replied. “It was wildfire.”
“Didn’t the Imp use all that fuckery at the Blackwater?”

“He’s name is *Tyrion*, and there was some leftover. Bronn used it to blow up the Lion Gate. That’s the noise you heard.”

“Blow it up?” Sandor stared at her in disbelief. “You can’t tell me the Lion Gate’s *gone*.”

“I just did,” she confirmed. “I saw it myself. He let Robb’s army through.” Shae brushed dirt and soot from her arms before gesturing to the food. “You need to eat. We don’t have much time.”

Sandor glanced at the tasteless meal, frowning at the thought of enough wildfire to make a city gate flatten to rubble and dust. “Fine. Wish you’d brought some wine to wash it down, though.”

After he took another bite of the stale bread, Shae fished through her belongings. It wasn’t until she pulled out a skin of liquid that he realized what it was.

“Dornish sour?” he asked hopefully.

“No. It’s water. You think I would bring you wine when you’ve had nothing to drink for days? That’s stupid.”

Sandor didn’t have the right to be irritated, but he was anyway. “Fine. Hand it over.”

Shae uncorked the skin and took several long gulps before handing it to him. He looked at it with a scowl. “Can’t believe you didn’t bring wine.”

“This might be our last night on this earth. Beggars can’t be choosy.”

“That’s all the more reason to drink wine.” *She’s got spice in her*, Sandor thought, but Shae spoke no lie. He finished the water entirely in several massive gulps, sighing when he was done. “Last night on this earth,” he repeated. “For once, I hope it’s not.”

“Just once?”

“Aye. The little bird needs me, and…” He hesitated. “My family needs me. I can’t die.”

Shae grinned. “I never thought you would be a family man.”

“I’m not. Don’t know where it’s coming from, to be honest.”

“I do.” The handmaiden stood and offered her hand to help him up. “You love Sansa more than anything, and you want to make her happy.”

Sandor wasn’t fond of being read like an open book, at least with anyone who wasn’t Sansa, but perhaps that was how Shae knew. He did not take her hand and stood of his own accord, brushing the dirt from his tunic. “Yeah,” he said after a moment’s pause. “Something like that.”

The woman smiled before she sobered, her expression changing to one of action. “Are you ready?”

Sandor nodded. He inhaled through his nose and mentally prepared himself for the sight of wildfire. *Just as I thought I was done with that shit*, he brooded, *only this time I don’t have Sansa to run to.* The memory alone sent his heart racing. “Get on with it, then.”

“Follow me.”

Shae retrieved the torch from its fixture and sped off down the black corridors. The two ascended to
the second level of the dungeons, and then the first, finding the staircase that would take them to the
lowest inhabited floor of the Red Keep. Sandor hadn’t expected to come across many guards, but
those they encountered fell swiftly to Shae’s knife. He never had to interfere. She certainly knows
how to handle herself. Shame I ever doubted her.

When they reached an open bridge, the foul smells of war and burning flesh slammed into his senses.
Sandor knew the scent well. He looked out to the inferno King’s Landing had become, littered with
shouting men and hues of lime green. Massive boulders soared through the air from distant catapults
and laid waste to all they touched. Architecture crumbled to pieces and fell to the open jaws of
emerald flame. “Wildfire,” he mumbled.

Shae turned at his sigh of distress. “It’s not near us. Hey. Look at me.” She snapped her fingers in
front of his face until his eyes met hers. “The fire is far away. Sansa isn’t. Which is more important to
you?”

Sandor’s jaw tightened. He wished he had the nerve to slap her, but Sansa would never forgive him.
He shoved past Shae wordlessly and sped to the adjacent building, following her direction despite his
growing fear.

The halls were suspiciously empty. Sandor glanced behind every corner, expecting to find a group of
soldiers on patrol or rushing from one point to another, but after a time he realized how vacant the
Red Keep truly was. Shae led him back to his chambers with far too much ease. “Where are all the
men?” Sandor asked, dressing hastily in his armor.

“I wish I knew.” Shae began to pace back and forth while she waited for him. “It’s strange. They
wouldn’t leave this place abandoned.”

“Wherever that little bastard king is, I bet they’re not far behind.” Sandor buckled the belts and
hoisted his greatsword behind his back, making sure all his daggers and spare blades were accounted
for. The armor looks good, he noticed. Sansa must have polished it while she waited for me. The
thought gave him pride.

“Are you done yet?” Shae asked impatiently.

“Just finished.”

“Good. Now listen closely.” Shae reached for his arm to pull him close, but Sandor flinched from her
touch. She seemed to catch the hint. “Tyrion is waiting for you in their chambers. He might know
where Sansa is, but you have to hurry. Robb had the same idea. If he finds her before you do, he’ll
take her away and his men will never let you near her again.”

“I get it.” Sandor narrowed his eyes. “Where are you running off to?”

“I’m not running. I’m going back to Flea Bottom.” Shae gripped her knife by the hilt. “There are
people that need help fleeing the city. I can save lives with those tunnels.”

Somehow, her declaration made him miss Sansa even more. Sandor’s heart softened. He would not
let it show. “Good luck, then.”

“You too. Keep her safe for me.” Shae sped from the room without another word. Sandor was quick
to follow. The two took opposite paths and Sandor bolted up the stairs, eager to hear the Imp’s
information and save Sansa from whatever cage she’d been placed in.

Sandor shoved open the door to her room with a loud clang. He scanned his eyes over the
surroundings in jaded light until his gaze met Tyrion Lannister’s.
“Dwarf.”

“Dog.” Tyrion scowled. He looked as if he’d already seen his share of the battle. “You should be thanking me, but I guess I expected insults.”

Anger surged through him. “How is it that you’re free while the little bird’s locked away?”

“Shae wasn’t foolish enough to spend the night,” Tyrion replied, though his voice was not mocking. “No one knew she was with me. I expect Baelish told Joffrey about Sansa. He threatened me earlier that day.”

Sandor curled his lip. “I’ll gut him.”

“Yes, I expect you will.” Tyrion grabbed a battleaxe from the table and turned to his squire, a boy Sandor had no affiliation with, though Sansa seemed to like him. “Podrick, are you ready?”

“Yes, m’lord.” The boy looked up to Sandor with an anxious stare. “Are—are you ready too, m’lord Clegane?”

“Lord Clegane,” Sandor spat. “Fuck me. We’re not doing that.” He pulled open the chamber door and waited for the others to follow. “We’re running out of time. ‘Which way?’ he barked impatiently.

“Left,” said Tyrion. “Through the throne room, it’s the shortest route. We need to find the easternmost door, it’ll take us to the tower.”

“Tower?”

“I think she was taken there, but I’m not sure. They won’t let me see her.” Sandor noticed the look of worry buried deep in the Imp’s gaze. Maybe the little shit really cares for her. What reason would he have to lie for so long?

Sandor took Tyrion’s direction. He navigated through the corridors with ease, having patrolled these halls countless times on countless different orders. Wall-mounted candles flickered as he passed until even the shadows began to worry him. He charged into the throne room and searched for the doorway in question, but his inquiries were cut short. Clashes of steel from the end of the hall stole his attention. Lannister soldiers were locked in a grueling fight with two Stark men, and the Northerners were clearly struggling. Sansa would never forgive me if I let them die. Bugger it all, who am I? Sandor unsheathed his greatsword from his back, determined. “Detour,” he called to the Imp. “Go on ahead.”

“Are you sure?”

“Aye. If I’m gonna switch sides, may as well start now.” He gestured for Tyrion and Pod to move behind him, past the Iron Throne which sat looming like a dragon.

“If we’re not back before the fight is done,” said the dwarf, “meet us at the top floor. To the right at the mouth of the west-facing tower.”

Sandor didn’t know why he trusted Tyrion with Sansa’s safety, but there was no time to ponder. He nodded in acknowledgment. After the Imp and his squire scurried to the eastern exist, Sandor bolted forward to the Starks’ assistance and hacked the nearest lion down the spine.

The guards were taken entirely by surprise, just the way Sandor liked it. He reached forward and snatched the nearest man by the neck, lifting him from the ground to run him through with his swift blade. The Stark men took note of his interference and lunged into the fray. Sandor tossed the body
in his hands aside before slicing the next combatant’s face in two, giving no time for recourse. He moved in front of the last remaining soldier and swiftly opened his throat. Blood spilled like water down the front of his armored chest, and the guardsman fell lifeless to the stone.

The two Starks pushed a corpse they’d made to the ground, panting, struggling to regain their breath. Sandor sheathed his blade and looked at them, though it was difficult to see their features in the darkness. They’re hardly more than children, he thought with a scowl. The taller soldier wore a bull’s head helm and steel armor, while the youngest was clad only in leather and an iron helmet too large for him. The eldest placed a hand over his stomach and shook his head. “Thanks, stranger,” he huffed. “Too bad my companion doesn’t know anything about stealth.”

“I know plenty about stealth,” spat the shorter boy. “I couldn’t think, though. I just…acted.”

“Yeah, well, next time you should control it. Nearly got us killed before we did anything. You’re no use to your family dead.”

“I was fine. We would have been fine.”

Sandor glanced between the two of them. He’d heard that voice before, but surely it couldn’t be… Could it?

Acting on impulse, he reached forward and yanked the helmet from the smaller boy’s head.

Not a boy, he realized in disbelief. A girl. A bloody girl.


Anger washed over her so quickly that it took him by surprise. “You’re the Hound!” shouted Arya. She drew her little sword and waved it through the air just as Sandor leapt backward.

“Put that damn thing down, can’t you see I’m trying to—“

“I don’t care!” she fired back. “You hurt my sister and you murdered Mycah. You’re not getting away!” Arya broke into a mad dash towards him, but her friend wrapped a strong arm around her waist and held her back as she flailed.

“Gendry, stop! Let me go!”

“He was killing Lannisters!” said the boy. “Why would he be against us if he saved our lives?”

“He’s a liar and a cheat. He’d do anything to gain our trust if it meant killing us in the end.”

“You’ve got a lot of assumptions for someone you’ve never bloody met, wolf-girl.” Sandor scowled at the both of them. “I don’t know what you heard, but whatever it is, it’s false. The little bird gave herself, I didn’t force her. So take your damn lies and shove ‘em up your arse, I don’t have time for them.” Sandor clenched his fists. “If you want to find your pretty sister, shut your mouth and follow me.”

Gendry and Arya exchanged hesitant looks. The eldest looked up at him. “You know where Lady Sansa is?”


“No. This is a trap.” Arya gripped her toothpick of a sword. “We should kill him and find Sansa on our own.”
“What if he’s right?” asked Gendry. “We can’t just ignore ‘im, Arya.”

“He’s lying. Sansa would never love a monster like him.”

Aye, Sandor thought. She shouldn’t. He scrambled through his mess of thoughts until he found the facts that truly mattered to him, and hoped they would be enough to convince her of his innocence. “Sansa mumbles in her sleep,” he recalled. “She likes the touch of silk, says it makes her feel pretty. She sews most of her dresses and likes to sing. Lemon cakes are her favorite food. Her soap smells like, err… I don’t know, some damn garden flower. Do you want me to go on?” He was surprised at how much he remembered, and how much he deeply missed her. Sandor crossed his arms over his chest and scoffed when Arya didn’t respond. “No? Good. Now put your tiny sword away and follow me, damn you.”

He turned on his heels and stormed toward the exit Tyrion had taken. The baffled look on Arya’s face was one he would not forget.

“So—wait,” she called, following after him in quick little steps while Gendry trailed behind. “Why did people say that you hurt her?”

“Because they didn’t know any better,” Sandor replied, irritated. “The word ‘innocent’ doesn’t come to mind when people look at me.”

“And Mycah?”

He frowned. “That was Joffrey’s doing,” he said in a deeper tone. “Don’t wanna talk about it.” Killing the butcher’s boy had always haunted him. He didn’t need the reminder.

“But you—“

“I said, I don’t want to bloody talk about it.” He jabbed a finger at her face, and Arya glared at him before shutting her mouth. “Be quiet if you know what’s good for you. Both of you.”

“Do as he says, Arya.” Gendry placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “He’s all we’ve got right now.”

The wolf-girl grumbled and begrudgingly followed him.

The trio hurried up the many stairs to the designated floor of the Red Keep, and again Sandor noted the absence of Lannister and Tyrell soldiers. Tywin would never make a mistake like this, unless it’s not a mistake at all. Sandor wasn’t sure which option worried him more. If the keep’s vacancy was a part of his plan, then Sansa was already at a disadvantage. Giving Tywin the upper hand would make saving her nearly impossible.

Take a right, the Imp said. Sandor followed direction, and before long he found Podrick standing beside the entrance to the tower staircase. “M’lord Clegane,” he muttered in nervous greeting.

“Didn’t I tell you not to call me that?” Sandor snarled. “Where’s the dwarf?”

“The t-tower, m’lord. Ser.”

Sandor fumed and prepared to tell Podrick Payne exactly where to put his fancy titles, but Tyrion Lannister emerged from the base of the tower with an uncertain expression. Sansa was not with him. Panic began to rise like the sea in Sandor’s chest, slowly, then all at once. Words didn’t need to tell him what happened.
“She’s not here,” Tyrion murmured. He looked as though he’d witnessed death itself. “She’s gone. I don’t—I don’t know where she is, she was supposed to be here, my father ordered it—"

“Liar!” Arya exclaimed, drawing her needle. “Liar! I knew it! Gendry, we can’t trust them!”

Tyrion eyed widened in disbelief as he recognized her, holding his hands up defensively. Pod took a few steps backward and Sandor was overwhelmed, yearning only to find his little bird and put this all to rest. Frustration reached a boiling point within until it spilled over the edge and his temper was lost. Sandor grabbed a vase from a nearby table and threw it across the room with an angry shout. The shatter grabbed their attentions and they stared at him, wide-eyed.

“Arya Stark. Tyrion Lannister. Gendry. Squire. There, now we’ve all fucking met, is that what you want? You can kill each other later. I don’t care. I need to find Sansa.” His throat began to tighten and he damned himself for going so far, so deep into Sansa’s love that he’d lost the calluses that made him a hard man. “You’d better come up with some other ideas, dwarf, or I’ll leave you behind and look for her on my own.”

Tyrion and Arya exchanged hesitant stares. Gendry kept a firm hand on her shoulder to keep her from acting brashly, and the touch seemed to work, for her scowl faded into angered understanding. “I don’t trust you,” said the little wolf, “but if sticking with you really helps Sansa, I’ll do it.”

“Actually,” cooed a voice, “there’s no need.” It was a tone none of them expected, and everyone but Sandor remained oblivious until the golden monster crept from the shadows. Joffrey Baratheon emerged with a triumphant, wicked smile. Five members of the Kingsguard stood protectively at his side. “That was a lovely confession, dog. So genuine. Do you love Sansa, I wonder?”

There was no use in denying it now. “Aye,” Sandor grumbled spitefully, “but I’m not going to die for her. Not tonight.” He reached for his sword.

Joffrey beamed. “That’s alright. Sansa will be dead before this is over. Ser Meryn will find her and put her to good use. Maybe I’ll take a turn too. Maybe I’ll make you watch.”

Ser Meryn locked eyes with Sandor. “She is so very pretty. Her sweet red hair and soft skin, pink perfect lips. Whether she’s moanin’ or screamin’, it’s just as good.” His smile grew wide. “But you know me. Screamin’s the best way, especially with her. How long was she up in that tower with me? Two days? Three?”

Sandor ground his teeth, knowing this could only end one way regardless of who ended up dead. He drew the greatsword from his back and gripped it tightly by the hilt. “You’re a lying sack of shit, Meryn. Do you remember what happened the last time you touched her?” he growled. “Course you do. I bet you’ve got a nice little scar from it. This time, I won’t make the mistake of letting you live.”

“Clegane,” warned Tyrion, but Sandor would not back down. Whatever Meryn Trant did or didn’t do, he had to die. Sandor wanted it, craved it like nothing else. And if Meryn goes, the rest of the bastards will too. Arya retrieved her Needle and Gendry his axe, and the unlikely allies stood at the crossroads of doing the right thing and letting fate intervene.

The true course became clear. Podrick threw a knife across the distance like an arrow and the blade buried deep in Ser Boros Blount’s neck.

Sandor’s focus was entirely on Meryn Trant. He clashed blades with the knight and reveled in the hiss of steel on steel, dodging a failed thrust and matching swords again. The pair stepped forward and back in a dance of wild abhorrence that drove them further down the lines of carelessness. Sandor was punched in the cheek and he staggered backwards, snarling as he lunged forward again.
The memory of Sansa’s screams was the fuel that urged him on. He struck a blow with his fist against Meryn’s jaw and kicked him to the ground. He sliced open the throat of a knight that tried to take advantage of his distraction. The blood of Meryn’s brother-in-arms spilled over his glittering golden armor, but it wasn’t enough, wasn’t nearly as satisfactory as Sandor needed it to be. Meryn scrambled backward and spat profanities about Sansa, knowing his fight was lost, but Sandor would take his time and cherish this sweet gift.

“Ready to die?” Sandor spat with a manic grin. The knight begged for mercy. He did not oblige. Sandor pressed the tip of his blade against Meryn’s belly and shoved it inward with a forceful jolt. Meryn gasped and cried out as the sword ripped through his insides, pressing further through flesh until coming to rest at the center of his rib cage. Sandor kept the blade buried deep and twisted until life drained out of him, finally sent to the pits of some distant hell. Only after Meryn Trant took his last breath did Sandor Clegane yank his sword free.

He was high on vengeance. When he turned to face the she-wolf, he watched her make a kill of her own. Arya removed the pointy end of her Needle from Joffrey’s throat, hovering over him like a vulture. The bastard coughed up blood and pleas for mercy.

“Valar Morghulis,” she whispered. Gendry placed a hand on her shoulder, and together they watched King Joffrey Baratheon choke.

Chapter End Notes

A:IHGWEIUNGHOIHF0QWH230T2HG
I AM SO. EXCITED. OHHHH things are gonna get SO REAL
OH MY GOSH
Okay. I'm fine. I'm totally fine.
You have until Saturday to stop freaking out, but then I'll just make you freak out
EVEN MORE. This is all just going insane. I don't know what I'm writing anymore.
You could ask me what the plot of this story is and I'd just rock back and forth muttering
"must....write.....romantic modern au" for six hours.
Did you like it? I hope I did this well enough. Sorry I'm always so self-conscious pffftt
it's just such raw material, you know? It's very nerve-wracking to post. Blah. Good shit.
See ya Saturday, my sweet lovely dears!
Sansa was safe, for the moment. The King in the North didn’t know what trials lay ahead for him and Roose Bolton, much less Sansa, but he remained confident in their temporary security. The three Northerners sprinted through various corridors fast enough to lose any pursuers that followed them. They quickly descended to the second floor of the Red Keep, but Sansa began to grow breathless and Robb knew that his wounded sister needed a moment’s rest. Her well-being was worth risking a little time. The king hastily opened a nearby door to an empty bedroom and showed Sansa and his general inside, locking the exit behind them. Sansa headed straight for the featherbed and sat on the edge of the mattress, trying to keep her breath steady. Lord Bolton lit several candles and brought one close to her.

“Let me see your arms, Princess,” Roose cooed softly.

“You can trust him,” Robb encouraged.

Sansa was hesitant, but eventually she obliged and held out her arms to him. Roose brushed his fingers gently along the black and purple skin, ignoring Sansa’s quirks of discomfort. “Nothing appears to be broken,” he concluded. “These contusions will heal with time, but you need rest. Are there any other wounds we should know about, my lady?”

Sansa shook her head and looked away. Robb noticed how uncomfortable she was under Roose Bolton’s aid, but he didn’t know how to ease her conscience. She seemed so fearful. I feel like I haven’t saved you at all, Sansa. She curled her hair behind her ear and anxiously bit her lower lip. “There might be bruises on my ribs,” she said, “but none of my bones are broken. I’d know if they
“Yes. The pain would be excruciating. May I see them?”

Sansa met Roose’s eyes. “I’m not afraid of pain, and I’m not taking off my dress.”

There was an odd tension between them that Robb couldn’t understand. He rubbed Sansa’s shoulder in attempt to help her relax. “You’ve been through a lot,” he said, meeting the familiar rivers in her eyes. “We can have your ribs looked at later.”

The Lord of the Dreadfort patted Sansa’s hand and rose from his kneeling position. “True enough, Your Grace. No permanent damage has been done that I can see. Except for her pregnancy, of course.” Roose gestured casually to Sansa’s abdomen. “Moon tea has been stored for you back at camp, my lady. When the war is over, we will bring it to you without any hesitation.”

Her expression soured. “Pardon?”

“Moon tea,” he repeated plainly. “For the bastard. Surely you don’t want a child with the blood of House Clegane.”

If Roose had yet to offend her, he certainly had now. The Sansa Robb knew from the past would scream when she lost her temper, but instead her eyes bore cold, calculating disdain. Robb hardly recognized her for the second time. Sansa slowly stood from the bed and kept her shoulders square. The color of her hair caught the candlelight and made her glow like a goddess taken form.

“How dare you?” she asked sternly. “What I do with my child is none of your concern, nor is it your decision. There will be no tea. Bastard or not, this life is mine to carry and bring into the world. You overreach yourself.”

This place has changed you. Robb was immensely proud of his sister for standing her ground, yet something still felt strange to him, something secret. Her growing unease distressed him. He clenched his jaw. “It’s alright, Lord Bolton. I’m sure you did not mean to offend her.”

“Of course not.” Roose smiled bitterly. “I would never seek to hurt the princess. We should get moving, however. The sooner we bring the lady to the godswood, Your Grace, the sooner we can search for Tywin Lannister.”

“Agreed. Sansa?” Robb asked, placing a gentle hand on her back. “Are you ready to move on?”

“No. Not yet.” She flashed Bolton an icy stare before turning her gaze to her brother. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

I knew it. “Can you wait until we reach the heart tree? We’re not safe here.”

“No, I can’t.” Sansa wrapped her arms around her torso, almost protectively. “It’s urgent. You must listen to me, please, no matter how much you might disagree or say I’m wrong. Nothing has ever been so important to me, Robb. Not ever.”

“Say it, then.” Does she think me completely intolerant? He glanced to Lord Bolton before meeting her eyes again, so he might take her words more seriously.

Sansa took a deep breath. “I’m in love with Sandor Clegane.”

“What? Sansa—“
“Please listen. Please.” She placed her hands on his arms, knocking his guard down. “You can’t hurt him. Whatever you heard is a lie. Sandor has never hurt me, never. Even when he was ordered to. And Lord Tyrion isn’t only my husband, but he’s my friend. He’s never touched me, not once since we were forced to marry. You can’t kill them. Please, Robb, I’ll never forgive you if you do.” Sansa’s blue eyes glistened with tears. He hated the sight of her despair. Mercy, he realized. She’s asking me for mercy.

Robb’s mind was shaken. He repeatedly tried and failed to wrap his head around her words. He couldn’t be a leader if he didn’t know who the enemy was. The men he’d hated for weeks and months had been redeemed in the eyes of his precious sister, and she pleaded for their lives though he’d already condemned them to death. But how can I deny her this? he thought against his will. Shae must have known too. That’s why she lied. The father of Sansa’s child and her dwarf Lannister husband…the gods have a cruel sense of humor.

Hesitantly, he gave a nod of approval. “I’ll spare them if I can, but if they charge at me I will fight.” “They won’t. I know they won’t.” Sansa beamed with relief and it puzzled him even more. “Sandor wouldn’t hurt my family.”

