Kept

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Kept
by tini243

Summary

Joffrey is still alive after his wedding to Margery Tyrell and Sansa is still his prisoner. But when his most loyal guard asks for a favour, he feels honour bound to grant it.

Notes

Finally decided this one was ready to have a first chapter posted (thanks Sassy for the encouragement!).

This story will be a bit darker than the one I wrote before, especially Sandor isn't quite the little ray of sunshine he was in "Heart of the Night". It will also be not nearly as close to canon as the other one was, I am taking quite a few liberties with established canon here. Sansa is about four years older than in the books.

I will put warnings at the start of every chapter if something specific comes up; generally speaking there will be mention of past physical abuse and sexual encounters with dubious consent. If any of this isn't what you expect of a SanSan story, I'd rather you'd not read this one.

For everyone else: please enjoy and let me know what you think.
Chapter 1: Suffocating

At the best of times, guard duty to his grace - the biggest asshole in the whole of Westeros - was an unbelievably mind-numbing job. Being a man of action, standing in front of a closed door for hours on end, wearing full plate armour and being expected to look vigilant and alert while being bored out of his mind was its own form of torture for Sandor.

Still, those were the best of times. Worse were those when he had to drag in the boy king's victims like the good dog he was and stand there to witness them being tormented; with words sometimes, with bodily harm more often. He wouldn't be able to say how many tongues he had seen ripped out, how many beatings, cut-off and broken limbs and floggings.

There had been some hope that with Stannis beaten from the gates of King's Landing at the Blackwater, with the Starks all but obliterated and His Grace married to his new ally's daughter, Joff's need for cruelty would abate, but that might just have been foolish.

The worst times, however, were those when he had to get her. Every time the little fucker was especially riled up about something or other, it was for her he sent. For his personal whipping girl. For Sansa.

The king still took some care she was not permanently damaged or too visibly injured, still had not ordered anyone to defile her, and so far Sandor could always manage to stop things before anyone took his cock out of his breeches for other depravities, but that might only be a matter of time.

Mostly only Trant and Blount were ordered to beat her and with Tywin dead, the Kingslayer off gallivanting around in the Riverlands and the Imp gone gods knew where, there was no one to gainsay him.

Fortunately, so far, every time Sandor called a halt to the proceedings, Joffrey listened to him, for whatever reason. Sandor figured it was because the king still felt beholden to him for saving his worthless life during the Blackwater battle.

Today, he had to stand guard outside the chamber in which the small council was convening. Since his grandfather's death, Joff sometimes showed up there to make unreasonable demands and usually stormed out again once he was bored.

Predictably, only about a half hour after the meeting had started, the door flew open, but instead of seeing the king scowling and complaining as he usually did, Sandor was surprised to see him grin like the mad child he was. And a grin on Joffrey's face never boded well.

"Bring her to my private quarters, dog," he commanded, rubbing his hands with glee. "The Stark bitch."

Sandor nodded curtly and turned to drag his feet towards her room when Joffrey called after him.

"Tell her maids to pack the things she brought with her, nothing of which my family gave her, and have her wear a servant's clothes."

Again, Sandor nodded, a heavy feeling settling in his gut.
This didn't bode well at all.

…

He knocked on her door and when she opened, she looked at him with wide-eyed terror, as usual. By now he knew it wasn't fear of him that prompted this reaction, but the fact that he only came to her when he had to fetch her for the king.

How she must hate to see him, knowing what awaited her there.

As was her wont for some time now, she quickly schooled her features back to passiveness.

"His Grace sends for me?" she asked and he found himself admiring her bravery. Her voice had been almost steady.

"Yes," he said. "Ask a maid for her dress, you're to appear dressed in servant's clothes. And you have to do something about your hair."

She wore her hair dressed as always in an elaborate coiffure, but he had a feeling that today Joff wouldn't want to see her prettied up like this.

Knowing that it wouldn't do to make the king wait, Sandor started to unlace the back of her dress while hollering for a maid.

The frightened little thing scurried into the room a few moments later.

"Bring a servant' dress for Lady Sansa," he barked at her. "And pack her things, only those she brought from Winterfell, nothing of what was gifted to her here."

A startled gaze met his from the mirror they were standing in front of, a fearful question in her eyes.

"I've no idea what he intends, girl," he said quietly while pulling pins and ornaments from her hair. "I'd tell you if I had."

When his fingers unintentionally brushed her neck, she shivered a little and he took greater care not to come into direct contact with her skin. She had her features under control once more but was strung taut as a bowstring and he could sympathize. He wouldn't add to her agitation by making it seem as if he was touching her on purpose.

It was an impression he always took great care to avoid.

He never took part in her torment, but he was the one who brought her back afterwards. Often enough she had to lean on him, being too weak to walk on her own, and a time or two he had had to carry her.

His touch, to her, had to be inextricably linked with pain.

"Help me out of the dress, the maid is taking too long," she suddenly said. "I have a grey dress in the wardrobe that will serve."

He did as being asked, propriety between them being barely more than a word by now. He'd seen her in various states of undress already and none of those situations - like this one - had been remotely stirring or arousing.

The laces at the back he'd already opened and Sansa fumbled with her girdle and between them they managed in no time to get her down to her shift and into the drab grey dress she had mentioned.
The maid had meanwhile returned and busied herself with packing Sansa's belongings, while he eyed her critically.

The problem was, Lady Sansa Stark wouldn't look like a servant if her life depended on it and today he had an inkling it quite possibly might.

"You can't have your hair that way either," he grumbled. The shining auburn waves that - now free of their confines - reached down over her waist were a luxury no servant could afford.