Because he’s a part of it, now. Robb saw it in her eyes and put the pieces together to his dismay. How could I live with myself, knowing that I killed someone she loves so much?

“I won’t hurt them, but I can’t make promises for my men.” Robb had to stay firm in case the worst should happen, and he still had his doubts, but further explanation could be taken later. He wiped her tears as he had so many times before, and took her hand in his. “If I find them, I’ll spare them. I promise.”

“Thank you.” Sansa smiled tearfully, cupping his cheek in an oddly affectionate gesture. He watched her eyes swim with thoughts unspoken, trying to tell him something or come to some conclusion that she kept secret. Before he could ask, Sansa slipped from his hold and walked out of the chamber door, Grey Wind close at her heels.

“The godwood is not far,” said Roose. “If I remember correctly, it should be on the bottom level overlooking Blackwater Bay.”

“It is,” Sansa replied.

“Good.” Robb peered around a corner before gesturing for the others to follow. Lord Bolton rushed on ahead while the king instructed his sister. “We’ll take you to safety there, alright? I’ll even leave Grey Wind with you. He’ll protect you while—“

“Shh.” Roose held a finger to his lips, signaling for both of them to be silent. Grey Wind perked his ears and began to snarl. From the distant hall, voices echoed with the clank of armor. Something about a hound and a bull, but the words were warped and the king could not decipher them.

“Soldiers,” Robb whispered. “I can’t hear what they’re saying. How many are there, do you think?”

“Eight, maybe. No more than that.”

“Enough for us to take them?”

“They’re only Lannisters, Your Grace.”

Robb smiled. “That’s true. Sansa, go in that room around the corner. We’ll take care of them before we move on.”
“No,” she begged. “Don’t leave.” Sansa clutched onto his hand and searched his eyes, pleading for him to remain beside her. Robb’s heart broke to see her so frantic, but he was out of options and keeping her alive was his top priority. He would rather keep her safe than make her witness slaughter, regardless of how many traumatic things she had seen already. He doubted that bloodshed would affect her now, but he would take no chances.

“Keep Grey Wind with you,” Robb soothed. “Go quickly. This won’t take long.” He pulled her close and kissed her upon the crown of her head. Sansa looked at him fearfully but turned to obey, running to the nearest room with Grey Wind and shutting the door behind them.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t send her on ahead?” Bolton asked. “Keep the wolf with you. She’ll be alright. The princess could make it to the godswood while we distract them.”

“I’m not letting her go alone.” Robb gripped the hilt of his sword, firm on the subject. “We can handle this. Ready?”

“At your leave, Your Grace.”

When the lions came marching down the adjacent hall, Robb took initiative. He leapt from the shadows and plunged his blade through the chest of the nearest man, alerting the other seven to his hostile presence. He yanked his sword free of flesh and struck blades with an assaulting guard while Lord Bolton took up the rear, cutting their way through the mass of golden men. Two more soldiers fell to Robb’s sword and another to his companion’s, leaving the remaining four to be reckoned with. The King in the North met steel with the first assailant, parrying and ducking underneath a swinging battleaxe. He jumped backwards to avoid a devastating blow and hacked at the neck of his target, twirling to find the next. It was an odd dance of sorts, a mingle of blood and blades with the eminent threat of brutality. Robb finished off the final Lannister soldier with a slice at the throat and stomach, struggling to catch his breath when the fight was done. He rested his hands on his knees and observed the scene. Eight bodies littered the once-empty halls and the stone around them was spattered in blood.

“Not so bad,” the king panted. “I wonder how they knew we would be taking this route to the godswood…”

A strong arm wrapped around his neck from behind. “Because I told them,” growled a voice in his ear, and Roose Bolton drew a dagger. Pain seared through Robb’s left side, white hot and sharp as steel. The king cried out to the distant ceiling.

He didn’t feel the ground as he collapsed. His throat heaved blood and he spat on the stone floor, clutching his side, feeling life seep through his fingers. Robb struggled to crawl forward. Each cough was fire and blood spilling between his lips. Roose stepped around him, chuckling all the while.

“The King in the North,” he taunted. “The King who Lost the North, perhaps. I wonder what Winterfell will think, when the new Warden comes home with two dead Starks to display at the Dreadfort, and Lady Sansa, betrothed to my son.”

Robb coughed again. His body twitched in anguish. The rusted taste of blood filled his mouth and he spat red onto the floor.

“Our Blades Are Sharp. Those are my words, Your Grace. Quite frankly, you should have seen this coming.”

Roose shoved the king facedown against the cold floor. The betraying blade took a second drive into his flesh, buried deep in Robb’s low back and tearing at his insides. When the dagger was yanked
free, scarlet ran warm from his open wound and Robb struggled to put pressure on it, determined not
to die.

Roose Bolton only laughed. “Still going to try? Pity your father never taught you—“

“Robb!”

The King in the North glanced up to the scream of his little sister. He saw the trail of her nightdress
at the end of the hall, and four legs of his northern direwolf.

“S…Sansa,” he groaned, barely able to hear his own voice. “Run.”

But she ignored his dying wish, as he knew she would. Robb rolled on his back and grasped his side
as Grey Wind’s snarls echoed around him. Roose Bolton’s screams and the rip of flesh rang clear
through the blood-soaked hall. Robb pressed against the wound on his stomach and felt tears form in
his Tully eyes. Roslin, he thought in despair. Sansa. Arya.

Mother.

When violence ceased at last, the sound of hysteric tears took its place. Robb felt himself being lifted
from the stone and propped up against the opposite wall. He weakly opened his eyes to see the
shredded throat of his once-trusted general, smothered in gore at Grey Wind's mercy. I should have
known.

Sansa smoothed dark auburn hair from his face. He turned to look at her. The sorrow in her eyes
made him feel as though the stabbing reached straight to his heart. “Sansa,” he murmured again.

“Robb,” she choked. “No, Robb…” Sansa wiped her face and tore a small part of her nightdress,
making a partial wrap for his wounds. She unclipped his armor to reach them and he did not fight
her.

“Sansa,” he groaned.

“What?” she snapped through her tears. “Robb, please, don’t talk.”

The king reached out to touch her cheek, wiping her tears and smearing blood on her porcelain skin.
“I remember when you were born,” he told her. “They rang the bells of Winterfell all day and night
to celebrate. Father said…he said you were the most beautiful thing he’d ever laid eyes on.”

Sansa sobbed and shook her head. “Please,” she begged. “Don’t…”

“Do you know what I said when I held you the first time?” he asked weakly.

“You’ve never told me, but you can tell me when you’re better.”

Robb chuckled, though it sounded like misery. “I looked down at your wild red hair and sleeping
eyes and said, ‘What is this pudgy little baby doing here? I thought I was getting a sister.’”

Sansa giggled, covering her mouth. Agony fell over her. She clenched her eyes shut and tears spilled
down her cheeks.

“Father looked at me and said, ‘That pudgy baby is your sister, and her name is Sansa. You have to
protect her always.’ I was so mad that I didn’t have some fierce warrior of a sister who wields
swords and fights dragons, but we got that in Arya anyway, didn’t we?” Robb grinned and cleared
his throat. “Mother punished me for calling you fat. And I treated you like a foreign creature, some
little goblin that had come to live in my home and I never understood why you ate and shit so much.”

“Robb,” she laughed, weeping. “Stop, please. Let me get someone to help, don’t talk—“

“No. I could die.” His smile fell. “I’m not going to pass without saying this. Please let me.”

Sansa bit her lip. Robb took her hand in his and continued to speak. He kept his eyes dismally focused on her.

“I was young when you were born, but I remember the year you turned three and started talking. I was with Jon playing knights in the courtyard. You ran outside, with your little white dress and red hair and bright blue eyes, and you shouted so angrily at us. ‘Stop it!’ you said. ‘Brothers aren’t supposed to fight!’ You took my wooden sword from me and threw it in the dirt. And you started crying, because Jon and I were your brothers and were hitting each other, but we were just playing a game. You didn’t understand. And I knew then that I didn’t want my little sister to wield swords and slay dragons. I wanted you because you knew the difference between peace and war even at three years old, when you mastered the curtsy and knew your manners better than any lady I’d ever met. You knew wholeness before anyone ever showed you what it was.” Robb grimaced and cupped her cheek with his trembling hand. “And I love you, Sansa. More than you know.”

Sansa crumbled into broken sobs. She wrapped her arms around his neck and the siblings embraced in a union that may be their last, and they knew it. He stroked her hair and held her as she shuddered. Sansa thanked him, praised him for being everything she could need or want in an older brother.

Don’t you see? he thought. You gave me something worth dying for.

“Go to the godswood,” Robb told her as she pulled away. “If I die, you’re the Queen in the North. And you have an heir to protect.” He placed a shivering hand over her belly. “You have to survive.”

“I’m not leaving you here.” Sansa shook her head wildly, beginning to panic. “I can’t just leave you behind, not here in the open, not where anyone can harm you.”

“I’ll be alright.” He gestured to the tourniquet. “I’ll use this until help comes. I have men and women in the castle somewhere, they’ll find me. Grey Wind will search for them.” He looked at the wolf, smiling as he pet his ear. The movement became too much to bear after a time, and his hand fell lazily to the stone.

“Robb—“

“Sansa, please. Don’t make me watch you die.”

The princess looked to the ceiling, shedding a few more tears before blinking them back. “I’ll send help. I’ll find someone, I’ll—“

“The godswood,” Robb insisted. “You have to stay safe. For the North. For my niece or nephew, yeah?” He smiled despite the pain. “They’ll send reinforcements soon. Please…”

Sansa could not deny him. He saw it in her eyes. She kissed his cheeks countless times and professed familial love over and over, before standing in despair. She gathered her skirts and turned quickly, sprinting in the opposite direction. Not once did she look back. Robb watched her round a corner and fade out of sight, red hair and white gown flowing behind her, just like the little girl in the courtyard he remembered years ago.

Please, he prayed. Whatever gods are here, please, please let her live.

Grey Wind whined and sniffed at his master’s face. Robb heard soldiers amassing down the opposite
hall and sighed, scratching the wolf behind the ear and meeting his golden gaze.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not going to die. Not if I can help it.”

The king’s eyes rolled back in his head, turning white as the full moon. Physical pain faded and two legs became four. The taste of manflesh was sweet on his fangs and tongue. He howled as loudly as his voice was able, ensuring every inch of the Red Keep heard his wolfcries before bolting down the nearest corridor, fresh on a familiar scent.

Chapter End Notes

I'M SO SAD. For guaranteed tears, reread Robb's monologue with this playing in the background. I wept like a damn baby (even though I really have no right to since I WROTE IT)

So, uh. Wow. This isn't even the climax of the story yet. I wasn't lying dude SO MUCH HAPPENS and it's really daunting to write. Most of the things happening from chapters 11-17 are all first-time writing experiences for me and it's intimidating and also embarrassing (what if I totally suck?). I just hope I pull it off. It's been an incredible learning experience. For my next fic, though, maybe I should take it easy and not make plots that are so freaking intense...(but I still love it).

ANYWAY. WOW. SAD CHAPTER. My beta said that Robb's monologue was the best thing I've ever written and she can't stop thinking about it, so I hope you guys enjoy it just as much. Ehe. Ehehe. *avoids all the arrows and hate mail flying in my general direction*

See you on Tuesday!
Broken Doors and Broken Candles

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I should feel something. Tyrion stared open-mouthed at the lifeless body of his nephew, pale face smothered in bastard blood. This is Jaime’s son. I held him when he was newborn, I saw him cry, heard him laugh and watched him grow. I should feel something. But with each thought Tyrion gave to a world absent of Joffrey Baratheon, his muscles eased as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He remembered all the taunts and horrid jokes, the cruelty thousands suffered at the hands of their mad king.

Joffrey of House Baratheon lay dead, and all Tyrion felt was relief.


“I did,” said Arya Stark, her smile growing wide. “For my father.” The newly made Kingslayer wiped her bloodied blade on the pant leg of Joffrey’s attire. No one seemed able to speak, standing disquieted with six corpses splayed across the stone, each a blatant reminder of human mortality. Arya turned to the Hound and scowled. “I should kill you, too.”

“Good fucking luck,” shot Clegane. “If you’re actually going to try, girl, get on with it. But if not, help me find your sister.” He sheathed his blade and looked to the many exits, trying to determine which one to utilize.

Arya huffed. Gendry put away his weapon and turned to her. “We should go. There’s gonna be more of ‘em comin’ an’ I don’t think we should be here with a dead king when they show up.”

“Agreed,” Tyrion replied, gripping the hilt of his axe. “I doubt anyone will celebrate Joffrey’s death
like we seem to be.” He tore his eyes from the dead and turned to face the odd group of unlikely allies, packed together by some bizarre twist of fate. *What a rescue party we are.* “The only other place Sansa could be is the godswood,” he determined. “She always talks about how safe she feels there. If she’s been freed, I guarantee that’s where she is.”

“And if she wasn’t freed?” asked Arya.

“Then I expect there’s not much hope for her.” Tyrion wished he could bite those words and swallow them back, but the truth had to be confronted, no matter how terrible. He glanced to Sandor Clegane and observed the despair in his deep grey eyes. For once, Tyrion saw him as a man instead of a disfigured beast, a warrior hopelessly in love and horrified at the thought of losing that small mercy. He swallowed the lump in his throat. “We should go there first. If she’s not there, I suppose we could—”

The distant howl of a wolf disrupted him. It reverberating through the corridor, a mournful sound, and dread festered in the pit of Tyrion’s gut. He furrowed his brow and dared not move. Arya spoke before he had the chance.

“That’s Grey Wind,” she said in a panic. “Robb!” The girl broke free from Gendry’s touch and dashed madly towards the back hall, making for the staircase where the sound had come from.

“Arya!” Gendry shouted, following her frantically with Sandor quick at his heels. Tyrion flashed Podrick a look, knowing he couldn’t run half as fast as the others, but he didn’t quite fancy being without them, either. He nodded to his squire and hastened towards the southernmost hallway.

The group froze abruptly at the end of the corridor. Tyrion halted in his tracks as fear shot through him like an arrow. Standing before the serpentine staircase, Robb’s Stark’s direwolf snarled viciously, teeth bared and threatening. Tyrion held up his hands and Podrick whimpered in terror. *How did it find us so quickly?*

“What’s wrong?” Arya asked the wolf, fearlessly stepping forward. “Where’s Robb? Take us to him.”

The beast nudged her hand, whining as if saddened to see her. Its gaze was hueless and weeping.

“Arya,” Gendry whispered. “Look. There’s no gold in ‘is eyes anymore, they’re…”

“Pale.” The Stark girl slowly knelt before Grey Wind, setting her needle beside her. The creature put his massive paw on her arm. She took it in her tiny hand, barely able to hold it in comparison.

“What’s going on?” Tyrion asked hastily. “Not all of us are wolves, my lady. Can you explain what it’s doing?”

“Not it,” she spat. “Him.” Arya sheathed her sword and wrapped her arms tightly around the wolf’s neck, embracing it like a brother and gripping tight on his warm grey fur. “I’m so sorry, Robb. I didn’t mean to betray you. I know we promised, but I had to come. I didn’t want to stay behind and be useless.”

Everything began to make sense, as much as his logical mind thwarted the idea. *Robb Stark is a warg.* There was enough proof in Arya’s reactions. Tyrion would have laughed aloud if the situation wasn’t life-threatening and dangerous for the lot of them. *Wouldn’t Cersei scream to see this?* he thought, letting out a sigh that trembled. *I can’t believe it. I’m about to talk to a wolf.*

He cleared his throat and prayed he was dreaming.
“Uhm. Your Grace,” Tyrion said awkwardly, feeling like a fool. The beast turned its grey head to look at him. “Not to rush you or anything, but we did just kill my nephew and his kingsguard, so if you have any idea where Lady Sansa is we should like to leave and find her immediately.”

Grey Wind made an odd noise that sounded like a gasp. “It’s true,” Arya insisted. “I killed Joffrey. I put Needle right through his neck. We went to find Sansa in the tower but she’s gone.”

The King in the North glared Tyrion down, blinking great pale eyes. Tyrion thought he saw human fright in the animal’s gaze, or Robb Stark’s, or whoever it was slipping underneath the beast’s skin with ancient Northern sorcery. Surely all the books I’ve read can’t be lies. The creature stared at him, then to the Hound, where his eyes rested for a considerable amount of time. Tyrion didn’t know what he was thinking.

“If Stark’s in the wolf,” said the Hound, “where’s his body?”

Grey Wind snorted. The wolf turned away and quickly descended the stairs. Tyrion was sure he intended them to follow. Arya rushed down the winding staircase and the others trailed behind, the grey blur of the direwolf acting as their guide through empty candlelit corridors. They rounded a final corner through the Keep, unprepared for the bloodshed and betrayal that met them.

The body of Robb Stark lay resting against the stone wall, surrounded by carnage, eyes as white as the full moon. When Grey Wind returned to the king’s side, Robb inhaled sharply and his gaze rolled back to a familiar blue. He struggled to breathe. Arya darted to his side, dark eyes full of tears.

“Robb!” she exclaimed, kneeling beside him and taking his face in her hands with care. Tyrion felt winded, unhinged to find Sansa missing and Robb Stark struggling to stay on the right side of the Stranger’s door. The king was nearly catatonic, skin pale and clammy with blood-stained hands.

“Arya,” Robb mumbled. “Why are you here? Dammit, you know I wanted you kept safe at Mother’s side…” He clutched the wraps on his wounds, coughing. Arya promptly wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth.

“I had to help you and Sansa,” she replied sorrowfully. “I couldn’t just let you fight without me, could I? Jon gave me a sword. I can help.” Tears spilled rapidly down her cheeks, and it occurred to Tyrion that he’d never seen a Stark cry aside from Sansa and Lady Catelyn. Ned was always so strong and noble, Arya too bull-headed, Bran and Rickon too young and headstrong, and Robb too struck with the need for vengeance.

“I don’t want to see any more Stark tears,” Tyrion thought. Haven’t they suffered enough?

“Hold on,” said the princess. “We have to move you somewhere else. Somewhere better. Gendry knows how to help with this stuff and—”

“No, there’s no time.” Robb shook his head weakly. “Lady Brienne and Dacey are on their way. I smelled them. Or, Grey Wind did. But nevermind that.” He sighed, clasping the silk against his wound. “Sansa…you have to go after Sansa.”

“Where is she?” Sandor barked frantically. “Did you find her?”

“Lord Bolton and I did, before he betrayed me.” Robb gave a spiteful glance to the body in question. “I told her to run for the godswood, but it could be a trap. I don’t know…” He groaned in agony. “I don’t know how much he told the Lannisters. I could have sent her to her death without realizing.”

“Whatever my family knew, they didn’t share it with me.” Tyrion clenched his fist. “They knew I wouldn’t stand for this.”
The king nodded, grimacing. “Sansa told me everything,” he said. “About your forced marriage, how you never touched her. She said you’re her friend. Is that true?”

“Every word,” Tyrion replied. “Sansa is very dear to me. I want nothing more than to see her safe.”

“I believe you.” Robb glanced to the Hound. “And you, ser. She told me how much she cares for you. Said she loves you more than anything, that you never hurt her. Is that true too?”

Sandor flinched as if he’d been struck by a sudden blow. He opened his mouth to speak but he couldn’t seem to find words. Robb must have noticed the fear in his eyes, for the smile he offered was genuine. “I’ll take that as a yes,” said the king with a little laugh. “It’s alright. I gave her my blessing. I’m just glad she found someone worthy of her. That was always Father’s greatest wish.”

“And yours as well, I’m sure.” Tyrion set his axe against the wall and placed a firm hand on the Northerner’s shoulder. “We’ll find her, Your Grace. I think I owe your family that much.”

Robb gave a tense nod, and said nothing else on the subject.

“I’ll stay ‘ere,” Gendry offered. “Someone has to wait with ‘im. I can help with ‘is wounds, too, as best I can.”

“I’ll stay too,” Podrick added.

“What’s your name?” asked the king. “I don’t think I’ve met you before.”

“Podrick, Your Grace. Podrick Payne.”

“Payne?” Robb chuckled. “Even more kindness from unexpected places. Thank you.”

“It’s settled, then.” Tyrion stood straight and took his axe by the hilt. “We shouldn’t waste any more time.”

“Good luck,” said Robb.

“And to you, Your Grace.” Don’t die, Tyrion begged inwardly as he turned towards the adjacent corridor. Don’t do that to Sansa. I can’t stand to see more of her tears.

Before they rounded the distant corner, a shout came from the back of the hall. “Arya!”

The girl whirled around. Gendry raced to the princess and slowed as he reached her. He hesitated, grappling with what to do, though the choice became suddenly clear. He swiftly gripped the sides of her face and pressed a firm kiss to her lips, tender and sweet and entirely undemanding. Like two people in love who might see the last of each other, Tyrion recognized, for he’d felt that anxiety so many times before. The duo pulled apart moments later, shocked at their unexpected declaration yet neither of them held a pinch of regret. They couldn’t stop smiling like the young fools they were.

“You’d better come back, m’lady,” murmured Gendry as their foreheads came to meet.

“I will. I promise.” Arya Stark beamed, bolstered by a fresh jolt of confidence, and kissed the blacksmith a final time before retreat ing in the opposite direction. Tyrion and Sandor followed in her wake, leaving love behind. Sandor shoved open a door to the outside and directed the others swiftly through.

Heat and lime-colored light met him when he faced the open air. He cast a glance to the chaos of King’s Landing, green and scarlet flame dragging the entire city to hell. The sounds of warfare were
deafening and the roar of fighting men wrenched Tyrion back to an uncomfortable reality. *We're running out of time.*

The three of them sped to the end of the connecting corridor, back into the Red Keep and descending until Sansa’s shrieks tore their attention. “No, please!” she cried from a distant room, near and far all at once. Sandor was the first to divert from the path, dashing frantically to search for the source. “Wait!” Arya called. “It could be a trap!”

“Don’t care,” shouted the Hound, kicking down the door he believed she hid behind. Tyrion watched recognition pass Sandor’s face from a distance. The color washed from his cheeks. Sandor stood paralyzed in the entryway, unable to move, unable to breathe. His expression slipped into one of sheer rage.

Tyrion hastened through the door behind him, instantly wishing he hadn’t. The sight was one from a nightmare. Armored hands the size of battleaxe blades gripped Sansa’s waist and neck, locking her in place against a body far too large for any man.

*Or any mountain.*

Gregor Clegane smiled with malice, tightening his hold on Sansa. Lord Tywin glanced to the open doorway, eyes of wildfire flicking pensively from one face to the next. He moved from Gregor’s side to stand in the center of the room. “You’re not reinforcements,” he said rather coolly. “Nor are you Roose Bolton. I see plans have changed.”

“Sandor!—“ Sansa gasped, but her outcry was silenced. Gregor gripped fiercely at her abdomen and she whimpered, falling still. *The Mountain could rip out her insides barehanded if he wanted to,* Tyrion realized, tasting bile in the back of his throat and scowling. He didn’t know what to do. *Gods help me, I don’t know what to do.*

“Well, this is unexpected. Perhaps we’ll settle this a different way.” Tyrion’s father held out his hand towards Gregor Clegane. The Mountain silently shoved Sansa into Tywin Lannister’s arms and he gripped her tight, drawing a Valyrian steel dagger from his belt. She struggled until he pressed the tip of the blade against her belly, and the fight left her. *He knows exactly how to control her—by using what she loves most.*

“Shall we talk like civilized people, Tyrion?” asked Lord Lannister.

Tyrion snarled. “Do I have a choice, father? ”

“Not if you want to keep this wife from the fate of the last one.” He kept his hand at Sansa’s throat and kicked open a side door, staring at the Hound, almost tauntingly. “Ser Gregor,” he said, “see that we’re not followed.”

The Mountain only nodded, a wicked grin spreading wide. Tyrion glanced up to Sandor, pity in his heart, but the Hound did not look at him. His eyes were locked on Gregor. Tyrion dared not interfere.

When he exited the room, Tyrion noticed Arya standing in the shadows with her backed pressed against the wall, Needle drawn, a finger over her mouth as a gesture of silence. *Good luck.* He turned to the opposite corner and followed where Tywin led, a distraught Sansa tight in his steel grip.

Tyrion couldn’t help but think of a song as he watched the terror in her sweet eyes.

“And who are you,” the proud lord said, “that I must bow so low?..."
oh
OH
here we go ladies and gents, let the climax begin (it lasts for like three chapters sorry)
This update comes after a huge negative development in my personal life so I'm really sorry if this chapter isn't as good as the others. Yesterday was a big struggle. I'll still be on top of updates, but I'll be sure to let you know if I need to take another break (but I shouldn't, at least not as of right now). You can check my blog post about what's going on but I honestly don't expect anything from you guys--just keep reading and loving, you give me one of the only things to smile about these days. I hope this fic is worth the time you take to read and kudos and comment and all that other lovely stuff that makes me feel of value. <3 Seriously. You brighten my life. Your support means everything. See you Saturday, my lovelies. Bring tissues xoxo
The Dance of Giants

Chapter Notes

THINGS TO NOTE BEFORE READING:

- This chapter has some pretty extreme dialogue. Be warned. It's impossible to write Gregor in-character without making what he says absolutely disgusting. Warning for violent threats of rape, murder, all that typical Gregor stuff. (He's the worst character in the whole series imo, writing him was like tapping into some gross writing darkness I'm not fond of.)
- While writing this, I realized that Sandor and Gregor never talk to each other in the whole series to date. It upped the pressure on me to do this absolutely perfectly. I hope I pulled it off. Let all your Cleganebowl dreams (hopefully) come true.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sansa,” he breathed, chest seizing tight. She smiled from across the room and his throat burned with the urge to cry. Even under Gregor’s lethal hold, Sansa looked relieved beyond measure to see Sandor alive, but any attempt to save her was futile with a dagger pressed against her womb. He watched the little bird be dragged away by the hands of Tywin Lannister, a man whose family he’d been devoted to since he was young, and fury flared within him. Sansa cried out. The sound ripped at the inner fabric of his being until there was nothing left but him and Gregor, standing in a guest bedroom with loathing thicker than blood to keep them company. Sandor met his brother’s eyes, one hand gripped on the hilt of his sword so hard his knuckles turned white.
The room fell silent. Only the crackle of hearthfire was heard between them. Surely their mother would weep to see them now, two brothers prepared to tear each other to pieces should a wrong move be made too suddenly, too soon.

And the Mountain began to speak.

“Little bird,” came a voice deeper than the seven hells. “I’m going to pluck out her pretty orange feathers one by one. She’ll beg me to stop, but I don’t listen to chirping.”

Sandor clenched his jaw and said nothing. When Gregor stepped to the side, Sandor moved in the opposite direction, unwilling to be taken off-guard. The hair on his neck stood straight and he fought the angry chill that threatened to shake him.

“She’s very warm,” Gregor taunted. “Soft. I bet you like that. Some stupid little bitch to spread her legs for you in the night.” He laughed again. The sound struck terror in Sandor’s heart, if only from instinct and painful memory. “I bet her cunt’s a pretty sight. Once I kill you, I’ll be sure to take a nice long look.”

The Mountain’s threats were not empty like Meryn’s. Gregor could tear Sansa to pieces with his bare hands, rip bone from socket and snap her like a twig. The thought drove Sandor mad. He snarled from across the room, heat rising to the center of his chest with the ferocity of hellfire. “What is it with you and raping girls?” Sandor spat on the floor. “That’s what I think of your rape. You’re not going to lay a finger on her. You won’t be able to kill me if hurting Sansa is your great fucking plan. Do you think death would stop me from protecting her?” He gripped his blade, impatient. “You don’t know shit. You never did.”

“I know enough,” Gregor replied. “I know there’s something you fear more than how hard I’m going to fuck the Stark girl.” The giant pulled his massive greatsword free from its sheath and took a nearby lantern in his hand. Gregor shattered the glass against the hearth and doused his blade with the oil. Before Sandor could properly react, the Mountain shoved the sword into the burning coals and caught the weapon aflame. Fire crept up the steel as if hell itself had reached out from the fireplace, long red tongues licking up sharpened edges. The room began to pulse with heat and light.

Sandor’s heart raced. He nearly dropped his sword, struggling to keep a firm grip and stay focused on the task at hand. It took far too much effort to keep his childish phobia at bay. Kill Gregor, save Sansa. He blinked past the terror and kept his eyes forward, knowing that Sansa waited for him on the other end of this infernal nightmare. She needed him to survive. Her and the child. Sandor found the strength to hold his weapon tighter, keep his will strong and prepare vigilantly for the oncoming assault.

“Get on with it!” he bellowed. The Mountain obliged with a grin.

Gregor lunged savagely across the room. Sandor ducked from the fiery attack, hoping to avoid clashing blades until the oil burned out and the fire extinguished. He had no desire to mingle two fears together. His brother only laughed. “Afraid to get burned?” he taunted. “Weak! Pathetic! Maybe I’ll give you another pretty scar to match the one you already have. Won’t your little bird love that?”

Sandor twirled his sword and searched desperately for the cocky confidence he knew was in him somewhere, the trademark arrogance that Sansa had chased away. He stepped back when Gregor thrust his sword forward and the brothers met blades, hacking at each other in a battle fueled more by hatred than the desire to win. Sandor knew he couldn’t simply find an exit and leave Gregor behind. Fighting him here was how Sansa stayed safe from his threats, how she stayed alive at the end of this. If Sandor lost this fight, Sansa would be dead long before Gregor ever reached her. He would
ensure Sansa’s suffering was endless. Tywin’s capabilities were a mere shadow of the methods
Gregor implored to break those he claimed as his. I have to keep her safe, Sandor thought in despair. I have to buy time. She’s all I’ve got.

But the fire continued to make him hesitate. Sandor jerked away from the flame and mustered the willpower to strike. He engaged Gregor’s bloodlust with equal aggression. The giants danced to the tune of violence, each striving for the satisfaction of slaughtering the other. Sandor managed a blow across his brother’s cheek, but it was returned by a brutal smack to the side of his temple. A punch from Gregor was enough to make his ears ring and vision shake. Gregor was too much, too strong. Sandor stumbled backward but his body refused to recoup as quickly as he needed it to. The small moment of weakness was all Gregor saw. He gripped Sandor by the scruff of his neck and slammed his face viciously against the wooden table, laughing maniacally at the crunch of bone he heard. Sandor fell to the ground, groaning and spitting blood from where his lip had split open. His head buzzed and the room ruthlessly spun, unforgiving. “This was harder when you were still a mewling babe,” Gregor jeered. “You’re helpless. Worthless.” Before the younger Clegane could stand and regain his ground, Gregor pulled him up by the back of his armor and shoved him forcefully against the stone wall. Sandor barely caught himself before his body hit the floor. He took a moment to catch his breath, spitting more blood from his mouth. He blocked an incoming attack with his armored forearms and huffed. He kicked Gregor back and pushed up from the wall, noticing his sword lying uselessly at the opposite end of the room.

Gregor inhaled sharply as the fire from his blade licked his fingers, bringing with it the shock of pain. He released his sword and it crashed to the ground, and by some miracle Sandor found a window of opportunity. He leapt at his brother and tackled him barbarically to the floor. The two Cleganes collapsed in a tangle of huge fists and cruel curses. Sandor had the upper hand for a short while, pummeling fist after fist into Gregor’s scowling face until the struggle for dominance was ripped away. Gregor tore Sandor off of him and climbed atop his younger brother before he could recoil. Gregor pinned him to the ground, as he had so many times before. Sandor felt himself shrinking back to that place against his will, a child looking death in the eyes.

Gregor gripped Sandor by the neck, leaning close with his teeth bared. “You look like a fucking monster;” he snarled. “Your pretty bird screams in her head when she looks at you. She hates your hideous face. I made a masterpiece.” Gregor slammed his fist into Sandor’s ribs and he felt the agonizing crack. Each breath was a stab, much too painful. He was picked up in his brother’s arms and thrown across the room like a toy, landing against a wooden chair that shattered upon collision. His surroundings began to spin faster. He tried to stand on his feet but Gregor was too quick. His fist uppercut Sandor’s jaw and he fell back to the stone, coughing, every inhale a knife to his gut. Sansa, he thought hopelessly, trying to move until he was forced still. Gregor hovered over him like the predator he was. He gripped a single hand around Sandor’s throat and squeezed.

“I’m going to rape her,” Gregor declared with a voice that held no lie. “I’m going to fuck her so hard your bastard pup bleeds out of her. She’ll cry for you, but you’re dead and burned and no one will save her. Then I’ll take her again and again until she stops screaming for mercy. I’ll let every single one of my men use her. They’ll fuck her so much she forgets her own name, and when they’re done, if she’s not torn in half already, I’ll do the job myself. Just like the slut Elia of Dorne. I’ll make my brother’s bitch belong to me.”

“Touch her and you die,” Sandor rasped, barely clinging to consciousness. He saw a shadow moving behind Gregor, but he couldn’t make out who it was. “She belongs…to no one.”

“You won’t be alive to see it. Time to finish what I started.” Gregor drew in a breath and prepared to snap Sandor’s neck with a final jolt of his fist.
He would have, if an ear-shattering shriek hadn’t sounded from behind.

Arya Stark leapt from the nearby table and wrapped her arms around Gregor’s neck, screaming all the while. The Mountain’s iron grip released Sandor’s throat and he breathed desperately and quickly, gasping for air to bring his consciousness back to full force. He sat up, watching Arya’s Needle shove into Gregor’s left eye. The sight gave Sandor an unexpected rush of energy he needed. The Mountain thrashed and shouted obscenities, snatching Arya by the back of her neck and throwing her across the room—directly at Sandor. He leapt up from his sitting position and caught Arya before she hit the ground, stopping her fall. Pain rippled through him, so sudden he almost keeled over and stopped moving entirely.

“Stay here, wolf girl.” Sandor panted weakly and picked up his sword from the other end of the room, approaching where Gregor stood blinded and screaming. No doubt the little blade had reached his brain. Just as well.

Sandor sighed, relieved, but he would not take his time as he had with Meryn. He’d been waiting a lifetime for this moment and would not waste a single second. He violently thrust his sword through Gregor’s chest and steel armor, reveling in the choked gasps pulled from Gregor’s lips. Euphoria rushed over him, an immense sense of accomplishment along with the warmth of his brother’s blood. He yanked his blade free and mercilessly shoved Gregor Clegane on his back, where he lay still, unmoving.

Sandor turned away from his ruthless brother. Quiet filled the room. He and the Stark girl met eyes, and there was an understanding between them that Sandor never thought he would find in another living soul. He almost smiled to see it there, that thirst for vengeance in the name of protecting the ones they loved. No one could convince Sandor and Arya that hate wasn’t as good a path as any, but both of them had found some semblance of peace in the middle of this war. He was grateful for it.

“You saved my life,” he panted. Breathing was misery but he didn’t pay attention to the pain. The adrenaline seemed to be numbing the sting in his ribs, for now. “If you hadn’t jumped on his back, I…”

“You’d be dead.” Arya took a deep breath.

“Could’ve done something sooner,” Sandor snapped. “Before all that.”

“I didn’t want to,” she said truthfully. “I had to know what you’d say. What you’d do.”

“Well, there. Now you bloody know.” Sandor couldn’t blame her for being hesitant. He was glad she didn’t interfere until need arose. Gregor was mine to slay. He blinked and scanned his eyes over her, observing for injury. “You alright, girl?”

“Yes, I think so.” She wiped the blood from her tiny blade and sheathed it. “What about you?”

“Ribs,” he said. “Head’s pounding too. But I’m alright.” Sandor looked down to the calm little wolf, struggling to speak the impossible words. “…thank you.”

“I didn’t do it for you. I did it for Sansa and her baby.” Arya frowned, brushing dirt from her tunic. “No one should have to live without their father. You seem to like her enough, even though she talks in her sleep and likes silk and stupid songs.”

Sandor couldn’t help but chuckle, feeling lighter than air. “Aye,” he said. “She’s a damn mystery. I can’t believe that—“

“Behind you!”
A steel arm wrapped around his waist and dragged him down. Gregor, groaning and smothered in his own blood, yanked a dagger from his belt and buried it deep in Sandor’s right thigh.

Pain surged through him. He shouted from the shock and reached for his nearby blade that had fallen, stretching, until Arya ran over to toss him her spare knife. He caught it by the hilt and plunged it into Gregor’s skull, hearing the crack of bone as blood flooded down his brother’s features. The Mountain fell beside him, lifeless, but his fatal damage was already done. Scarlet spurted from Sandor’s gaping wound. The dagger was buried deep in his flesh. Sandor’s leg was ineffectual, throbbing. Arya struggled to pull him back against the wall to sit upright, but she was a tiny thing and Sandor was beyond average size. He had to help her. Moving was agony. When his back landed against the stone wall, he groaned and clutched his ribs, glancing down to the knife lodged in his leg.

“Fuck,” he cursed, breathing heavily. “I can’t believe…the bastard wasn’t done yet.” His voice was grated and spiteful, his breaths akin to gasping.

“He was! Needle was in his eye, I saw it, he—“

“It doesn’t…rrgh, fuck. Doesn’t matter. Girl, girl.” He reached out and gripped Arya by the collar. Panic pumped through his veins in place of the blood he was losing. “Sansa. I have…I have to see Sansa,” he said hoarsely. “Get her. My useless arse can’t save her now, but I’ll be fucking damned if I have to die without making sure she’s alright.”

“You can’t die,” spat Arya. “I’ll find her, I promise. Don’t take that knife out. You and Robb can’t both die, okay? You can’t do that to Sansa.” Her face was riddled with worry, though Sandor knew her only fear was for Sansa’s happiness. In that, they were alike.

“I don’t have much of a choice,” he replied bitterly. “Would you get on? This knife, I don’t…fuck it. I don’t have much time.” He let go of the girl and leaned his head back against the wall, groaning, biting down on his lower lip. Arya only nodded, fleeing the room to follow where Lord Tywin had taken Sansa.

His vision began to blur, but whether it was from tears or unconsciousness, he did not know. Sandor waited as long as he was able until Darkness came to keep him company, sitting beside him with a hand clasped over his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I'm apologizing after every chapter but I'M SORRYYYYY.
So. Grade my Cleganebowl. This was the hardest chapter by far, so much fighting and violence and hatred that it was really emotionally exhausting. I hope it was to your liking though. <3 Let me know what you think!
Also *squints at comment count, squints at kudos count* you are some talkative fans. I love it. I love you.
Ohhh, important notice too! I have to have unplanned surgery on Tuesday, so I might not be able to update until Wednesday, July 29th. I don't know what time my surgery is because for some reason they don't call and tell me until the day before? I don't know. I think it's safe to say that I won't be able to update until Wednesday. Sorry! I didn't plan on this but I'll do what I can to update on time. <3 See you on Tuesday (or Wednesday) my lovely angels!
Lord Tywin’s glare was laced with repugnance. He tapped his fingers atop the long oaken table in the center of the room, surrounded by the greatest warriors in service to House Lannister. He looked more regal and kingly than Joffrey ever did, with his straightened back and piercing green eyes that revealed none of his intentions. He glanced from the Princess of Winterfell to his stunted, crippled son, digging into them with a stare as they sat at the other end of the table. Sansa’s gaze never left his. *I will not cower for him.*

Sansa was a smart girl. She had learned many things from Littlefinger, Queen Cersei, Joffrey and Tywin Lannister himself about the game of thrones and how to play. Perhaps her biggest weapon was her assumed innocence. *My biggest weapon, she thought, or my biggest weakness.* If Sansa wanted to survive the night and live in the dreams she’d conjured, dreams of a giggling child holding Sandor Clegane by the hand, she would need to become a player and make her move, using innocence to her advantage.

Little did Tywin know, her husband had been the greatest teacher of them all. Tyrion had taught her many things in their short marriage. It was he who lay beside her in bed and he who broke bread with her every morning and night. They were two friends bound in separate trysts of forbidden love, and for that, they had common grounds for plenty of conversation. Tyrion had told her stories of his past as she shared hers. Sansa learned about his first wife and the horror that ended their union. In turn, he learned the grisly details of her childhood at Joffrey’s hands. They bonded over tales of cruelty and deceit that would make even the strongest men tremble. But more importantly, he educated her with all he knew about survival in King’s Landing, and what it meant to be a Lannister. *This is the home of lions,* she remembered him telling her, *and my father has made you their kin.*
But he was wrong. While Sansa bore Tyrion’s name and title, she was a wolf and always would be, no matter who she fooled with her “innocence.”

Silence hung in the room. Sansa and Tyrion kept their hands laced together under the table, sitting side by side, never moving. They had agreed long ago that they would protect each other should the worst come to pass, and neither of them had any use for betrayal. A dozen warriors lined the perimeter, many with crossbows aimed at the husband and wife. Lord Tywin merely sat, giving thought to their sin and brooding on appropriate punishment.

Until, at last, he spoke.

“So,” said Lord Lannister, remaining calm as ever. “My son and his rebel bride. What am I to do with you?”

Sansa drew in a breath. Time to play. “Is this how you would treat the mother of your grandchild?” she whimpered convincingly. “By threatening her and standing by as she’s beaten?” Sansa had become a fine actress. She placed a hand over her abdomen and kept the other locked in Tyrion’s grip. “I…I thought this was what you wanted, my lord. I thought this would keep me alive.”

Tywin laughed. The sound sent a chill trickling down her spine. “You are a terrible liar, Lady Sansa. I’m well aware that you’re carrying the Hound’s bastard.”

“No you’re not,” she fired back. “You weren’t present on my wedding night. Tyrion and I joined in sight of the gods, and I conceived.”

Tyrion quickly played along with the lie, leaning forward in his seat. “It’s true. Didn’t you tell me I was a drunken little lust-filled beast? Cersei’s spies saw no blood on the sheets because Sansa wasn’t a virgin anymore, thanks to Joffrey’s order. Not that you did anything to stop that, though.”

His father scowled. “I have other ways of knowing.”

“But you can’t afford to be wrong.” Sansa’s eyes narrowed. “If this baby is of Stark and Lannister blood, you can’t risk throwing it away. It’s the last of your—“

“Enough!” Tyrion’s hands slammed onto the table. Sansa flinched, instantly quieting. “I will *not* be lied to. Not here. Not now.” He pushed from his seat and Sansa paled, fearing for her life, praying that Sandor would find victory against his brother and reunite with her sooner than later. Time could only be bought for so long. She squeezed Tyrion’s hand. He squeezed back.

Tywin gestured with his chin at two of the surrounding guards. The soldiers sheathed their weapons and forcefully grabbed Tyrion by the shoulders, pinning him harshly to his wooden chair. They dragged him away from Sansa so she could see him fully, their mailed fists clenched tight on his arms. “What are you doing?” Sansa asked nervously. “You can’t hurt him, please—“

“Quiet. Do not speak until you are spoken to,” instructed Tywin as he observed the fear in her eyes. His voice was filled with spite. “You will tell me the truth. Every lie earns Tyrion a broken rib, maybe more, depending on the severity. Is that clear?”

“Still using my wife to make threats against me, father?” Tyrion quipped. “You haven’t changed at all.”

“This conversation does not involve you.”

This wasn’t how the game was played. Tywin was making a surprise move, one that she was unfamiliar with, and Sansa didn’t know how to change her plan of attack. She had never dealt with
Tywin directly, and the man was known to be unpredictable. *This is the same person that pulled Roose Bolton out of Robb’s council,* she thought, *the man for which ‘The Rains of Castamere’ was written.*

A red sun began to rise in the distance over Blackwater Bay. Her only reply was a nod.

“Good. Stand.”

Sansa rose to her feet. How had Tywin known that she cared for her dwarf husband enough to use him as a weakness? Had she not played her part well? Did someone betray her trust? Tyron shook his head to her, silently begging that she remain silent, but Sansa didn’t know how much more violence she could handle. *Just stay alive,* Tyrion’s eyes told her. *Say whatever you must, and don’t worry about me.*

Lord Tywin placed his hands behind his back and looked to where Sansa stood trembling. “Is Tyrion Lannister a spy for the North?”

“N-No,” she stuttered. “Not at all. He is loyal to your House.” Sansa rubbed her arms. “He only married me because you made it so, my lord.” She took in a slow breath and tried to keep calm. The pieces fell together in her head. She wished they hadn’t. “You knew Lord Bolton would kill Robb, so you bound me to Tyrion in hope of conquering the North through marriage to its only remaining heir.”

“Very good,” he praised, a small smirk on his lips. Tywin nodded to the guardsman. The left one raised his arm and smacked Tyrion viciously in the jaw, pulling a groan from him.

“No!” Sansa shrieked. “You said—“

“I lied. Did Tyrion ever bring a whore into King’s Landing?” Tywin’s voice was growing firmer, just as the fear in her belly swelled with each syllable. *Shae.* “No. No, he didn’t bring anyone here. I am the only person who sleeps in his bed.”

“Disappointing.” Lord Tywin gave a second order. Tyrion suffered a piercing blow to the mouth. His lip cracked and blood welled at the open wound. Sansa feared she might be sick.

“Don’t worry,” Tyrion told his wife with a strained chuckle. “They’re beating me instead of you because you’re right. He doesn’t know that the child isn’t mine. He can’t risk taking any chances when his other grandchildren are bastards born of decades-worth of incest.” He wiped his lip and sneered up to his regal father. “Our lovely child is the only hope he has of protecting his precious Lannister legacy, especially since Roose Bolton is dead.”

Tyrion paid dearly for his outburst. The backtalk earned him several strikes to the chest and a cry of pain at the ceiling. Sansa gasped and covered her mouth, not wanting to watch any more, too overwhelmed and tormented by the events of days past. She had been taken cruelly from Sandor’s side and locked in a tower where beatings were more common than food or water. When Robb set her free, Sansa thought that safety wasn’t far behind, but he met his death on betrayal just as her father had. Now Tyrion stood to defend her, the last of her loved ones. *It’s too much. I can’t.* Sansa was weary with fatigue and aching for family, for her mother and sister and brother, for Sandor. She only wanted her child to live a happy life, but as the scarlet sun continued to hover on the horizon, her happy future faded into nothing but broken dreams.

*I’m going to die here.* Sansa felt tears in her eyes. *All those years of torture, for what? To be slain just before I could finally taste freedom?*
Tywin sighed impatiently. “Your northerners are always stubborn, but you are softer than most. You will break.”

“I won’t.” Sansa stood her ground despite the consequences. “You can’t break me, my lord. I am the blood of Winterfell.”

“Your father said something similar, once.” Tywin gripped her harshly by the chin and made her look at him. “But your suffering will kill you tonight, Lady Sansa. Of that I am certain.”

“Suffering does not kill.” Sansa fearlessly met his eyes. “My life is a witness to that truth. I am made stronger by it.”

He didn’t like something he saw in her gaze, and the back of his hand slapped across her face. She fell to the floor, gasping, praying that it would all be over. Tywin snatched her by the arm and hoisted her back on her feet. “Tell me who freed you.”

“My brother,” she said proudly. “The King in the North. He freed me and he’ll kill you. I know he will.” Though he is surely dead by now, Sansa thought achingly, but Tywin doesn’t know that.

Lord Lannister was growing angrier by the second. “Take her to the stables and saddle a horse,” he barked to his men. “We’ll take her to Casterly Rock with us. Kill all in your path.”

Sansa was so overwhelmed that she could hardly process the information. She began to feel dizzy and lightheaded, near fainting. “Tyrion,” she whimpered as foreign hands grabbed her arms. “Tyrion wait, stop—stop!”

The door came crashing down. Two large warrior women and even larger men burst into the room, taking only seconds to scan before an ensuing fight commenced. Sansa was shoved to the ground as her captors met the intruders’ blades in every direction. She crawled under the chaos, desperate to reach some form of safety as swords clashed and curses spat violently above her. She screamed as a severed head fell to her left and blood rained down her right. Sansa scrambled back against a bookcase, watching two lady knights in foreign colors take up arms against Tywin’s guard. The pounding of her heart was nearly louder than the mayhem around her.

A little hand reached out. Sansa looked up, seeing Tyrion’s bruised face painted over with concern and urgency. He was able to reclaim his axe, gripping it tightly by the handle.

Sansa said nothing. She took his hand without question and followed where he led, to a large wardrobe in the corner of the room. He held the door open for her.

“What are you doing?” Sansa asked over the uproar.

“Saving you,” her husband replied. He took her by the hand and pulled her towards the hollow space. “Stay in here. I’ll protect you.”

“But—“

“Sansa,” he pleaded. “If I’m going to die, I’d rather leave this world knowing I saved someone who deserved it.”

He looked her in the eyes and she saw truthfulness there, and something else, something deeper and far more significant. Caring. He cares for me, as I do for him. Sansa cupped his cheeks and kissed him impulsively on the lips, if for nothing else but encouragement.

“Don’t die,” she told him. “I’m sick of watching my loved ones get butchered.”
“Don’t worry. Shae would kill me if I died.” He squeezed her hand and turned away, closing the door behind him. Sansa was left in total darkness. She didn’t want to hear the bloodshed outside and desperately covered her ears, sending whispered prayers to whatever gods dared to listen on a night so filled with death.

“Please,” she begged helplessly, “Please have mercy. Please have mercy on all of us, on Robb and Tyrion, on me and my child, on everyone. Even Sandor. I know he doesn’t have favor with you but I can’t be there to help him, please, please…” And she began to cry, though she was sick of crying, for what else could be done? Sansa was not equipped for battle. Her weapons were courtesy and intelligence, not swords and shields. *But Robb loved me this way,* she thought in heartache, *even though it may kill me in the end.*

She couldn’t help but think of Sandor Clegane. He’d been stolen from her on Joffrey’s orders, left behind with the Mountain to confront his deepest fears. “Give strength to his sword,” she prayed, wiping the tears from her face with shaking hands. “I don’t want to raise this child without him. Don’t take him away from me, please. You’ve already taken so much.” Sansa brought her knees to her chest and rested her head back against the wood, tears streaming down her dirty cheeks. *I always wanted to die in Winterfell,* she thought mournfully, *with my family around me and the warm summer sun on my face. I’d be old and gray and happy with the life I lived. Where is that future now?*

Someone shouted indiscernible words, and all fell silent. Sansa had no way of knowing who had emerged victorious. Loud thuds battered against the wardrobe and Sansa screamed, dread piercing her core. She reached for a metal hanger and clutched it in her hand as a weapon, but when the door swung open she saw the face of the blonde knight blinking down at her with sympathy. “Lady Sansa?” the woman asked in a soothing voice. “It’s alright, the fighting’s over. My name is Brienne of Tarth. I’m here to protect you.”

“Brienne…” No name had ever sounded sweeter. Sansa was so relieved that she leapt from the wardrobe and hugged her, whoever she was. The woman was stunned but her tenseness slowly eased as Sansa refused to let go. She rubbed a mailed hand up and down her back in a calming motion. “It’s alright, princess. Everything’s going to be alright.”

“I’m sorry,” Sansa panted, pulling away to catch her breath. “I’m sorry, I was just—terrified, so terrified…” She adjusted her eyes and scanned the room, seeing the bodies of her captors splayed gruesomely across the floor. The other female knight had her weapon drawn, pointed directly at Tywin Lannister. Tyrion stood beside her, crossbow aimed.

“Had enough?” asked the brunette with a cocky grin.

“He has.” Tyrion glared at his father. “I’d say this war is won.”

Sansa struggled to wrap her head around what he was saying, barely able to absorb all that was happening at once. She felt light-headed and woozy, and she nearly sat down before her mind jolted to attention.

A little boy dashed into the room. His hands were smothered in blood. He frantically searched his surroundings until his eyes fell upon her, blinking wide with shock. *Not a boy,* Sansa thought. *It’s Arya.* She felt a knife twist in her heart at the sight of her lost sister, and she let out a joyful laugh. “Arya? Is that you?”

“Arya,” panted the girl, but her voice was not one of happiness. Misery was laced in Arya’s familiar stare. It was a look she had never seen from her younger sister before; a look of remorse, of shame.
“Sansa,” Arya stuttered again. “I tried to—I tried to help him, but…” The girl held out her sanguine hands. “You have to come, before he…”

“Before he what?”

Arya remained silent, and Sansa knew.

She bolted from the room without explanation. Sansa held her skirts and dashed barefoot down the hall as fast as her weakened legs could carry her, desperate to reach Sandor before the worst fell upon him. Terror infected her blood from her toes to the top of her head, a deep instinct that knew her peace would soon come unraveled. Was there no such thing as relief in this life? Couldn’t she simply celebrate with her family and move on to a better future?

Sansa raced into the chamber and stopped breathless at the threshold. Sandor Clegane lay leaning against the adjacent wall, covered in crimson. He looked to her with a rueful gaze. “Little bird,” he rasped. She flew to him.

“No,” Sansa breathed, collapsing to her knees beside him. “No, I—Sandor…” More unbidden tears welled in her eyes as she stared at the knife buried deep in his right thigh. Blood pooled around his wounded leg, a puddle of rubies reflecting the candlelight. She reached for the hilt of the dagger but he snatched her wrist and pulled it back. “Take the blade out and I’m dead in minutes,” he told her sorrowfully. “I’m done, Sansa. I’m finished.”

She shook her head wildly. “No you’re not. We didn’t come through all of this to not be together at the end, do you hear me?” Sansa took his face in her trembling hands, greedily soaking in the sight of him as if it would be her last. “You’re not going to die. I won’t let you.”

“Don’t have a choice.” He placed his callused hand over hers, brushing his thumb along her injured knuckles. “I’m sorry. For the way I treated you all those damn months ago. For letting Joffrey hurt you.” Sandor curled her hair behind her ear.

No. Please, please no. Sansa broke into hysteric sobs, reaching for his spirit with hers, anguished to see him so broken and slipping away. “I can’t say goodbye to you too,” she wept. “You promised me you wouldn’t leave. The night of the Blackwater, do you remember? ‘I’m not going anywhere,’ you said.”

“Aye.” He frowned, and Sansa watched gray eyes swim with tears of his own. “But I was never good at promises.”

“I don’t believe you.” She smoothed the hair from his face, sweat-covered and filthy from whatever prison he was being held in. He looked a true monster to the naked eye, weary and scarred and battle-fresh, but to Sansa he was everything. He was her safety from the mob, her protection when wildfire filled the sky. He was her first, her only. A life without Sandor Clegane would be a fish without water, a forest without the sun. A life without Sandor Clegane was no life at all.

“Your brother was no true knight,” she said. “But you are.” Her voice cracked, eyes red and spilling tears she could not stop. “I know you hate them, but you’re better than any ‘ser’ I’ve ever met. Even if you’re not a knight by title or royal decree, you’re my true knight.” Sansa pressed her forehead to his as sobs shook her to the core. She wanted to rip him open and bury within, convinced her love could heal him from the inside. She wanted to hug him and kiss him and cradle him, all forms of nurturing Sansa was capable of, hoping that the power of her passion could surpass any injury. But that was not the way of the world. She had learned that when Joffrey took her father’s head. Sandor pulled her in and kissed her deeply, desperately.
“I’m not a knight,” he rasped, “but I’ll be yours if you’ll have me. Even when I’m dead.”

“Even then,” Sansa replied.

...No. No, I won’t let this happen.

Sansa shamelessly pulled away. “I don’t care what you say. I’m not letting you die, I can’t, not without trying to save you.” She looked over her shoulder, seeing Brienne of Tarth and a man taller than Sandor standing in the doorway. “Help me carry him onto the bed,” she instructed. “I’ll—I’ll find a maester, someone to help. Please!”

“Yes, my lady,” stuttered Brienne. “Lord Umber, help me.” The two warriors assisted a bleeding Sandor Clegane from the stone floor and onto the featherbed, one that was much too small for him but would suit medical purposes just fine. Sansa rushed to her lover’s side and took his hand.

“Sansa,” he muttered. “Don’t waste your damn energy.”

“You can’t talk me out of this.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you.” Sansa cupped his face and kissed his cracked lips. “I love you.”

He looked as though her confession was unexpected, uncalled for, but it touched his heart and she saw his eyes melt. He didn’t say anything else, only squeezed her hand, no doubt to keep from weeping.

“Princess,” came an unfamiliar voice. Sansa looked up, seeing an odd little man in a maester’s clothes quick behind Arya’s heels. “My name is Qyburn. I hear you have someone that needs tending to?”

“Y-Yes. Yes,” she stuttered. “Who are you? How did you get here?”

“I’m in service to your brother, princess. I was summoned immediately after he was found. But enough about that, let me take a look here.”

Sansa trusted him. Not because he gave her any reason to, but because he could save Sandor. She moved out of the way when instructed but stayed close to Sandor’s head, brushing the hair affectionately from his forehead as Qyburn examined him. “The battle?” she asked.

“Over,” said the maester. “Your brother’s forces prevailed, as did the king himself. He’s resting now.”

“Robb’s alive?”

“Yes,” he replied, “and will be as long as he lays low for a time.”

Sandor chuckled breathlessly. “You Starks never stop fighting, do you?”

“Never.” She kissed his knuckles and looked lovingly down upon him, until Qyburn’s diagnosis ripped her heart from her chest.

“The blade has nicked the artery,” he determined in haste. “It’s a miracle he’s still alive, but we need to act fast. The wound must be cauterized.”

Sansa’s hope flickered out.
Sandor’s muscles tensed and he laughed bitterly. “Fuck you, old man. No one’s burning me.”

“I must,” he insisted. “You have minutes, my lord, at best. When I take this dagger out, the bleeding has to be stopped immediately or there will be no saving you.”


“Don’t say that.” Sansa blinked at him, heartbroken. “Please, Sandor.”

“I can’t, little bird.” He tightened his jaw. Weakness shone bright through his steel eyes. “Don’t ask me to.”

But all she had to do was look at him, and his resolve came undone. Sandor gripped her hand tight and slammed the other against the bed, shouting in panic masked as anger. “Dammnit!” he cursed, his hands beginning to tremble. Sansa could feel the racing pulse in his wrist as her own sped up to meet it. His eyes were not on her. Sandor stared at the maester, watching him move to the hearth and place a steel dagger into the flame. “Sansa,” he whimpered. “Sansa, please. I can’t—”


His voice shook with terror that filled her every bone. Sansa kissed his cheeks, then his forehead and his nose before finally coming to rest on his bleeding, broken lips. He threaded his fingers in her hair and she allowed her kiss to calm him, filling every movement with as much love and compassion as she was capable of summoning. “Stay,” he begged. “Don’t leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” She pressed her lips to his knuckles. “Here. Sit up.” When he moved, Sansa climbed behind him and placed her knees wide on either side of his torso, beneath his arms. Sandor rested back after she was comfortable, his head on her shoulder where she could kiss and touch his face with ease. “Shh,” she whispered, trying to remain strong though her heart shattered with every tear he shed. “Trust me. I won’t let the fire hurt you.”

“Rip the cloth on his leg open,” Qyburn instructed. “Hold down his limbs. Find him something to bite on.”

“Fuck,” Sandor cursed, clutching the sheets so hard his fingers paled. “Fuck, fuck. Sansa. I can’t, Sansa, don’t make me.” He was sobbing then, riddled with an anxiety she couldn’t understand. The sight alone was enough to break her. She found herself weeping too, pressing her forehead against his and kissing whatever skin she could reach. She heard the tearing of cloth and looked up as Brienne offered a piece of wood. Sansa took it, looking down to her lover once again.

“Bite on this,” she said softly. “Please. It’s better than biting your tongue, right? Shh, it’s going to be okay. Trust me.”

Sandor hesitantly opened his mouth for her. She placed the wood between his teeth and clutched him tightly to her chest. Brienne and the Umbers held down his arms and legs as Qyburn brought forth the burning blade, bright red and sweltering. The sight of it made Sandor struggle and Sansa tried to shush him, though her attempts failed. She spared a glance to no one else and kept her eyes locked with his, hoping that the rivers in her gaze could douse the fear of fire he kept so closely.


The steel was yanked from Sandor’s flesh, followed by the sear of red-hot steel to his skin.
Sandor screamed.

She never wanted to hear the sound again, but it continued, one second after another of unending torment. Sansa whispered things in his ear to calm him, but what they were, she did not know. She lost all track of time and sobbed as she squeezed him. Sandor was thrashing, flailing, screaming and pleading like a child reliving torture all over again. Tears streamed down his face. A horrid and pungent smell signified his burning flesh and Sansa wanted to vomit, but she didn’t, couldn’t. She kept him close and wept as he shouted and begged mercy in her arms.

And suddenly, he fell limp.

Chapter End Notes

...so, yeah. Shit happens. \_(ツ)_/\nThis was another really hard chapter. Sansa goes from confident, to scared, thrilled, relieved, mortified, and then extremely depressed all in 5,000 words. How she manages to keep this baby is beyond me tbh. And what is Tywin's characterization? Who knooows.
I did mega medical research for this chapter, the last one and the upcoming Saturday one, so I hope none of you are medical students who can call me out on something I did wrong. I did the research, promise!
Anyway. Uhh. SORRY. I need to go get surgery now, ffff, can't believe I sped-updated just for you guys. Love me. HAVE MERCY, my back is about to be cut open.
See you on Saturday, my lovelies! Let me know what you think of this twist <3 this was the main thing I've been excited for since I started plotting months ago, eeee. I hope it's as good as I want it to be! *sits and waits for my house to be egged and tires slashed*
OH ALSO can we take a look at that badass banner picture?? It totally looks like it could be Sandor on fire. I just found it on Google. props to whoever made that shit, honestly, it looks so good. >:D
The black cells were cruel to him. Darkness and Silence had returned to Sandor’s side, much against his will. The company was unwanted. He loathed the shadowed surroundings and yearned for another dose of mercy, for someone to rescue him from the deepest pits of the Red Keep. He had no desire to remain imprisoned. Silence floated gracefully through the heavy air, entirely invisible, yet Sandor could hear its presence. Darkness had swallowed him and he sat on the stone floor in the belly of a beast, frowning, anxious.

He felt neither warm nor cold, healthy nor ill. He was not hungry and didn’t harbor thirst, not for water or wine. He tried to make out the shape of his hands, but his eyes could see nothing beyond the black oblivion created for him.

The cells were cold, he remembered suddenly. The stone was like ice. Sandor felt nothing. He furrowed his brow. He lifted a hand and slapped his arm in attempt to feel pain, but there was no sensation, not even the sound of skin on skin. Sandor stood and felt a disorienting lack of pressure on his feet. He couldn’t tell if he was standing or falling, moving or staying still. He reached out for the wall only to find empty space in every direction.

What the fuck is going on?

Sandor heard a door open, but saw no light or figure. A woman’s shoes clicked along wooden floors. Water sloshed about in a metal basin. Something heavy was set down on a nearby surface and fabric shifted as someone moved, coming to rest in an unseen position.

“Sansa…” said a raspy voice, one that was gentle and familiar. “Have you eaten anything lately?”
“I don’t want to eat.” Sandor wanted to run to her, but when he moved he fell further into the abyss that consumed him. He opened his mouth to shout, but not a sound came forth.

“Oh, Sansa. You look miserable. Come here, let me brush your hair at least.” Heels clacked again, moving to the other side of him. Sansa and the unknown woman adjusted or went somewhere, Sandor couldn’t be sure.

The little bird began to weep.

“You don’t understand,” she cried, muffled by fabric but remaining just as vigilant. “None of you do. Not Robb or Arya, Lady Brienne or Dacey or even Roslin…”

“Shhh,” cooed the stranger. “You forget how much I have lost, too. I understand perfectly.”

“No you don’t.” Sansa sniffled. “I see the way you look at him, the way you look at me. You think he’s going to die. You want him to so I can find a better match, don’t you? Maybe marry Elmar Frey since Arya refuses to?”

“I don’t appreciate your tone, Sansa.” The voice was stern, maternal. Lady Stark?

“Nor do I appreciate everyone’s hateful looks or their shifty eyes.” Sansa moved. Sandor recognized the sound of her rubbing her bare arms, a nervous habit she always had. “I love Sandor. I love him so much, Mother, and if he dies I don’t know what I would do.”

“Sweet girl. Come here. Come on.” Catelyn rubbed Sansa’s back and shushed her. The chair creaked in repetition as she swayed slowly back and forth, rocking her despondent daughter to a state of calm. “The maesters are doing everything they can for him on Robb’s order. Why would he work so hard to save the Hound’s life if he didn’t think you were serious in your affection for him?”

“I don’t know,” Sansa replied helplessly. “But I know he doubts him. Everyone does.”

“Shh. Let’s not speak of this now. You need to stay calm. Don’t panic, if only for the little one.” Sandor heard gentle fingers brush through Sansa’s beautiful hair. “Shall we say a prayer for him?”

“I’ve said so many…” The tone of her voice brought him heartache. “The septas say a single prayer can act as a tourniquet. I lit a hundred candles in the godswood and the sept, and prayed to the Seven. Even the Stranger. Still, Sandor hasn’t woken up.”

“Is there harm in one more?”

Sansa hesitated. “No. I suppose not.”

“Good. After we pray, I’m going to make you eat something. You’re nurturing another life. You need to stay healthy.”

“I know.”

“That foreign woman, Sheila I think her name was…she ordered lemon cakes from the kitchens. Would you like some?”

Sansa chuckled. “Her name is Shae.”

“Shae, then.”

“Lemon cakes sound good.”
“I thought so. Now wipe your tears, hm?” Catelyn Stark took Sansa by the hands, and together the two women began to pray.

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Darkness was swiftly replaced by a faded white glow. His surroundings began to glitter like sunlit diamonds, like the moon on the waters of the Trident. Pale gleams twinkled in every direction. Sandor could finally examine himself in the light. He was covered in blood and broken armor, in scars and dirt and sweat. Gregor, he remembered. I fought him. I killed him. He clenched his fist and looked around, desperate to find a clue to his location now that his environment had been illuminated. For a moment, Sandor wondered if he was inside a star.

“Sandor!” came a child’s shout. “Sandor, over here!”

He turned. The vision of a little girl, nearly five years old with curly black hair and grey eyes, waved to him a few yards away. She wore a purple dress with white trim and her smile was as bright and happy as he remembered.

Sandor blinked in disbelief. “…Elinor?”

Tiny Elinor Clegane skipped up to her older brother, jovial and innocent. Sandor felt his heart rupture. He fell to his knees, the only thing he could do, and his eyes filled to the brim with tears.

“Fuck this,” he muttered, barely audible. “I’m not dead. I can’t be. I promised her.”

“You’re not dead, silly!” the girl replied. “Not yet, anyway. You might be soon. That would make me very sad.” Elinor frowned to show just how sad she would be, but her demeanor was clearly playful.

“You’re dead.” Sandor reached out, curling her soft hair behind her ear. “This isn’t real. Where the fuck am I?”

Elinor gasped. “Father would be mad to hear you say that word.”

“Father never gave a shit,” he replied. “It was the septa who put all those pretty thoughts in your head.” Sandor’s hands fell to his lap. “Answer me.”

“I heard that maester say you were comatose. It’s like sleeping for a really long time, but not in a good way.” She picked up a flower out of thin air and began to pluck at the golden petals, one by one. “You only have a few days to wake up. Otherwise you’ll be dead, like me.”

“Killed by Gregor,” he spat. What a great family we are. He glanced around to the sparkling surroundings. An unseen sky began to rain down flecks of polished crystal. Elinor started to dance, spinning around as the little gems bounced off her skin. “Wee!” she exclaimed happily. “Sandor, come on! Come dance!”

This is a memory. He knew it well. When Elinor was five years old, the night she was killed, she’d heard the pounding rain from a thunderstorm outside and crawled into Sandor’s bed. He was only eleven at the time, burned and bitter and hateful of everything around him, but little Elinor was all he had to smile about. She’d taken his hand and pulled him from the blankets. “I don’t want to see lightning,” Sandor had protested. “Lightning makes fire. What if the trees go up?”
“Don’t worry,” she’d giggled in reply. “I won’t let it hurt you. I’m big and brave, remember? You said!”

I did say. I told her all the time. Sandor felt his throat tighten, not wanting to remember the rest. “Elinor,” he said hoarsely, “I need to get the hell out of here. I’ve got to wake up.”

“Why?” she replied, stopping mid-twirl.

“I’ve got a life out there,” Sandor couldn’t believe the words he was saying, but as long as he kept them inside, he supposed it didn’t matter. “I’ve got a girl.”

“A girl?!” she exclaimed excitedly.

“Aye, a girl.” He couldn’t help but smile. Elinor’s gap-toothed grin was always so infectious. “She’s got red hair. She sings nice like Mother did and she has pretty eyes. She’s perfect.”

“Aww.” Elinor dropped her flower and approached him. “What’s her name?”

“Sansa.” The name tasted sweet on his tongue. “Sansa Stark.”

“Pretty! I bet she likes you a lot, even with this.” She touched the charred half of his face. “It didn’t turn out so bad.”

He frowned. “It’s hideous.”

“Better to have scars and a perfect girl than to be dead like me.” Her tone remained bubbly and matter-of-fact.

If only I could change that. Looking in her eyes again was torture of the worst sort, worse than fire, worse than ten Gregors or the pits of the seven hells. He took her tiny hands in his huge ones and squeezed them tight. “Sorry,” he whispered. “Sorry you’re dead.”

“It’s okay. Since I’m gone, I get to watch over you. And I’ll come with the Stranger when your time is up, okay?”

“Not soon, though.” He stood from his kneeling position. “I’m not gonna leave her. I promised.”

“We’ll see.” Elinor turned on her heels. When she began walking away, the light around him started to fade.

“Elinor!” he called. “Wait!”

The girl froze.

“Is this real?” Sandor asked. “Or is it just some damn dream meant to torment me?”

The little girl smiled, so warm and sweet it stopped any further inquiries. She giggled and waved, disappearing without another word.

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The door opened again. Another set of clicking heels alerted him to the presence of a woman
walking into the room. He heard someone move abruptly beside him, nearly tripping as they shot up from their chair. "Y-Your Grace," stuttered Sansa, flustered and embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I would have dressed properly if I knew you were coming."

"It's okay." Sandor didn't know this voice. "Whatever makes you comfortable." The girl sounded young and sweet, just as Sansa was. She took a few idle steps forward, brushing her hand along a flat surface. "Did you hear what happened to the Smalljon this morning?" she asked with a hint of scandal in her voice.

"No," said Sansa plainly. "I haven't left the room."

_Gods, Sansa, leave me and get some air._ But Sandor could not speak, so he only listened.

"Well, Smalljon Umber was walking into the kitchens to get Robb some more water. He didn't anticipate how low the ceiling was. He was walking so fast that he knocked himself out on the stone! He looked so ridiculous. I almost felt bad for him, but when he woke we had a good laugh. Qyburn says he may have suffered a concussion."

Sansa's laugh was a shadow of the one he loved so much. "He's too big."

"He really is. But not as big as your Hound, that's for certain." The strange woman moved closer until he heard her noisy heels come to a stop at his right side. "He looks so sad," she observed. _Don't look at my face._ "Have the maesters said anything new?"

"No," said Sansa. "I mean—no, Your Grace." She sat in her seat at his left side.

"You don't need to call me that, you know. We're sisters now, and truth be told I'm still not used to being called a queen." She smiled. Sandor could hear it in her voice. Sansa, however, was not so jovial. Silence passed between them for a moment, awkward and strange as they sat on either side of his unmoving body, until finally the stranger spoke. "I've been praying for him."

"Have you?" Sansa's voice was almost bitter.

"Truly. I have." Sandor heard fabric move along with the soft _tink_ of jewelry, followed by the brush of his hair from his forehead. "People say terrible things about him. I'm sorry they do. I've told them to stop, but a lot of the soldiers here aren't of the North, so I can't give command as much as I would like to."

"It's alright." Sansa sounded tense. "People have been sneering at him all his life. I doubt it will stop on his deathbed."

"He's not going to die." The queen withdrew her hand. "He has far too much to live for. He has you. He has your baby."

"I don't even know if I'm still pregnant." Sansa's voice began to tremble. "I don't know what's going to happen."

"Well, you haven't bled, so that's a good sign. And the Hound is still breathing! That's good news too."

"...I suppose."

The queen released a sigh. "Let me draw you a bath."

"What?" Sansa asked. "A bath? For me?"
“Why not?” the girl chuckled. “You are my husband’s sister. You’re carrying the newest member of
the Stark family. I want to take care of you.”

*She’s the sweetest bloody thing I’ve ever met,* Sandor thought in irritation, though he hadn’t really
met her at all. She reminded him of Sansa, only a bit older and wiser, and far less damaged by the
cruelties of war. Sansa stood from her chair and rushed to the queen, locking her in an embrace.

Sandor heard her cry again. This time, he wanted to cry with her.

“I’m so sick of these tears,” Sansa wept. “I just want this to be over, Roslin. I’m so tired, so ready to
go home…”

“I know,” cooed the queen. “I know. None of these soldiers have been away from their families as
long as you have, and none of them have suffered in the ways you were made to. But you know
what that means?”

“What?” Sansa asked.

“It means that you’re the strength of the North,” she replied. “You’ve been strong for so long,
though, and it’s okay to cry.”

The blackness began to swirl and blur with candlelight, dizzying him until a small room came into
focus. Sandor recognized it as his childhood bedroom, on the second floor of his family keep with a
window overlooking the southern mountains. He slowly approached the glass and looked out to the
familiar sight, one that had always brought him peace. As a boy, Sandor used to love watching the
stars glitter over distant stone hills. _I forgot about this place,* he thought as the moon shined upon his
father’s kennels. Scattering deer rushed to find safe haven from their howling.

A knock came at the door. Sandor turned. “Come in,” he said without thinking, but another voice
had said it too, one much smaller than his own.

Lady Clegane gracefully entered the room. She was more beautiful than his hazy memory could
recall, with almond-shaped eyes and brown hair tied behind her back. Her belly was lightly swollen
with pregnancy. “I see you’re still awake,” she said with a grin.

*Mother.*

“Is Gregor gone yet?” asked the small voice. Sandor looked over to see himself as a young boy of
six, eagerly hopping to his bed and beaming. His face was whole, unburned and unmarked by
Gregor’s fury. _I could never remember anything before that...*

“Your brother just left,” she said.

“Good. I’m glad he’s gone.”

“He’s only off to train, Sandor.”

“I don’t care. I hate him.”

His mother frowned, but the expression did not stay fixed. She forced a smile and approached his
bedside. How many times did she pretend to be happy for me? “You don’t mean that. Now, get into bed my sweet pup, and close your eyes. Come morning light, everything will be as it should.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“And I love you, Sandor.” She scooped him up in her arms and cradled him. His head rested on her shoulder, nuzzling deep. Sandor’s throat clenched tight and he stumbled a few steps backward, wanting to leave this memory and never return, but he was trapped in his own mind and didn’t know what remained from years of drowning in wine and anger. What else had been forgotten? Did he want to know?

Softly, so softly, his mother began to sing.

Gentle Mother, font of mercy,  
Save our sons from war, we pray.  
Stay the swords and stay the arrows,  
Let them know a better day.

Gentle Mother, strength of women,  
Help our daughters through this fray.  
Soothe the wrath and tame the fury,  
Teach us all a kinder way.

Gentle Mother, font of mercy,  
Save our sons from war, we pray.  
Stay the swords and stay the arrows,  
Let them know a better day.

Sandor’s heart fell through the floor. He sobbed as his back hit the wall, holding his head in his hands and pleading for the world to stop. His mind had become a prison of everything he yearned to forget. Too much, he begged, it’s too damn much. This is worse than death, worse than anything. Wake up, wake up you fucking monster!

She was there before he could move away, pulling his hands gently from his face. Sandor couldn’t speak, only looked into his mother’s silver eyes with confusion and sadness until he could no longer resist what his sanity ached for. It’s okay to succumb here. It’s okay because no one else can see.

Sandor leaned into his mother’s open arms. She held him and he wept into her shoulder, gripping tight to a past long lost.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“It’s been three days, princess.” The voice was grim but gentle, like one bearing ill news. “I’m afraid if he does not awaken soon, we will have to bring in the leeches. There’s nothing I can do after that.”
Sansa did not reply. She drew in a shaky breath. “Get out,” she muttered. “Everyone. Please, just… give me some time.” Sandor heard the shuffling of feet. He tried to estimate how many people were there, but lost count after a time. The door closed. Sansa was left alone with him and he hated it, hated that he couldn’t hold her, couldn’t touch her, couldn’t wipe her tears and put a smile on her face that he was so anxious to see.

For the first time in his life, Sandor heard her truly cry. But hers were not tears of mere sorrow—this was a deeper ache, a pain that whipped him. Her sobs were hysterical and scarring in nature. Sansa wept so hard that he heard her trip against something, followed by the shatter of glass. “Please,” she cried out. “Please don’t take him away from me.”

Sandor cursed himself and thrashed within, trying so very hard to wake from whatever fucking stupor he’d fallen into. He reached desperately for her but could not make his body move, stuck in the godsforsaken coma induced by Gregor’s wrath. Sandor almost wished his brother were alive so he could kill him all over again, for hurting Sansa this way.

The bed creaked softly as she climbed atop it. He heard a gentle kiss by his ear. Sansa cuddled up beside him and wept until she fell asleep, and Sandor was left alone with nothing but the sound of her ragged breaths.

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“Your pretty bird screams in her head when she looks at you. You’re a monster. Weak! Pathetic!” Sandor replayed Gregor’s taunts in his mind for reasons he did not know. He leaned back against a massive tree by a small dark pond, watching stars float effortlessly above him. Leaves rustled in the evening breeze but he did not feel a chill. The night was blue and beautiful. Elinor curled up against him, stargazing contently.

“It wasn’t nice of Gregor to say those things,” she muttered. “I’m sorry he was so mean to you. I wish I could have stopped him.”


“You wouldn’t be bothering anyone, sweetling.” Sandor looked up to the face of his mother. She sat down beside him, letting her fingers brush lazily through his matted hair, her maternal gaze fixed upon his scars. “I’m sorry your father didn’t protect you. You deserved better.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he spat. “It made me strong.”

“It made you broken.”

Sandor clenched his jaw and said nothing. He tore his gaze away from his mother’s and looked out to the water, watching the surface ripple faintly with the wind. “Never figured out why he didn’t just kill me.”

“He wanted someone to toy with.” Elinor sat up. “But that’s okay. You get to change lives now, so whatever mean Gregor did doesn’t really matter.”

“Doesn’t matter?” Sandor scowled. “Look at my face and tell me it doesn’t matter, girl.”

Elinor reached out and cupped his cheek. Her grey eyes met his. “It doesn’t matter.”
“She’s right.” His mother offered her hand, and he stood from where the three of them were resting. Lady Clegane’s smile was earnest as she looked upon him. “You will improve the lives of thousands. Your sons and daughters will be happy, and your scars won’t matter to a single one of them.”

He wanted to call her a liar, but Sandor didn’t have the courage. Instead, he simply scoffed and turned his stare towards the enormous tree that was their resting place.

Wait. I know where I am. Sandor stepped away and squinted his eyes, observing the environment in the dim starlight. The alabaster trunk had a sorrowful face carved in the center. Scarlet sap dripped from its eyes like tears, matching the color of the leaves overhead.

“You dare to think of this place?” said a deep voice, warped and rigid.

Sandor turned. The harrowing figure of Ned Stark stood solemnly behind him with his eyes closed, his Valyrian steel sword pointed to the dirt. Clouds rumbled and smothered the sky in darkness. Lady Clegane and Elinor moved swiftly beside Lord Stark, their hair blowing in the wind in a mingled black and brown. Sandor froze at the opposite end of the small pool amidst the hurricane that slowly swallowed them. Thunder clapped and lightning ripped through the atmosphere, setting Winterfell aflame in the distance. “What do you want?” he shouted over nature’s cry.

“This is the Stark home. A northman’s home. Certainly not one to a killer.”

The world was built by killers, so you’d better get used to looking at them. Sandor shook his head frantically. “Fuck that, it’s not the same!” he bellowed, red-faced and furious. “That’s not who I am anymore.”

Ned Stark opened his eyes. An iron gaze pierced Sandor where he stood. “Prove it. Prove to me that you deserve this, Sandor Clegane, and make the North an offer.”

Sandor didn’t think, only acted on impulse. The way forward was obvious, as if he’d known what to do for years yet never made the attempt. He knelt before the pool in the godswood and looked down to his right hand, flexed and massive and filthy. I should have done this years ago. In a fluid motion, Sandor shoved his fingers into the left side of his chest, deep through thick skin and scars, through muscle and flesh and bone until he curled his grip around his beating heart. He ripped the organ from his chest cavity and blood seeped down his wrist. His heart continued to pump, pump, pump. He stared incredulously at the gore in his hand before dropping it into the pool beneath the weirwood. He glanced up to Lord Stark for approval.

His mother smiled. “There. You see, now? My son is not the monster you believe him to be. His heart is human, Lord Stark. Just like yours.”

“He’ll make a good match for Sansa,” Elinor chimed in. “He’ll keep her safe. He promised!”

The Hand of the King knelt down to pick up Sandor’s bleeding heart from the pool for inspection. He looked it over, examining every crack and crevice and ventricle he could find. “This belongs to my daughter?”

Sandor nodded. “Aye. Only her.”

“I suppose it’s good enough. There’s only one thing left to do, now.” Ned Stark walked around the black pool, his ebony cloak dragging behind him. He shoved Sandor’s beating heart back into his chest with force.

“Wake up.”
“…don’t crowd him…”

“…make sure he can see…”

“…step back, Your Grace, we need more room…”

Sandor was spinning, floating and flying all at once and the force made him weary with sickness. His eyes slowly opened. All he could see was red hair and he reached for it. Sansa, he wanted to say. Little bird. But his mouth would not move and his body lay speechless. He heard her sweet voice and felt her hand clasp his. “I’m here,” she whispered. “Sandor, I’m here.”

Unconsciousness claimed him again.

The second time he woke, he was able to say her name. “Sansa,” he croaked. “Water.” Those were the only words he could form, and after he’d swallowed refreshment he slipped back to a dreamless slumber.

Sandor didn’t know how much time had passed before he woke for the third and final time, able to function somewhat fully. His vision struggled to focus, blurred and groggy, but he wiped away the sleepiness and glanced around the room. He hadn’t been moved since the fight with Gregor, but the chambers looked more cheery and accommodating than he remembered, if he remembered at all. Morning light threaded through the open curtains. Sandor weakly pushed himself upright, laying back against the soft pillows and groaning. He saw auburn hair illuminated by sunlight, turned away from him to watch a swift sunrise creep over the horizon of Blackwater Bay.

“Sansa,” he rasped, reaching out for the figure of his loved one. “Sansa.”

Her head snapped to attention. “Sandor,” she said quickly, rushing to his side and taking hold of his outstretched hands. She sat on the edge of the bed and smoothed dark hair from his face. “I’m right here.”


Sansa laughed tearfully. His heart wept with joy to hear her. Sandor didn’t want to see her cry anymore, but Sansa was always one who wore her feelings proudly on her sleeve, and her tears were a testament to the size of her heart. “Thank you,” she said.

“Mm.” He slipped his fingers in her hair and reveled in the softness of it, the orange color that glowed in the light of the sun. Gods, how he’d missed her. It felt like years had passed since he was able to touch her like this, in peace, without the threat of death or discovery looming over them like a ghost. He stayed silent for a time until the memory of the godswood came flooding back to him, and he knew what needed to be done. “Sansa,” he asked quietly. “Tell me something.”

“Anything,” she replied.

“Do you remember where the heart is?”

Her blue eyes softened. Sansa placed her hand over his left shoulder, gently clutching his ragged tunic. “Here,” she said. “Right here.”
“I wouldn’t have known if you’d never pointed it out.” Sandor’s throat singed with tears, but he chose not to fight them. *I’ll let her see. Only her.*

Her lips formed a trembling smile. She wiped his cheeks affectionately and waited for him to continue.

“Never knew I needed a heart,” he admitted. “They scared me. And then yours came to King’s Landing from Winterfell, parading around the bloody keep like some fool. I hated it.”

“Why?”

“Because it reminded me of what I couldn’t have.” He let his hand fall to her belly, where it rested lazily over the silk of her gown. “Now I have two of the damn things. Guess I’m truly fucked.”

Sansa’s laugh was bubbly and bright, the only remedy he would ever need. She burst with joy and wrapped her arms around his neck, and he held her close, unwilling to let her go. The lovers kissed and laughed and cried together, merging into one heart as they were already one flesh. The taste of her was sweeter than it had ever been, and he kissed her for what felt like hours, lazy and slow and undemanding. The contact sent tingles shooting through his body as if every piece of his being had missed her too. Perhaps they had. Sansa’s kiss made him new again.

“This heart is yours, little bird.” Sandor placed his hand over hers where it rested on his chest. “You found it. You get to keep it.”

“My most prized possession,” she giggled in reply, curling his hair behind his ear. “Nothing will ever mean more to me.”

And they kissed again.

**Chapter End Notes**

WOW EMOTIONS. This chapter was so hard and fun and great to write wow wow so many good parallels, so many sad things, so many happy things??? Ah. My heart is full. Could this be an ending? Maybe. But I have more plot things to do so bear with me through the home stretch!

(Also, if anyone complains about how much Sansa seems to be crying lately, remember that she’s a pregnant teenager who almost lost her entire family and her own life in a single night and probably has major PTSD so please check yourself)

See you on Tuesday! Only three chapters left!

OHHHH. Also, I think I got the coma stuff right. I’ve never written something in the perspective of a blind and paralyzed POV character before so this was a challenge, not to mention the limits of medieval medicine. I think, like, 90% of coma patients died back then because they had no way to make them swallow food and water. SHORT COMAS, HOORAY. If you’re a medical student/professional, kick me if I did something horribly wrong.

P.S. Did you cry? (If the answer isn’t yes, I haven’t done my job well enough! ;D)
A damnable shiver shot down his spine. Tyrion wrapped the wool blanket around his small shoulders and cursed his bones for trembling. Weeks in captivity left him feeling hopeless, estranged. For a Lannister once so proud and strong, his resolve had slipped through the cracked bricks around him, seeping away into nothingness. As he looked around at the familiar prison in which he’d been confined, Tyrion wondered if he was facing the end of his life. No matter what he had done for Winterfell’s daughters, his Lannister name was a crime all its own. Sansa was a sweet girl but she was not the King in the North, nor was she as influential as Catelyn Stark, two people whose hatred of him was entirely doubtless. Tyrion watched a torch flicker on the opposite wall past iron bars of freedom and thought of how he should like to spend his final hours, were they upon him.

He had seen Shae once since the war was declared over. She had brought him food, company and the pleasure he cherished so much, but she was gone as quickly as she came in fear of being found disobedient to the new king’s rules. That was one week and three days ago. Tyrion had started keeping track of passing time in his head.

By Tyrion’s calculations, four weeks and two days had trudged by since the end of the war. The guards referred to it as “The Battle of the Lion Gate,” or “The Battle of Winter’s Rage.” Tyrion supposed both titles applied equally. He leaned back against the cold wall and ignored the daylight threading through the small window at the top of his cell. I bet it’s a beautiful day. I should like to see the sun, he thought. At least one more time.

“Imp,” called the guardsman, rapping on the iron bars unexpectedly. Tyrion jolted to attention. “You’ve got a visitor.”
He pushed himself upright and rubbed away the grogginess from his eyes. “I thought Robb Stark ordered you to keep me lonely. But I suppose I’ll take anyone instead of looking at you all the time.”

“That’s King Robb,” snapped the soldier, “and it’s not just any visitor. It’s Princess Sansa.”


The guard pulled out a set of heavy iron keys and unlocked the cell door. In a flow of fine silks and flowered soap, Sansa Stark stepped gracefully into his prison, a place where such beauty didn’t belong. The door was locked behind her. “Could you give my husband and I some privacy?” she asked. The soldier nodded, bowed, and left.

Sansa looked like the sun and sky he ached to see. Light blue silks floated around her, the height of fashion, draped over her arms and shoulders with hanging sleeves. The gown was embroidered to look like feathers in some places, the rest flowing fabric, making her look like a little bird in her own right. Around her waist was a golden belt of extravagant patterns. Sansa’s hair fell in tumbles of orange curls over her shoulders and down the length of her back, bouncing when she walked. Atop her head was a tiara of gold and diamond.

“You look like a queen,” Tyrion told her in earnest.

Sansa grinned bashfully. “Not a queen,” she said. “Just a princess.” She picked up her skirts and moved to sit by his side, atop the uncomfortable cot that had been set for him.

“How is Shae?” he asked.

“Good. She sends her love.” Sansa fumbled with her hands. “I wish I could have come sooner.”

“It’s alright. I’m sure the Hound and your health have taken much of your attention.” The statement may have sounded bitter to some, but Tyrion meant it genuinely.

“They have.” Sansa let out a long sigh. “How are you…?”

“Fine,” he lied. “They keep me fed enough. It’s not too cold at night.” The truth was far less sugar-coated, but he didn’t want to make her worry.

“I’m sorry they’re keeping you down here. I tried to convince Robb to let you free, but Mother insists on making sure you’re ‘contained’ until the trials begin.”

“Which is today,” said Tyrion flatly.

Sansa nodded.

“Hm. Well. How are you?” he asked, eager to change the subject. “Healthy? Happy?”

“Mostly both,” Sansa replied. “I’m very healthy according to the maesters, but the morning nausea is terrible. Mother says that means I’m having a girl.” She placed her hand over her stomach with great affection. Sansa’s newly-forming maternity made her glow with excitement, and Tyrion smiled to see her joy. She was so happy when she talked about the life growing inside her. The thought of Sansa becoming a mother to a polite little grey-eyed girl was one that made his heart warm.

“The happiness is something to be worked on, though,” Sansa continued. “I’ve started having nightmares and panics. I can’t sleep. Robb suffers the same symptoms. Qyburn says it’s some sort of delayed reaction to trauma, damage to the brain or something like that.” She fiddled with her hands. “And I cry too much.”
“I’ve heard that pregnant mothers have stronger emotions than most,” Tyrion said, trying to be reassuring. “I’ve read about it.”

“Mother said that too.”

“She would know best.” The cell fell quiet, neither of them entirely sure what to say given the events that would soon come to pass. He found himself wishing he could offer essence of nightshade to help her sleep, but he had neither the power nor the ability to provide her with what she needed.

“Why are you here, Sansa?” He looked up at her regal form, irritated, but not at her. “Why come to the cell of a criminal before your brother passes judgment?”

Sansa looked over to him, blue eyes filled with compassion. “I want you to know that I’m on your side. I’ll do whatever I can to make sure Robb’s judgment is fair and honest. I’ll speak for you if I have to. I don’t want you to worry.”

Tyrion folded his arms across his chest and smiled despite the worry. “You’re too sweet a girl for a place like this.”

“So I’ve heard,” she replied. “But we won’t be here much longer. Robb intends to leave soon once King Stannis arrives. He wanted to give everyone time to heal, as well as himself.”

“Smart move.”

“Half of his forces are already back at Winterfell, though, repairing what Ramsay did to it.” Her demeanor suddenly darkened.

“Ramsay?”

“Ramsay Snow.” Sansa looked angered just to say his name. “Roose Bolton’s son. He set Winterfell on fire and captured Theon. That’s all I know. Robb doesn’t let me in on his war councils.”

“He should,” Tyrion encouraged, desperate to erase her frown. “You’re smarter than his men, and you had a great teacher.”

Sansa chuckled. “What, you?”

“Of course! I taught you plenty of things, Lady Sansa, you mustn’t forget that.” His tone was humorous and she responded as he hoped she would, laughing with a smile she deserved to wear.

“So,” Tyrion began after she calmed. “How is he?” He didn’t need to specify.

“Better. Much better.” Sansa grinned. “He has trouble walking, so he’ll have to use a cane for some time. He doesn’t like that very much. But his head has cleared, he remembers everything now…” She folded her hands. “He’s different.”

“Different?” Tyrion asked. “How so?”

“He’s…sweeter.” Sansa was smiling wide, but Tyrion could tell she was trying to hide it. “I mean, he’s still rude and brash and abrasive as ever. He called Lady Brienne a ‘man with a twat’ yesterday and I had to scold him for it, but when it’s just the two of us, he’s not that way at all. It’s like he can finally be himself around me. There aren’t any barriers anymore.”

Good. “Perhaps it was the shock of almost losing you that woke him up.”

“Maybe.” She bit her lip, anxious. Tyrion felt her mood change to one of despondency. “When
Robb was nearly dying, he gave me his blessing. But now that he’s alive and has had time to think, I don’t know what will happen to Sandor. Or to you.”

“He’ll do what needs to be done, I expect.” Tyrion sniffled, trying to remain passive for her sake. “He is much like your father was.”

“I hope that’s true,” Sansa said, “because Father would have listened to me when I fought for your freedom. Robb, though…I’m not sure.” She swallowed. “I don’t want to lose either of you.”

“Nor I, you.” He took her hand in his and squeezed. She squeezed back. Husband and wife smiled upon each other, bonded in friendship, before Tyrion’s guard came wandering back. “Princess,” he said. “His Grace requests you in the throne room. The trials will begin shortly.”

“Alright.” She let out a shaky sigh. “I’ll see you shortly, then.”

“I believe so.” Tyrion kissed her hand and sent her on her way, though after she was gone it occurred to him how much he wished she would stay.

Hours passed before he was summoned. Tyrion was provided with a fresh change of clothes and the opportunity for a bath, which he eagerly took. He scratched his growing beard and frowned at the scarred face he saw in the mirror’s reflection, wondering how Robb Stark would take to him now that his life was not in danger. Would he keep his word? Would honor demand that he exterminate House Lannister and make Tyrion answer for his father’s crimes? There was no way to tell. This wasn’t a game anymore, that much was certain, and Tyrion knew his former tactics had no place here. Robb Stark will be justified in anything he does. I’m at an incredible disadvantage.

Tyrion dressed in a navy jerkin, absent of his house sigil and colors as to not offend the Northmen. He clasped the buttons around his chest and sighed, disdaining his reflection a moment longer before he turned to the guards posted to watch over him. “Let’s get on with this,” he said hesitantly. The men bound him in iron shackles and escorted him from the base of the prison tower, out into the sun he missed so dearly.

The stone courtyards were surrounded by scaffolding and construction. It was the Battle of the Blackwater all over again, only on a much larger scale. Stark banners waved in the autumn breeze and men with Northern sigils oversaw the rebuilding of the city. Tyrion was glad that the new king was taking initiative to fix what he had broken to some degree. Better to leave King’s Landing in a state of repair than to leave it behind in shambles.

“How do you like that?” taunted one of his captors as they reached the gates. “Pretty sight, there.”

“What is?” Tyrion asked.

“Look up, dwarf.”

He did. Atop the gates to the throne room, the severed heads of Petyr Baelish and Tywin Lannister sat rotting on an iron spike. Tyrion stopped and stared, wide-eyed, emotionless. Flies buzzed around the flesh of his father and Tyrion felt haunted, as if Lord Tywin’s eyes could still see and judge him. He tasted bile in the back of his throat and looked away, no matter how relieved he was to know that his father could no longer torment him.

Save a spot for me in hell. You may not be waiting long.

The taunts of the guardsmen fell quiet as they approached the massive door to the Great Hall. As silently as possible, they pushed through the entrance and led Tyrion inside, disrupting whatever confession the King in the North was currently hearing. The court turned to look at him with
disparaging eyes. Tyrion’s shackles echoed through halls he had once roamed freely, and the faces he recognized in the firelight sneered at him, faces of people who owed him their lives.

“Wait here,” said a Stark soldier. “You’re next.”

After who? he almost asked, but the question was answered for him. On her knees before the Iron Throne was a filth-covered Cersei, blonde hair matted and tangled around her. She looked a savage mess as she shot a hostile gaze to him over her shoulder. Tyrion swallowed the lump in his throat and kept his ground. Cersei had a touch of madness about her, and her green eyes shone bright like wildfire. She turned away from him to face the king.

“My children,” she spat, her voice raw. “You’re going to rip them apart. I will not let that happen.”

“Prince Doran has agreed to foster Tommen as well as Myrcella in Sunspear,” said Robb calmly. “The engagement to Trystane Martell will still stand. Apparently your daughter has fallen in love. Dorne doesn’t believe in breaking those bonds, even in knowing her real father.”

“Dorne loathes us. They’ll kill my children, they’ll slaughter them like sheep in their beds as payment for Elia. If you confine them to Dorne their blood will be on your hands.”

“I have been assured of their safety by Prince Doran himself,” Robb replied with a bit more force. “I don’t wish them any harm, and neither does Dorne.”

“Liar!” Cersei screamed. “Once you’ve taken my head you’ll butcher them! I won’t let you!” She scrambled to her feet, but was immediately restrained by the king’s protectors.

“I told you, Your Grace,” said Sansa coldly. “Robb would know who was innocent and who was guilty.”

“Make your decision then, King Robb,” Cersei replied spitefully. “And don’t spare me your blade simply because I’m a woman.”

Robb swallowed hard. He leaned over to his mother and sister, discussing something in secret with a look of remorse. Leave it to Ned’s son to hesitate here, thought Tyrion. He’s as noble as he is chivalrous. Cersei won’t like that.

Moments later, the king sat straight. The words he spoke after were laced with regret. “Cersei of House Lannister, for the crimes of incest and the murder of King Robert, as well as your abuse against my sister, I give you a choice; execution at sunrise, or a lifetime in service to the Silent Sisters. You will have another day in the black cells to consider your decision.”

Tyrion flinched at the sound of his sister’s shrieking. She fought against the soldiers but was easily over-powered, screaming so loud that Robb’s words nearly drowned. Cersei thrashed like an animal trapped in a cage too small. Her captors dragged her from the throne room and not once did she spare Tyrion another glance, only screeched and cried curses against the North until the echoes of her profanity could be heard no more.

Again, Tyrion could feel only relief, for himself and his cherished niece and nephew.

He was not given much time to ponder. “Tyrion Lannister,” said the king with a stressed groan. “Approach.”

Tyrion was shoved forward by the guards at his back until he could walk of his own accord. The King in the North sat atop the Iron Throne, looking regal and established in that hardened, colder way of Winterfell. A crown of jagged steel and bronze rested on his dark curls. Beside Robb sat his
queen, Lady Roslin of House Frey, dressed in a gown of deep emerald and crowned with silver and gold. Arya stood proudly in Stark armor at her side, with Grey Wind curled up at her feet. His mother stood to Robb’s left and Sansa was beside her. When Tyrion met her gaze, she offered a little smile in reassurance.


“We would be whole if my father still lived.”

“I had nothing to do with that.” Tyrion clenched his jaw. “Joffrey is dead. Arya killed him.”

Robb narrowed his eyes. “You’re here to answer for yourself, my lord. Not Joffrey or anyone else.”

“What would you have of me, then?”

The king sat straight. “Did you or did you not send an assassin to murder my brother?”

Tyrion huffed in annoyance. “As your lady mother well knows, I did not try to kill Brandon Stark. You should remember that I brought him plans to make a saddle so he could ride. Why would I try to kill someone I sympathized with or arm an assassin with my own blade? Besides, I won my trial by combat in the Eyrie. Many people witnessed it.”

“You’re not being accused of killing my brother,” Robb clarified with a small sigh. “I just want to know the truth.”

Tyrion blinked. “No,” he asserted. “I didn’t try to kill him. I believe that was Joffrey’s doing as well.”

Robb seemed to consider that a moment. He looked over to his wife and Arya before leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees and lacing his fingers together. “Why did you help us?”

Tyrion frowned. Is this a trick question? he thought at first, but the look in Robb’s eyes was genuine. “Is it so hard to believe that I have a conscience?” Tyrion stated. “The things my father did to your family were terrible. The things my sister and nephew did were terrible. Sansa suffered far too much in her years here, and I had no desire to see her suffer more.” He turned his gaze to his royal wife. “I care about her. I care about a lot of things, really, but Sansa is someone whom I care for quite a lot.”

Sansa smiled where she stood. Robb stroked his beard in thought, looking over to his mother for a nod of approval. He did not receive one. Still, the king opened his mouth to speak. “Remove his shackles,” he ordered. “Because of your treatment of Sansa, as well as myself during the Battle of the Lion Gate, I think you have earned your pardon. I will allow you to return to Casterly Rock as the head of House Lannister and Warden of the West, as is your rightful place, in exchange for your consent to a marriage annulment with my sister.”

Tyrion refused to believe what he was hearing. The courtroom gasped and chatted among themselves but Tyrion could hardly hear through the blood pounding in his head. For the first time in a long time, he was at a loss for words. This boy would give me something my own father kept away from me. A birthright, all for the sake of Sansa. Months ago, Tyrion had convinced himself that being heir to Casterly Rock was his only motivation for helping the Northern princess. But deep in his heart, he was simply glad they could both be happy.

And Shae. Fuck me, I can marry Shae.

“Done,” he said suddenly, imagining his lover as the lady of Casterly Rock. The mere notion filled with life. “Thank you, Your Grace. Thank you.” The shackles were removed from his wrists and
Tyrion rubbed them, grinning up to Sansa. “When can we annul this, then? I’ve got another Lady Lannister in mind.”

“Tomorrow,” answered the king for her. He was not smiling. “First, there is another person I mean to sentence. You’re free to leave, my lord.”

All Tyrion wanted was to abandon this place and wrap Shae up in every inch of him. “Thank you.” He turned to find her in the crowd, moving in and out of shocked onlookers, both friend and foe. When he found Shae beaming at the back of the room, he felt all his stress and agony seep through his fingers and dissipate to some unknown elsewhere. He took her hands in his and kissed them. “Fancy being a lioness?” he asked.

“Very much,” she replied. “Let’s get out of here so I can fuck you proper. I miss you. I love you.”

“And I, you.” He took her by the hand and led her to the exit. He started thinking of all the things he would show her at Casterly Rock, all the possibilities in their endless future together, until the voice of Robb Stark withdrew his excitement.

“Sandor of House Clegane,” called the king above the chatter. “Come forward.”

Tyrion froze. Dammit, he thought, damn me for caring so much. He looked up to Shae and saw the same immeasurable worry in her eyes. Neither one of them was capable of leaving Sansa alone at a time like this, especially not where the Hound’s fate was concerned. Tyrion followed Shae’s lead and walked with her to the leftside balcony, where they watched the unfolding scene from a close view. Sansa looked restless and frantic. “Robb,” she protested, “you said we would wait. You said that—”

“Sansa,” Catelyn soothed. “Not now.”

Tyrion turned to the center of the hall. A limping, crippled Sandor Clegane made slow passage to the foot of the Iron Throne. So much for the cane, Tyrion thought as he observed the absence of one, and the struggle lined in the weary face of the feared warrior. Clegane came to a stop at a fair distance from the throne itself, looking up to the King in the North with an expression of neutrality. He kept most of his weight on his unwounded leg.

Sansa was far too bothered to remain silent. “What are you doing just standing there?” she snapped at the nearest guards. “Get him a chair, he can barely walk!”

“I’m alright, little bird.” Sandor shook his head. Bloody fool, Tyrion thought, still too proud to know when he needs help.

Robb Stark cleared his throat. “Sandor Clegane. You are accused of murdering Mycah, the butcher’s boy, as well as my father’s men when he was betrayed in this very room. How do you plead?”


“What makes you say that?” came the voice of Queen Roslin. Her tone was gentle, though Robb looked as if he was shocked she would speak.

“Why else would you drag me out of bed and embarrass me before the whole damned court?” Sandor laughed bitterly. “The wolf girl wants to kill me. Maybe I deserve it.”

Liar. Tyrion remembered what Sansa had told him earlier. This was just an act, the Clegane way of protecting himself from the good things he had earned.
“Do you want to die, ser?” asked the queen with a frown.

“Not really. And I’m not a ser.”

“You have inherited your brother’s lands and title,” said Lady Catelyn. “That makes you a ‘ser’ whether you wish it or no.”

“This is stupid,” Sansa spoke up, her eyes wide with panic. “Robb, stop. Please, if you have nothing to ask of him, let him go back to—“

“Sansa.” Robb’s tone was stern, frustrated. She froze where she stood. “Enough. Please.” Her shoulders sank and her expression was conflicted. She looked down to Sandor and Tyrion gripped Shae’s hand, allowing himself to feel frightened on his wife’s behalf.

“Are you guilty or innocent?” asked the king.

“Guilty,” declared the Hound, “because I was a drunken dog on a leash.”

“And what are you now?”

Sandor hesitated. It occurred to Tyrion that Sandor didn’t know what he was anymore, but he came across an answer all the same. “Sworn shield to the Princess of Winterfell,” he said, looking up to the king. “Have been for a while. Take me or kill me, Stark. S’your choice.”

Sansa bit her lip and looked to her brother, hands clasped in front of her chest, almost in prayer. Tyrion nearly began praying too. The king leaned back and glanced to Sansa, watching her fear, trying to understand her. “Princess Sansa has begged for your life.”


“But my queen says I should give you more than your life.” Robb reached out his hand to Roslin, who took it without question. “She says you are the finest warrior in the Seven Kingdoms, and you saved her father’s lands by killing your brother. Arya says you slayed the Mountain bravely, and my mother wants you to take a vow of loyalty and return home with us. But I would rather know what you want.”

Sandor furrowed his brow. “The fuck does it matter what I want?”

“You have done the greatest possible service to me, whether or not you meant to.” To Tyrion’s surprise, the king’s eyes softened. “You kept my sister safe. That was all I really wanted. Tell me something you desire, ser, and if it is within my power, you shall have it.”

Make your choice wisely, Clegane. Tyrion found himself leaning forward to better hear his reply, stuck on the edge of adrenaline though he was sick of the intensity.

“Anything?” asked Sandor.

“Name it and it’s yours.”

Clegane cleared his throat, pondering the request. He looked down to his feet and shuffled them awkwardly, clumsily, and Tyrion was briefly reminded of a child too shy to ask for what he wanted. By the time Sandor looked up, Tyrion began to question if he would respond at all, until some stroke of mercy played in favor of his dear Sansa. “I want your sister,” Sandor declared. “Fuck your deal with the Freys. They got a queen right there, they can’t have a princess too. I’ve waited too bloody long to see my little bird be shut away in some other cage. Set her free. I’ll take care of her.”
It was a marriage proposal if Tyrion had ever heard one. *Thank the gods.* The court gasped, but their whispers went entirely ignored. Robb shifted on the throne and Sansa tearfully smiled, covering her mouth to keep from giggling aloud. Beside him, Shae exhaled in great relief.

“I gave Sansa the Bolton’s lands,” said Robb. “She’ll rule there upon our return. If you want to marry her, you’ll need to be named Lord Clegane of the Dreadfort and consent to nobility.”

Sandor scoffed. “Ser, lord, fucking knight me for all I care. If I can have her, the rest doesn’t matter.”

Tyrion grinned from ear to ear, overjoyed to see Sansa shed tears of happiness instead of sorrow. Robb gave his nod of approval and Sansa lifted her skirts, bolting across the room to leap into her lover’s arms. Sandor stumbled backwards but he managed to remain on his feet, strong enough to hold her as she ached to be held. Queen Roslin began excitedly applauding, and the celebratory gesture spread throughout the room like the sweetest fire. Tyrion watched them kiss at the center of the hall and felt his heart swell.

*I’ll be damned,* he thought with an almost childish grin. *We made a better future after all.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

My beta's notes on this chapter included "Baby Robb acting like a dick to keep up his reputation as a ruler is too real," and I laughed at that so hard, because it's true.

I LOVE THIS CHAPTER SO MUCH. GOOD THINGS ARE HAPPENING.

AMEN.

Could this also be an ending? Yeah. But it's not. I have fluff (and more smut...?) to do before this is over. I promised you a puppy and juice and nice things, so now I will spend two chapters repairing the damage I've done and tying up loose ends.

HOORAY. SO CLOSE~!

I should warn you that this weekend is another family reunion as we have a dying member of the family, but I'll still try to post on Saturday, because you know what makes the stress not feel like stress? YOU GUYS. So kudos to you for being the absolute best.

Ah. <3 happy endings for my babies. I'm so happy.

See you soon, my angelic readers!
The morning sun graced her skin with heat, slowly waking her from a peaceful slumber. She reached out across the mattress in hopes of finding the warm, solid body she ached to touch, but her fingers met only soft sheets and empty space. She gripped onto the fabric and stretched out her limbs, squealing happily as her mind adjusted to a woken state.

This is the last time I’ll ever have to wake without him. The thought left her giddy and speechless. Sansa Stark would become Sansa Clegane, her choice despite their separate social status, and the old life would morph into something fresh and beautiful. And I’ll get to see his face every morning and night.

Not even the morning nausea could dampen her spirits. Sansa dashed from her bed and pulled open the curtains, looking out upon a sunlit King’s Landing, already active with construction and continuing life. Broken buildings under repair captured the light of dawn. She breathed in deep and let tranquility dare to chase her anxieties away. Today is a good day, she reminded herself. Nothing can stop that now.

Sansa turned to her door at the sound of a knock. “Sansa,” called Shae through the thick wood. “Are
you out of bed yet?"

“Yes,” she replied. “Come in.”

Her handmaiden, now a lady of nobility in the eyes of gods and men, carried a small basket of supplies in her arms. Other attendants rushed in around her and every one of them was chatting excitedly in hushed whispers. Sansa couldn’t help but chuckle at nothing in particular, overwhelmed with delight.

“Are you going to laugh all day?” Shae asked. “Come here. You need a bath.”

“I still can’t believe you’re helping me,” said Sansa, padding across her chambers to the metal tub in the connecting room. The maids began to fill it with steaming water. “You’re a lady now, a real one. Lady Lannister.”

“You were Lady Lannister too,” Shae retorted with a grin, “and you snuck around the castle fucking the king’s dog. If you can do that, I can help you get ready for your wedding.”

Sansa gasped. Her face burned bright red. “That—that was only once…”

“Just once? Is that why you’ve hardly slept in your own bed since the battle?” Shae smirked knowingly, pointing to the tub once it was full. “Strip. We have to hurry. I let you sleep in because I knew you needed it.”

Sansa was only too eager. She threw off her nightclothes and dipped into the hot water, feeling her tense muscles relax under the heat. Shae helped wash her hair and body with soap that smelled of sweet jasmine. According to Margaery, the scent was said to bring out the lust in a man. Sansa wasn’t a stranger to Sandor’s physical desire, but their intimacy had been challenged until this point due to injury and the challenge of sneaking past Robb’s guards. Sansa was determined to allow them both a night of release in each other’s arms. They had earned as much, and wedding nights were supposed to be special.

Neither she nor Sandor had wanted to wait. Sansa still fancied the idea of marrying before the heart tree of Winterfell, but the return journey from King’s Landing could take a month at best. After his arrival to claim the Iron Throne, King Stannis agreed to allow the last remaining Northerners an extended stay for the sake of her wedding. Most of Robb’s host had travelled home, leaving only the king’s sworn protectors and a handful of escorts to celebrate the royal marriage. But Sansa could care less who attended. She only wanted Sandor, and now, by some miracle, she could have him.

When Shae had finished helping her wash, Sansa climbed out of the tub and quickly dried off. A maid offered her a robe and she slipped it over her shoulders, sitting at the vanity per the request of the handmaids.

“Oh, Shae. I can’t believe this is happening.” Sansa covered her cheeks and beamed like a child in the mirror. “Happiness like this is so rare, that’s what I learned in this place, but suddenly all these dreams I had as a girl are coming true. I’m marrying someone I love. We’re going to have a family and live in a castle not far from Winterfell.”

“But you’re not as stupid as you were then,” Shae pointed out. “Bad things make people wiser. This dream wasn’t just given to you, Sansa. You earned it.”

“Mhm.” Sansa toyed with the dragonfly pendant around her neck. “Still. It’s just so hard to believe, almost surreal.”

“I know.” Shae chuckled under her breath. “I wake up each morning and think, ‘I’m Shae the funny
whore, Shae the handmaiden, and Shae the Lioness too.’ It’s very…bizarre.” She glanced at Sansa to make sure she’d used the word correctly. Upon her approval, Lady Lannister beamed. “Anyway. I don’t care if it’s not supposed to happen. We deserve to be happy, Sansa. Don’t ever forget it.”

“I won’t.”

A soft knock came at the door. “Who is it?” Sansa called.

“A bride’s mother,” replied Catelyn Stark, and Sansa’s heart leapt. She stood from her chair despite Shae’s fussing and threw open the door, wrapping her mother in a tight embrace. Sansa felt her old self revive from the ashes, but stronger and more refined; a Sansa Stark not obstructed by falsehoods and deceit. Her family had encouraged such growth. She took her mother’s hands and led her to the vanity, where Catelyn chuckled to find all sorts of jewelry options laid out across the tabletop.

“These are very expensive,” Catelyn commented, lifting a necklace of diamonds with her scarred fingers. “Beautiful, but expensive. Who gave these to you?”

“Margaery,” Sansa replied. “Since Robb convinced King Stannis to pardon her family, she’s been so grateful. She was always pleasant to me before, but they keep showering us with gifts. It’s almost overwhelming. They even made my dress. Have you seen it?”

“Not yet,” her mother said, setting down the necklace. “I was waiting until I could see it on you. But enough about that, let’s get you ready.”

Sansa sat back in the chair while Catelyn picked up a brush, running through long auburn curls still waiting to dry. The handmaidens busied themselves with Sansa’s face, applying a bit of color to her cheeks and some boldness to her eyes, and Shae left the room to retrieve her wedding gown from wherever it was being stored. Sansa chatted with her mother and reminisced on past times, laughing and tearing up and feeling joyful all around. By the time her hair had been pinned up and her appearance prepared, high noon had come and gone, leaving one thing left to do before the ceremony could begin.

“Ready?” Shae asked, draping the gown over her arm.

“Ready,” Sansa replied nervously. She stepped into the undergarments, making sure they were comfortable, before drawing in a deep breath. Slowly, Sansa extended her arms as Shae and Catelyn dressed her.

Her wedding gown was a light peach color, soft against the tone of her skin and hair. Flowers embroidered the bodice, and sleeves of see-through fabric and lace hugged her arms tight from shoulder to wrist. The skirts were big and heavy, the same light shade with faded vines traced in intricate stitching. Catelyn stepped behind her and buttoned up the back of the gown, tying all the necessary ends before moving away to observe her fully.

“Oh, Sansa…” Tears formed in her mother’s eyes. “You look beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.”

“You think so?” Sansa asked excitedly, looking down to the dress. “It’s so pretty. I feel more like a princess in this than I ever have anywhere else.”

“Sandor Clegane had better fall on his knees and weep when he sees you, or he is the stupidest man I have ever met.” Catelyn crossed the room, smiling from ear to ear. “I have something for you, my dear. Come here.”

Sansa stepped forward. Lady Catelyn outstretched her hand, offering a silver pin in the shape of a leaping trout, sparkling in the light of the setting sun. “I wore this on my wedding day,” she
explained, “and Robb wore it on his. Now, it’s your turn.”

“It’s beautiful,” Sansa muttered as Catelyn placed it on the gown. She felt stronger somehow, more confident now that a token from her mother’s marriage would be with her through her own. Sansa leaned forward to pull Catelyn into a hug. “Thank you, mother. I love it.”

“And I love you,” she replied, rubbing Sansa’s back in assurance. “Your father would be so proud.”

He would be. Sansa took a deep breath, imagining how pleased Ned Stark would be to see her here, on the brink of happily ever after with the most unlikely of men. Can he see us from wherever he is? she wondered. Does he know how gentle Sandor has become? Does he know how much I love him? Sansa took pride in that little reminder, letting her mother kiss her cheek and step away. “You’re ready. We’ll see you in the godswood.”

“Alright.” Sansa took a deep breath and released, watching her handmaids and supporters leave the room with little waves and wishes of good luck. She bit her lip and began to pace, watching the sun dip in the west and light the sky in pink and scarlet. I wonder if Jon got my letter, Sansa thought, imagining the face of her half-brother when he heard of her happiness. I hope he’s as thrilled as I am.

Sansa didn’t know how much time had passed before the final knock came at her door. She stopped her nervous walking and carefully opened it. Robb Stark stood waiting in the candlelit hall, dressed in fine clothes with his crown atop his head. When he saw her, his mouth fell open.

“Sansa…” Robb smiled so brightly, she thought the sun lived inside him. “Gods, look at you. Not the little girl from the courtyard at all anymore.”

“No.” Sansa chuckled nervously, looking down at her dress and adjusting it. “Do you like it? Lady Olenna had it made for me.”

“It’s stunning,” he said, taking her chin and gently lifting it. “But not as stunning as the woman who wears it.” Robb kissed her cheek and held out her diamond tiara. “One last thing.”

“An important thing,” Sansa chuckled, bowing her head so the king could place her token of status atop her head. Robb offered his arm with a great smile. “Ready to get married?”

“More than ready.” Sansa slipped her arm in his, and brother and sister made their way together toward the godswood.

Twilight turned the sky into a bruise of purple and black, with scattering diamond stars that sparkled with the moon. A cool evening breeze brushed against her skin and Sansa felt elated, blessed beyond measure to be alive to appreciate the rapture life was beginning to bring. Optimism and hope were the fires that fueled her, and she was comforted to feel them growing with her healing spirit. Sansa looked out upon Blackwater Bay and allowed herself a moment of reflection. How fitting, she thought suddenly, that this will end where it began. King and princess passed friendly faces upon their entry to the godswood. Elm, alder and black cottonwood trees wrapped them in protection. Candles illuminated either side of their path in a dull orange glow. Sansa saw Margaery and her bright, smiling face beside Lady Olenna. Tyrion and Shae looked beside themselves with elation. The Umbers and Dacey Mormont bowed their heads as they passed, and even Bronn looked pleased, grinning as he nodded his head to the king. So many friends had come to see her married. So many of them had survived, thanks to luck and prayer, and Sansa would never cease to cherish those many miracles.
Sansa and Robb stopped before the heart tree, a massive oak covered in smokeberry vines with a joyful face carved in the trunk. Sandor looked near tears to see her as she was, a bride, a woman whose heart belonged solely to him. He was dressed in the colors of his house, the sigil of House Clegane emblazoned on his chest and his hair pulled back with a golden string. Sansa felt a sting at the back of her throat and smiled when their eyes met, thinking of how endearing he looked all dressed up for her, regardless of how awkward he may have felt.

Lady Catelyn stood proudly beside Arya and Queen Roslin, the last remainders of the Stark family. Greatjon Umber stood at the center, as he had agreed to conduct the ceremony. He stepped forward with a grin. “Who would come before the Old Gods this night?”

“Princess Sansa of House Stark,” Robb replied. “Heir to Winterfell and Lady of the Dreadfort. She comes here to be wed.” He squeezed her hand when he said her name. “She is a woman grown, trueborn and noble, and deserving of the happiness she seeks. She comes to beg the blessings of the gods.” Robb looked at her husband-to-be. “Who comes to claim her?”

“Sandor of House Clegane.” Sandor swallowed hard, looking uncomfortable, but not from a desire to be elsewhere. He stepped forward on the king’s command and did not remove his eyes from Sansa. “Who gives her?”

“King Robb of House Stark,” said her brother, “in place of Lord Eddard Stark, our loving father.”

The Greatjon gestured to Sandor. “Princess Sansa, do you take this man?”

There was no hesitation. “I take this man.” Robb kissed her temple and removed his arm from her, leaving her free to go where she wished. Sansa stepped forward and took Sandor’s offered hands, standing with him before the heart tree of her father’s gods, and the ceremony continued.

By the time the vows were said, night had fallen. The gods demanded that husband and wife seal their union with an act of love. Sandor cupped her face with his rough hands and leaned down from their drastic height difference, kissing her with sweetness and fragility. Applause lifted through the godswood, but Sansa couldn’t hear, couldn’t care. She placed her hands on his chest, over his heart, and smiled as he kissed her again. It was okay to kiss him now, acceptable to be publicly affectionate with a man whom she’d risked her life to marry. Together, Lord and Lady Clegane took each other by the hand and faced the exuberant crowd. All traces of darkness had been chased away.

The party was held in the Queen’s Ballroom, a small affair, where only friends and relatives were allowed to attend. The room was illuminated by dozens of candles lit in front of beaten silver mirrors, making the ballroom glow with warmth and light. Banners of houses Stark and Clegane lined the wood-paneled walls and Northern music was interwoven with Southern style. Dishes of various taste and type were offered to the newlyweds, as well as different wines that Sansa politely turned down. The smell of alcohol made her nauseous and she declined an offering of pork, convinced the scent was something putrid and poisonous. Sandor laughed at her sensitive nose and jokingly lifted a pork leg to her face, but when she nearly vomited he stopped and apologized, not absent of a mischievous grin. Her attitude changed, however, when the Umbers wheeled in a massive lemon cake the size of which Sansa had never seen, and she was so thrilled that she hugged both of them. The dancing commenced after husband and wife had both taken a serving of their dessert. Sandor allowed Sansa
to feed him a bite of lemon cake, and she laughed when remnants of frosting fell into his beard, which she eagerly kissed away.

“Princess!” called a rather drunk King in the North, standing in the center of the ballroom with his hand outstretched. “I believe it is time for dancing.”

Sansa giggled. “Are you sure you can walk straight?”

“Please, I’ve only had a few cups of wine. The king demands a dance with his now-married sister.” Robb approached the dias, a big, goofy grin on his handsome face. “If your lord husband doesn’t mind.”

Sandor scoffed. “I don’t own her,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “She’s my wife, not my pet.”

“How chivalrous.” Sansa leaned over and pressed a kiss to her husband’s lips. Sandor didn’t enjoy parties and felt rather out of place attending them, so she decided not to put him on the spot and ask for a dance. Sansa lifted her skirts and descended the small steps, taking her brother’s hand, and Robb twirled her around before leading her into step.

“You’re glowing,” he told her fondly. “Do you think that’s the baby’s doing?”

“Mother says so.” Sansa shrugged. “Remember how much she glowed with Bran and Rickon?”

“Always,” he chuckled.

“But I’m not sure. It could be that I’m just…happy.”

“I’m glad of it. I’m happy too.” He beamed with delight. “What do you think, boy or girl?”

“How should I know?” Sansa laughed. She spun in accordance with the beat and returned to her brother’s side. “Mother thinks I’m having a girl.”

“Have you thought of any names?”

“Not yet.”

“Hmm.” Robb took her by the hands and twirled her around again. “I think you should name it Robb if it’s a boy, and Robbetta if it’s a girl.”

“Robbetta?!” Sansa burst into laughter, stopping her dance to clutch her side. Heads turned as the siblings struggled to catch their breath from the king’s ridiculous joke. “What kind of name is Robbetta?”

“A perfect one!” he defended. “Robbetta Clegane. A true name for a princess.”

“You’re terrible.” Sansa jabbed him in the chest with her finger. “Robbetta. That’s hideous, even for you.”

“Is my husband being a complete fool?” chimed Roslin from behind. Sansa watched her approach them, all grace and beauty.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” Sansa stated with a chuckle. “You should dance with him and convince him Robbetta isn’t a very good name for a princess.”

“Eugh. Or for anyone,” Roslin replied, linking arms with her king. “Come, love. Let the bride share her night with others who would congratulate her, hm? You have the rest of your lives to dance
“As my queen commands.” He kissed Sansa’s forehead and moved off with his wife, chatting amiably with some of the Umbers and King Stannis’s men.

Sandor was never a social person, but Sansa certainly was, and she spent a majority of her time talking with the party guests about various subjects of importance. Tyrion offered a hug and well-wishes. Dacey Mormont had taken an interest in Lady Brienne, which Sansa wholeheartedly encouraged. Margaery was ecstatic upon further examination of Sansa’s wedding gown and Arya and Gendry were locked in an engaging conversation about whether or not blacksmiths should learn how to dance. Even Princess Shireen and Ser Davos Seaworth, the new Hand of the King, spared Sansa’s reception a few moments of their presence to offer heartfelt congratulations. The little princess spent a majority of her time discussing something with Sandor up at the dias, and while Sansa wasn’t close enough to hear, she watched Shireen point to her disfigured face. It didn’t take long to figure what they were speaking of. Sandor put his hand on the girl’s shoulder and told her something intently, to which she smiled, hugged him, and moved on to the next person who offered conversation.

Sansa returned to her husband shortly after. She stood beside his chair with a loving expression and he looked up to her, returning the gesture.

“You were talking with the princess,” she said, curling his hair behind his ear.

“Aye,” he replied. “Smart girl.”

“What did you tell her?” Sansa asked curiously. She wanted to sit on his lap, but the wound on his thigh was still far too tender to support her weight, so she remained standing beside him.

Sandor cleared his throat. “The girl was afraid she’d never find anyone that loves her, ‘cause of her face. She said that I inspire her.” He swallowed something in his throat. “I told her not to worry, and if she ever finds someone that makes fun of her face, to send me a letter and I’ll fuck ‘em with my blade.”

“You didn’t,” Sansa gasped. “You told that to Stannis Baratheon’s daughter?”

“No.” Sandor laughed at her look of shock. “But it was something like that. ‘Don’t worry, don’t let people make fun of you,’ that sort of shit.” Sansa eyed him sidelong, suspicious. “Don’t believe me, little bird?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” She could tell that he yearned to be affectionate with her, but was far too self-conscious to do so publicly.

“When is this over?”

“Northern parties last all night. Why?”

“Because,” Sandor began, resting a hand on her hip. “I want to take my wife to our chambers and fuck her before the old gods and the new.”

Sansa’s face flushed. “Sandor,” she giggled, though she would be a liar to claim she wasn’t having similar thoughts. “You’re being degenerate.”

Hesitantly, he reached up and brushed his thumb along her cheek. “Can we leave?”

“I think we can sneak away,” Sansa replied, taking his hand and kissing it. “You can go ahead. Let
me say goodnight to my family.”

“I’ll wait for you.” He dropped his hand into his lap and let her go on her way. Sansa pulled her mother and brother aside, stating her intentions, and with the consent of her family and a final speech from the king, husband and wife were allowed to return to their chambers, locked tight on each other’s arm.

The room was lit with candles and smelled faintly of roses. Sandor closed the door behind Sansa after she entered, looking out of the open balcony towards a moonlit King’s Landing. The city had changed so much since her arrival. She was not saddened to know she would be leaving it soon.

Sandor poured himself a glass of wine. Sansa knew he would need time to unwind after the stress of being the center of attention, so she stood in the middle of the room and watched him, the way he moved, the way the candlelight illuminated his scars. Sansa had admitted to herself long ago that his face wasn’t half as hideous as it appeared. She had seen those eyes look upon her with love, watched his features slack and ease with peace and sweet dreams. Not a soul in the world could convince her that she looked upon a monster.

Sandor downed the wine in a single gulp, looking faintly upset. “I don’t know the first thing about being a lord,” he said hopelessly.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing you married a lady.”

He chuckled at that. “I didn’t. I married a princess.”

“Even better.” Sansa smiled up at him, and he smiled back, a sight she cherished so very dearly. Sandor crossed the distance between them, moving behind her where she couldn’t see. Sansa felt a few tugs on her hair as he pulled the pins from it, one by one. I knew he’d go for my hair first. He loves my hair. He placed her tiara on the table beside them.

“Tell me what to do then, princess,” he said in a lower tone. “As the Lord of the Dreadfort, or whatever title I am now.”

His fingers in her hair were a pleasant distraction. “You’ll help me run the castle,” she began. “You’ll sit by me in court.”

“Lords have court?” Sandor snapped. “You’re fucking with me.”

“No,” Sansa laughed. “We oversee thousands of people now. All of the Bolton’s lands and inhabitants have become ours. They’ll come to us with questions and concerns, and we’ll settle disputes for them. That sort of thing.”

“Shit,” Sandor cursed in disappointment, but he continued working at her hair all the same. “What else?”

“You’ll do executions if we need to. You’ll help with rebuilding the North, probably, since the Greyjoys had it ransacked.”
“Better than court,” he grumbled, but she could hear the smile in his words.

Sansa’s thoughts took her to darker places, however, as she had been so trained to do. She blinked and turned to him, eyes full of sincerity. “You’ll go to war when it happens,” Sansa muttered, “and fight by my brother’s side in every battle. But you’ll come back.” She placed a hand over his heart, looking down where she clutched his tunic. “You always have to come back.”

Sandor reached behind her and pulled the final pin from her long hair. Auburn curls tumbled down her back, and he lifted her chin to meet his gaze of melted steel.

“Tell you what, little bird. You don’t leave me in the birthing bed, and I won’t leave you in the battlefield.”

They were promising the unforeseeable, making bets on events that may not have the capacity to change. But for a moment, for a long time perhaps, these little white lies could offer them comfort in place of worry, and Sansa knew how precious security had become to both of them.

“I promise,” she said with a sigh.

“Good. So do I.” And he kissed her again, sweeter and more tender than the last.

Her mouth opened to invite his tongue, hot and sweet with wine and desire. He cupped her face and slipped his fingers into her loose curls, his free hand reaching around her back to pull her closer. Sansa wrapped her arms around his neck and stood on her toes so she could kiss him easier, deeper, absent of any barriers. She tasted the sugar on his tongue and it spurned her need for him. Sandor lifted her with ease and placed her atop the small table, meeting her mouth with heated passion as he worked at the back of her dress. Sansa gripped greedily at his fine tunic and pulled it up over his head, tossing it to the floor to feel the natural warmth emanating from his body. She ran her fingers over coarse hair and skin and thick muscle, sighing as he brushed his beard along her neck with kiss after kiss. Sansa pulled her arms from her gown when the fabric was loosened and held his shoulders close. He pushed her dress down to her waist, exposing the slip underneath.

“Sandor,” she sighed, gripping onto him as he found that spot just below her ear that made her weak. His tongue and his kiss were more intoxicating than wine could ever be, and she thought back to the night of the Blackwater, back to a time when they were vulnerable souls caught in the web of war. Now they were free, bonded by choice rather than obligation, and Sansa pondered how truly powerful that was.

He reached up to cup her breast in his hand. Sansa whimpered at the contact and he pulled away. “Did I hurt you?”

“Not intentionally. They just—ow.” Sansa placed a hand over her sore breast and frowned. “They really hurt.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s alright. Just—“

“—be tender.” The words came out in a growl she didn’t expect, but the sound was raw like metal on sandstone and she shuddered to hear it against her ear. She leaned her head back as he worked her aching breasts with the softness she needed, brushing his fingers over the tips with the slightest of touches and she felt the sensation pulse between her thighs. He knew how much her nipples affected her and spent time there, driving her wild with anticipation, leaving her breathless and biting her lip. His touch trailed southward after a time and she knew his intentions. After making sure there was
nothing behind her, Sansa laid back atop the table as Sandor’s hand pressed flat against her belly. He settled his shoulders between her legs.

Sandor removed her smallclothes and didn’t hesitate to taste the wetness she had made for him. Sansa moaned to the ceiling and ran her fingers through his hair, arching her back with every flick of his tongue on that sinfully sweet spot. Her toes tingled with the force of his movements and her breath came in short, sporadic patches of exhilaration that left her speechless. Sandor moaned against her flesh and the vibration surged through her bones, sending her spiraling upwards towards the bliss that awaited her. Sansa gripped onto his hair and couldn’t control the noises she was making, but she knew the effect they had on him and she chuckled as he greedily gripped her thighs, pulling her deeper into his mouth. She felt his fingers slip into her sex and she writhed under his touch, his free hand sliding up to rest flat on her stomach once more. He worked her with his tongue until she teetered right on the brink of oblivion.

“S—Sandor—“ she warned. “Sandor, stop, I—“

But he wasn’t stopping, refused to, and soon she was left without a choice. Sansa cried out to the ceiling as the power of ecstasy shot through every vein and bone and nerve in her being. Her muscles twitched and she gasped, unable to control her breathing until the high slowly fell and she landed on the earth again.

Her husband pulled away from her, sucking the taste from his fingers before kissing her as he had before, harsh and passionate. “You didn’t….mm, you didn’t stop,” she said with a little frown.

“You think you’re getting away with just one?”

Sansa laughed breathlessly into his open mouth. She hadn’t even pondered the possibility of reaching such pleasure twice in the same night, but she supposed it was possible. “Do you like it so much?” she inquired, pushing his hair from his face. “Doing that with your mouth?”

“Mhm,” he growled in reply. “My favorite, aside from fucking you altogether. So sweet.”

She couldn’t help but grin. Sandor took her hands after another kiss and helped her stand on weak legs, pushing her dress to the floor. “I’m sorry,” she whispered as he rested his hands on her hips over the slip of her gown. “I’d return the favor, but…”

“I know.” Sandor laughed, and she playfully slapped his chest.

“It wasn’t that funny.”

“It was pretty fucking funny.” The last time Sansa had tried to pleasure Sandor with her mouth, she had to stop and wretch in the nearest chamber pot beside his bed. Apparently a strong gag reflex is a common symptom of pregnancy—a fact she had never been warned of. Sandor had laughed so hard that she feared he would re-break his ribs.

“When that stupid thing passes, you had better believe that I’ll return every single favor.” Her voice was sultry and laced with determination, but Sandor was still chuckling at the memory of her sickness to take her seriously. He unlaced his breeches and pulled her slip over her head, exposing her naked body to him and only him. He ran his hands from the curve of her hips to either side of her neck.

“Only if you want to,” he told her lovingly.

“I will.” Sansa slipped her hands down the front of his breeches and gripped the length of him. Sandor’s little gasp set her world on fire and he chuckled against her lips, pressing hungry kisses to
her as the heat of their passion was rekindled. He was hot and heavy in her hand, and she stroked him the way she’d learned as he lay wounded, the way he liked it most. He took a moment to indulge in her touch and cursed under his breath, but he seemed intent on making her the focus of their wedding night, with which she would not argue. Sandor guided her back to the bed where he fell on top of her, a tangle of limbs and skin on skin. He spread her legs apart and Sansa gripped onto his shoulders, silently begging that he give her all of him. He sat back on his knees and took her by the waist, hoisting her up so she straddled him, and for once Sansa was able to look down on him in the midst of their ardor. She met his eyes with longing, teasing his lips with something halfway between a kiss and bite. When he guided himself inside her, Sansa moaned into his open mouth.

“Sansa,” he groaned, arms wrapped tight around her back. Sansa kept her hands on his shoulders as she rocked her hips to his, moving around him, taking him as deep as she could until her depths were ignited by the friction and the pressure of him. She hummed into his ear and ground against him in a rhythm made for two, desperate for more, desperate for all of him. Sandor greedily kissed and bit and sucked at her sweet-smelling neck and chest. When he lifted his head, Sansa pressed their foreheads together and smiled, hoping her boundless love could communicate through her eyes. It seemed to. Sandor bit her lower lip and kissed her hard, and her back hit the bed in a gentle thud.

Sandor pushed deep into her with a long groan, one that she reflected in her own voice. He hooked his arms under her knees and spread her legs wider and higher apart, hovering possessively over her and moving deeper, further, harder. “Fuck,” he cursed. “Fuck, Sansa, I love you. I love you.”

Sansa giggled breathlessly. “I love you t—oh!” He shoved into her so deeply that she couldn’t help but cry out, her entire body alive with pressure and heat and love and Sandor. He knew she craved it when he was inside her entirely, relentlessly, and he began to move at a speed that sent her climbing desperately towards a second release.


Sansa bit her lip, barely able to stand any more, his voice in her ear commanding her to reach the peak and melt into his arms. She gasped with every breath and clung to him as each vigorous thrust sent her higher and higher. Sandor thrust into her so hard that the headboard began to slam against the wall, and she would have laughed if heaven wasn’t just within her reach. She cupped his cheeks and held his gaze, erotic and focused and all for her. Sansa kissed him and begged for him before she reached the top of the peak and then—

“Ah!” she cried when the floodgates fell and her body was marked with his name. Her blood wept with joy as it pumped through her heart and her skin tingled everywhere, from her head to the tips of her toes and beyond. Her muscles clenched and released around him as he continued to move, furthering the extent of her pleasure beyond what she imagined possible, and her nails dug into his shoulder, claiming him as hers before the rise ever began to drift down. Sandor sped inside her and gripped her by the chin, forcing her to look at him, but Sansa already knew what to do. She slipped her fingers in his hair and kept her ankles crossed tight behind shoulders, eyes intent on making sure he knew she was real. Her heart synchronized with his breathing. He fucked her as he promised he would and she continued to moan, for the pleasure never seemed to stop with him, but it didn’t last much longer. Sansa’s name fell off his lips as he groaned in his release, kissing her lazily through the ride until his pace began to slow and their breath mingled together in the space between them. Sansa could never tire of kissing him. She cupped his face and stroked his cheeks with her thumbs, both scarred and unburned, and he returned her love by kissing her nose, then her forehead, and scooping her into his arms as he lay on his back to rest.

“Fuck,” he sighed, a blissful smile on his face. “Just…fuck.”
Sansa giggled. She rested her head on his chest and traced unknown shapes over his heart, humming in happiness, exhausted but too in love to fall asleep. Sandor pulled her tighter into his arms and she buried in them. He knew how important his embrace was to her, to know she was with him. “How do you feel?” he asked after moments of peaceful silence.


He kissed the top of her head and threaded his fingers through her hair absent-mindedly. “I want you to feel that way, little bird. You need that.”

“And so do you.”

Sandor chuckled. “Gonna protect me with your sweet words and your pretty songs?”

“Always.”

Sansa lifted her head and they chuckled together, before she kissed him in the slowest and sweetest of ways. He curled her hair behind her ear and rested a hand on her lower belly. “You’re starting to get bigger.”

“You think so?”

“Mm. Just a bit.” Sandor laid her on her back and propped up on his elbow, so he could better glide his fingers along her abdomen.

“No one has noticed except for me. And that tickles,” Sansa said, laughing as she pushed his hand away.

“No one knows your body like I do.”

*And no one will.* Sandor slipped his hand into her hair and she nuzzled his face with affection. He kissed her sweetly and passionately, and Sandor and Sansa fell in love again as husband and wife.

Chapter End Notes

**SURPRISE FRIDAY POST.** I'm not worried about regularly updating at this point, it's basically over.

**OKAY SO can we talk about how MUCH this is?** Dang. Like I actually wrote a thing. This is pretty cool.

This could be an ending, yeah, but NO I still have more to make up for. I made you guys think that Sandor and Robb were dead men, so I think I owe you one more chapter of goodness. Just go with it.

My inner writer was like "the smut is gratuitous and unnecessary leave it out," but shortly after I thought "fuck it, it's fanfiction."

**I LOVE THIS CHAPTER.** I just. I'm so happy. HAPPY ENDINGS.

The final chapter will be posted when it's done, by Tuesday at the latest. Like I said, I'm not worried about updating on time anymore since the plot has been completed. Now all I have to do is give you a puppy. Consider this chapter the juice. PUPPY TIME.

See you soon~!
Gods, how he loved her. More than life, more than anything. So many months ago, Sandor Clegane was a man on a downward spiral, headed to damnation through the bottom of a wine glass. But he was no longer that man, as Sansa was keen on reminding him whenever he coaxed himself into believing he didn’t deserve her. He had promised to give Sansa the world, even though he himself was less than perfect. Sansa loved him when he was unlovable, saved him when he was damned, and cherished him enough to take his name and build a family that started in the pits of the Red Keep with an order from a dead king. He’d found beauty in ugliness, just as Sansa had seen it in him. He would not fail her again.

Mornings were his favorite. Sandor woke long before his bride, stroking her hair and rubbing her arms to make her feel safe. Sansa was still plagued by the occasional nightmare and he did what he could to soothe her. He kissed the back of her head and breathed in the scent of her flowery soap, pulling her body closer against him. Her bare back met his chest and she chuckled lazily, moving in his arms like a kitten finding home.

“Mmm,” she groaned, still half-asleep.

“Good morning, little bird.” He brushed his bearded chin against her neck and she giggled, squirming in his grasp. He wanted to shower her in the affection he felt so greatly at times like this, in the morning where it was just the two of them, but she was fragile in her current condition. They had been warned of the consequences of sex. Instead, he pulled her deeper into his strong embrace. “You’re not getting out of bed. I’m not done with you.”

Sansa laughed. She gently rolled on her side to face him, careful not to move too quickly. She made enough space between them for her massive belly, swollen with a child mere days from arrival.
Sandor placed a hand atop her womb where the infant moved. “Always eager when the sun comes up,” he said with a grin. “Gets it from me.”

“Not from me,” Sansa chuckled. “Neither of you let me sleep.”

“Kick me out of bed, then.”

“Never.”

Sandor kissed her with tender longing, easy and undemanding while his touch continued to rest on their child. Sansa hummed against his lips and he smiled to taste her, sweet and saccharine and all for him. He smoothed her hair from her face and kissed her thrice more before regretfully pulling away, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “Fuck the sun.”

“Nooo. I like it.” She rolled on her opposite side, her back facing him. “You get ready. I want to lie down a bit longer.”

“Okay.” Sandor pushed himself up from the comforts of their bed to fumble through his drawers for something to wear. He took a few moments to dress—not in the armor and weapons of the old days, but the tunic and breeches of the new, dark green in color and fine in make. He sniffled and chugged a goblet of lukewarm water. The sun was beginning to rise high over the Dreadfort and make the castle glitter. When Sandor looked back to Sansa, she eyed him lovingly and reached out to him without a word, hair glowing in the light of dawn. Gods, she's beautiful. “Come here,” she said. “Help me up.”

“So bloody lazy,” he replied with a grin. “Hold on, little bird.”

Sandor moved to the other side of their marriage bed, where Sansa lay with her hands outstretched. He pulled her gently upright and helped her on her feet, making sure she took movement as slow and steady as possible. “Better today?”

“No.” She answered, hands resting on his shoulders. “But it’ll be over soon. I just want to feel normal again, less huge.”

“Mm.” He ran his fingers through her hair and she sighed happily. “It would be easier if you rested more.”

“I know.” Sansa had denied bedrest ever since her family arrived at the Dreadfort two days past. They wanted to give Sansa support with the birth of her first child, but if Sandor had known she’d be so active with them around, he never would have sent the raven to summon them. Still, Sandor could not deny her anything. She was his eternal weakness. He would bring down the Wall for her if she only batted an eye, so keeping her family nearby wasn’t a matter of yes or no, but how long.

“Ooo, this one,” Sansa said as she pointed to the gown she wanted to wear for the day. It was a lavender shade with fur-lined sleeves, more than comfortable enough for her pregnant state. Sandor helped her dress and watched her braid her hair, wondering if he could ever muster the courage to ask her to teach him how. He gently crouched behind her to massage her lower back as she worked. “Remind me to finish this letter to Tyrion today,” she called over her shoulder.

“Fine.” Sandor gently kneaded her muscles with his thumbs. “Where is that little shit now?”

“Pentos. They’ll be there another week before—oo, that feels good—they return to Casterly Rock.”

“Do they ever stay in one place?”
“Not really. Shae loves traveling but they’re home enough to manage affairs in the west, and Varys helps, so it works for them.” Sansa finished her braid and braced her hands on the vanity. “I’m done, but don’t stop yet. Ohh, that feels wonderful…”

Sandor chuckled. “Tell me when, little bird.” She did after a time. When Sansa was comfortable enough to face the day ahead, Sandor offered his arm, helping her from their chambers and out into the kitchens.

The Dreadfort looked far more cheerful than it did when they first arrived. Bones and tattered flags and torture chambers once filled the home of an extinct House Bolton, but those were older days, dead ones. The halls of House Clegane were littered with flowers and banners of gold and black, with smiles and happier faces and peace. Sansa was the source of most of their joy. She managed a first-name basis with the servants in the castle and always lent an ear to those who needed one. The people of the North had very quickly adjusted to the change of rule in their part of the kingdom, and Sandor was grateful for it, grateful for his diplomatic and charismatic wife. He may have the title of the Dreadfort’s lord and benefactor, but it was Sansa who ruled here, and everyone respected her more for it.

“Good morning!” Sansa called happily to her family, moving from her husband’s side. Sandor watched her greet each Stark with a kiss and hug, from feisty Arya and her blacksmith betrothed, to the King in the North and his bubbly queen, to their mother, who glowed almost as brightly as Sansa did herself. Only Jon Snow was missing as he had things to attend to at the Wall, but he sent his love all the same. Sansa sat at the top of the dias and gestured for Sandor to join her, and together the family ate and talked and laughed about whatever there was to speak of in their peaceful lives.

Family was once a source of horror for Sandor, but the Starks had shown him truth.

The day, like so many others, passed by in a happy blur. Most of their time was spent waiting for Sansa to go into labor, and they spent hours in leisure and close company. Lady Catelyn told Sandor stories of Ned’s triumphs and failures in fatherhood. Roslin was very eager to show him how to make a braid in a woman’s hair, and Arya went on for far too long about how Sandor was a much better teacher for swordplay than Lady Brienne, who insisted on wit and patience rather than brute strength. Sandor couldn’t help but smile at that. Arya had earned a soft spot in his heart, where such things were rarer than Targaryen dragons, but he would never admit that openly.

As the sun set, Sandor, Catelyn, Roslin and Gendry sat near the entrance to the keep and watched the Stark siblings lay in the courtyard, viewing the stars overhead. He heard them laughing loudly to some unknown joke or memory. Sansa, Robb and Arya shared something Sandor had never experienced for himself up until quite recently—familial love. He wondered if his child could have something so precious.

“I want that for them.”

“Should she be lying on her back like that?” Sandor asked Catelyn, leaning closer so she might hear him better.

“She’s alright for a time,” replied his mother-in-law. “It’s been years since I’ve seen them do this. It nearly brings a tear to my eye to watch.”

“Robb always talked about how much he missed stargazing with his brothers and sisters.” Queen Roslin sighed happily. “He and Arya watch the stars every night back at Winterfell, but it’s different when he’s with Sansa. He’s so much happier.”

“Blood runs thicker than water in the North,” Catelyn said with a chuckle, “and they have a Tully mother. Family means everything to them.”
“Highborns,” Gendry mused. “I wonder if they all have time to be ‘appy like this. ‘Family this, family that.’ Doesn’t bother me, but it’s strange.”

“Aye,” said Sandor. “Us bastards don’t know shit about things like this.”

“Hush, now.” Catelyn put her hands on the shoulders of Gendry and Sandor, and her tone was strict and maternal. “Neither of you are bastards. House Clegane rules the Dreadfort, and House Baratheon will marry a princess. Both of you have been taken care of, and both of you are family to me.”

Sandor refused to let the smile in his heart show, but he gave appreciation all the same. Even Jon Snow had earned Lady Catelyn’s love, so he supposed he should praise her for her newfound open mind. “Thanks, Cat.”

“Of course.” The mother cast her eyes out to the cheerful siblings in the distance. “It seems that all four of us found happily ever after with House Stark, didn’t we? We outsiders?”

“That’s a sweet way to think of it,” Roslin replied, grinning from ear to ear. “It’s amazing how much they have gone through, only to survive and find peace.”

“I don’t care about my peace,” Sandor said. He didn’t remove Catelyn’s arm from his shoulder. “As long as Sansa’s alive and well, I could be dead and still happy.”

“That’s why Arya an’ King Robb like you so much.” Gendry smiled in understanding. “All they want is Sansa kept safe. Very few people in the world’ve suffered more than ‘er.”

“I know.” More than most. Sandor scratched his beard, thinking on that a moment before he pushed himself to his feet. “And everyone’ll suffer if she doesn’t get some rest. I’m taking her to bed.”

"Goodnight,” said Lady Catelyn, smiling in that loving way of hers that made it impossible for him not to smile back. He waved to Gendry and the queen before walking over to the happy siblings, footfalls heavy on the autumn grass. Sandor placed his feet on either side of Sansa’s hips and bent over her. She arched her brows and looked up at him, amused.

“How do you plan on getting up, little bird?”

She giggled. “I suppose my husband will have to help me.” Sansa yawned and placed her hand over her open mouth, humming in exhaustion. “I’m tired.”

Sandor sighed, shaking his head and crouching down. “Come on. Let’s get you into bed.”

“But we were just deciding which stars look like you!” Arya complained deviously, pointing to the sky. “It’s that group right there. The one that’s shaped like a dead dog.”

“Arya!” Robb exclaimed, but Sandor only laughed.

“Eat shit, girl.” He ruffled her hair and shoved her playfully back onto the blanket they’d spread beneath them, and hooked an arm around Sansa’s back. He carefully helped her to her feet. “‘Night, Your Grace.”

“G’night you two.” Robb waved, propping an arm behind his head. “Have that baby soon, would you?”

“Working on it,” Sansa replied with a chuckle.
Sandor helped her back into the castle to change and crawl in bed. He scooped her into his arms, raining kisses on her lips before they nestled together and fell in a tranquil asleep.

The moon hung high over the Dreadfort. Sandor had fallen into a dreamless sleep as he had so many times before, until Sansa’s stirring woke him.

“Mmm,” Sansa moaned, furrowing her brow as she snuggled up closer to his chest. It wasn’t the blissful cuddle of a woman in love, but the cowering of one in fear.

_A nightmare_, he thought. “Shh,” Sandor whispered, kissing the crown of her head. “Enough of that.”

“No, no.” She inhaled sharply and clutched to his chest, breathing hard.

Sandor propped up on his elbow, smoothing her hair from her face. “Sansa, stop. Wake up. It’s alright, you’re alright.”

“I’m not asleep,” she cried out. “Sandor, I—oh, _gods_…” Sansa clutched her belly and whimpered into his neck.

_Shit._ His heart began to pound and adrenaline flushed through him. Sandor placed a hand on her stomach protectively, and it occurred to him that he hadn’t the slightest idea of what to do. Sandor searched in the darkness for a candle and struck it to life. When he looked upon her in the dull light, he watched her face contort in the agonies of labor. “Fuck,” he cursed. “Sansa, tell me what to do. I-I don’t know what to do, I don’t.”

“My mother,” she mumbled. “Please Sandor, wake her, bring her to me.”

“I will. I will.” He kissed her forehead before pulling away, rushing from the room as quickly as he could.

Sandor had never run so fast. When he found Catelyn’s door, he knocked in great haste, not caring who else was awoken in the process. “Cat!” he shouted. “Cat, it’s Sansa, she’s—she—”

The door flew open before he could find the words. Sansa’s mother stood in the doorway with wide eyes, dark auburn curls tumbling over the shoulders of her night robe. “Now?”

“Okay. Don’t panic.” She closed the bedroom door behind her and put her hands on Sandor’s arms to comfort him. “Wake Robb and Roslin. I’ll go to Sansa and fetch the maester.”

“Alright.” Sandor moved from Lady Catelyn’s front door and watched her leave, a thousand possibilities buzzing around in his head and none of them consoled him. He deserted the hallway and turned the corner into another, quickly finding the guest chambers of the king. “Your Grace,” Sandor called through the wood. “Open up, it’s important.”

Roslin opened the door, all wild hair and giggles. “Is it Sansa? Nevermind, I can see it in your eyes. _Yes!_ Robb, get up!” She twirled around and shook her husband awake, regardless of how much he protested. “Love, Sansa’s in labor. She’s going to have her baby.”
“What?”

“Your niece or nephew, Robb. Sansa’s heir.”

“Her—oh. Olluh.” The king rolled out of bed and pulled a robe from his dresser. “Sorry, yeah. Coming.” He rubbed his face and Sandor recognized that same expression in his Tully eyes that he saw often in Sansa’s, that don’t-talk-to-me-until-I’m-awake look that always made him laugh. Sandor was far too worried about his wife to make jokes, however, so he rounded up the king and queen and led them back to his chambers.

Arya and Gendry were pacing nervously when he returned. Sansa was curled up on the bed with her head in Catelyn’s lap. Her mother stroked her hair and shushed her, while Sansa continued to groan and whimper from the pain no doubt ripping apart her insides. Sandor was horrified to see her so weak. When she saw him, Sansa reached out and he rushed to her side, crouching before her and holding her hands. “Sandor,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

He gave a stiff nod. She curled his hair behind his good ear and smiled to him. “Don’t worry. I’ll be alright. I promised you, didn’t I?”

False promises, Sandor thought. You can’t guarantee anything. But he didn’t want to say that and crush her spirit, so he simply nodded a second time, kissing her knuckles.

She sniffled and slowly sat upright. “Come here.” ‘Hold me,’ she means. Sandor took her gently in his arms and let her curl up in his embrace, clutching onto his tunic and crying out when the contractions became unbearable. He wrapped his strong arms around her for protection, only because it felt right and Sansa didn’t protest. Robb and Arya tried to calm her by reminiscing humorous stories of their childhood. Roslin offered water and a back rub while Catelyn held her hand. Sansa was surrounded with the love she needed. Maybe I made a good choice by bringing them here, Sandor thought, even if she didn’t rest as much. Sansa was calmer and more prepared with her family’s encouragement than anything he could have provided on his own.

Minutes turned to hours. The sun came and went in the longest day of Sandor’s life, and perhaps the hardest as well. Sansa suffered immense pain that only seemed to worsen, and there was nothing he could do, no avenue he could take to bring her relief. She couldn’t eat from nausea, couldn’t sleep though she had barely slept at all. Whenever waves of misery came over her, Sandor could only hold her close and wait helplessly for it to pass as she cried into his neck or a nearby pillow. When the maester declared Sansa ready for delivery after sunset, Catelyn pulled her hair up in a messy bun and turned to her son, the blacksmith and the father-to-be. “You three need to leave,” she told them. “This is not something you will want to watch.”

Robb nodded in agreement. Sandor was far more hesitant. Sansa had begun to cry out to the ceiling, but the king and Gendry guided Sandor from the room on weak legs that obeyed for gods knew what reason. The door closed behind them and brother and father sat in two chairs outside the chambers, mortified. Gendry paced anxiously.

“My mother died in childbirth,” Sandor blurted, regardless of whether or not the time was right. Sansa’s wailing furthered his fears. “She died having my sister.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you had a sister.” Robb looked at him with a frown.

“No one does. She died too.” Sandor fumbled nervously with his hands. “If Sansa goes the way my mother did, I won’t make it. I’ve got nothing without her.”

Robb’s eyes softened. “Sansa’s my heir, my sister, and you and I love her equally in different ways. I
may not know how you feel just yet, being a father, but I know enough, and I know Sansa will fight with all she has to stay here with you.” The king placed his hand on Sandor’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Sandor. She’ll make it.”

The comfort from a brother was strange. Foreign. It took a moment for Sandor to accept it. “You’d better be right.”

Sansa’s screams echoed on cue. Sandor felt his spirit crumble under the weight of her cries, of the uncontrollable agony coming through in her voice. He heard the maester, Roslin, Arya and Catelyn offer words of support and comfort, but none of them seemed to work. Sandor was left feeling useless and heartbroken.

“Fuck this,” he spat. “I’m not waiting out here.”

“Sandor, wait—!” Gendry called, but his warning came far too late. Sandor shoved open the door and slammed it behind him, darting to Sansa’s bedside. He took her hand and his heart swelled and shattered all at once when she smiled at him lovingly. “I’m making damn sure you keep your promise,” he told her.

Sansa nodded tearfully, her face red and strained.

She suffered as the delivery progressed. Catelyn continuously smoothed her hair from her face and Roslin and Arya moved wherever the maester did, offering assistance when and where it was needed. Sandor showered his wife in words of affection and encouragement, though what they were, he did not know. He didn’t recognize his own voice. Sandor’s focus was solely on Sansa, and Sansa alone.

The moon had risen high with midnight before she was told to push. Sandor rubbed her arm and kept her hand clutched in his, trying to shove aside the horror of her screams to remain strong for her. 

\[I \text{ hurt her when we made this child,} \]

he thought hopelessly,

\[\text{and now it’s hurting her again. If she dies here, I’ll never forgive myself. I’d be a monster after all.}\]

As if she read his thoughts, Sansa stopped mid-push to look at him, panting and disheveled. “I’m okay,” she told him weakly. “I love you so much. I’m okay, I promise…”

“Damn you, Sansa. Don’t worry about me. Focus.” He kissed the back of her hand, knowing she could read the \[I \text{ love you too}\] hidden in his harsh words. “Get the bastard out and give yourself a break.”

Sansa only nodded, though he watched her smile as best she could. The grin was quickly wiped away as she pushed again, her grunts and cries mixed with the determination to bring new life into the world. Sandor didn’t know how much time had passed before the maester declared they were close to being finished. Hours trudged by in a blur of pain and bittersweet anxiety. The queen gasped and Sandor snapped his head to attention, watching her face for any sign of mistake or disaster and his heart skipped a beat with the thought of thousands of horrible outcomes.

All fear was drowned out when he heard the screeches of their newborn.

Sansa burst into happy, exhausted tears. She lay back against the pillows and wept, her hands trembling as she placed her wrists over her eyes. “Oh, gods,” she panted. “I can’t…I can’t believe…”

“You did wonderfully,” Catelyn praised with a tearful smile. “Oh, Sansa. You are so very strong, my precious girl, I’m so proud of you.”
Sandor couldn’t move, think or breathe outside of his racing mind. He watched this creature of beauty, his wife, hug her weeping mother in a shared experience only two women could understand. He heard the continued cries of his child but couldn’t make himself move, frozen in place by the overwhelming emotions that stampeded through every thought. *How in the seven hells did I ever deserve this?*

“Congratulations, my lord and princess,” said the maester with a little bundle in his arms. “You have a baby girl.”


“Oh,” Sansa moaned, reaching out for her child. The maester lowered the squealing babe into her open arms and she gasped, looking down upon their little girl, and he saw her fall in love time and time again with each tiny move the infant made. “Hello, Elinor,” Sansa sobbed through her joyful smile. “Oh Sandor, she’s beautiful. She’s just beautiful…”

Sandor wrapped a hesitant arm around her shoulders and sat on the bed beside her, looking at the baby that began mewling softly. She had tufts of black hair jutting out in every direction and her small nose flared as she breathed. *Who the fuck am I, to be so close to this precious thing.* Sandor still failed to realize that he’d created this life, he and Sansa. They had been forced into the worst of situations, and by the grace of some gods, formed a miracle despite the horror.

“You can touch her,” Sansa said wearily, and he met her eyes with a look of apprehension. She rested her forehead against his cheek after kissing him. “She won’t bite, I promise.”

“Not her I’m worried about,” he replied, reaching out a finger hesitantly. “She—Sansa…”

“You won’t hurt her.”

*I bloody hope not.* Sandor reached forward and touched her soft cheek with his fingertip, transfixed by the vision of this life he’d helped to make. His daughter wrapped her tiny fingers around his massive one and made a noise similar to a coo, a soft sound that crushed his heart with the sweet ache of fatherhood. Sandor knew he could never deserve the love Elinor may have for him, but he wanted her to love him as he so quickly loved her, suddenly and spontaneously like a thunder bolt crashing to the earth. Catelyn wanted to hold her, but Sandor possessively refused. “Me,” he said. “I want her. Give her here.”

Sansa offered the small naked bundle to her husband and he took Elinor with the greatest care. She was so small that she could fit in his hands, and he looked at her as he had never looked at anything in his life, not wine, not death, not even Sansa. And Sandor understood then what so many fathers never could—*this little girl is everything to me.*

“Are you crying?” Sansa asked weakly.

“No,” he replied.

Sansa reached forward to wipe his cheek and he saw wetness on her fingers. “Liar.”

“Fuck it. Guess I am.” He kissed the sleeping infant’s head and cradled her in one big arm, his other still wrapped around his wife. Sandor pressed his lips to Sansa’s crown and yearned to smother her in affection, to kiss her all over her face and cuddle her and their newborn close. He remembered then that *he* was the Lord of the Dreadfort, and he had control over who was in his room and who wasn’t. “Everyone can hold her for a few minutes,” he ordered, “and then piss off. I want time alone with my wife and girl.”

The newborn traveled around the room, and Sansa and Sandor were relatively ignored. Catelyn wept with joy. Roslin cried too, and even the king shed a tear before saying she looked more like a Robbetta than an Elinor. Arya spared Sandor a rare compliment and Gendry looked at the child with wonder, all questions and no answers, all desire where he was still far too young for fatherhood. By the time Elinor was given back to Sansa, Sandor noticed that both mother and child were yearning for sleep, and he told everyone to come back after they’d all had some rest. The maester said he would return after some time to ensure that Sansa was in good health, and the onlookers left the new family in peace.

Sandor was grateful when they were left alone. He sat comfortably in the middle of their bed, his back against the headboard, and Sansa lay back against him with little Elinor snoozing softly on her chest. Sandor ran his fingers through his wife’s hair and whispered words of praise. “You’re stronger than I ever was or will be,” he told her in earnest. “You’re incredible, Sansa, and I love you.” For the first time in his life, Sandor felt hope.

“See?” Sansa muttered, half-asleep. “I told you…I told you I wouldn’t leave.”

He kissed the top of her head and wrapped his arms around his wife and daughter. “Go to sleep, little bird. I’ll be here.”

“Mhm.” Sansa’s head lolled to the side as she fell into a peaceful slumber. Sandor listened to the soft breathing of his family, his redemption from a dead life, and watched the light of a Northern sunrise bleed through the open tapestries.

And his mother’s words came flooding back to him.

_Come morning light, everything will be as it should._

Chapter End Notes

AND WE'RE DONE~! HOLY CRAP. WHAT A FIC I JUST WROTE. I CAN'T EVEN BELIEVE IT. I am so incredibly proud of this accomplishment. This fic was filled with so many first-time writing experiences, so many triumphs, so many good things. I'm so happy to finally be done! AHH. I AM SO HAPPY.

I'd like to give a special thank you to my wonderful sister, who beta'd this entire fic despite both of us being full-time college students with stressful lives. WE DID IT, VAL. Go follow her on tumblr, she's incredible!

And again, I have to thank all of you, my wonderful readers, for helping me through this. WE DID IT. I'm so happy to start working on the next fic~!

WOW. What a fic. Please, I encourage you to leave me a review in the comments below. This is a huge accomplishment for me and I'd love to know what you think, be it good or bad. What were your favorite parts? Favorite lines? The more I hear from you, the stronger of a writer I become, and I reply to 99.999% of comments. You could also leave a kudos if you enjoyed this <3 or message me on tumblr @kitharington, I'll get back to you ASAP!

Thanks again! I couldn't have done this without you. xoxo

EDIT: Have some gifsets! #1 #2 #3
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!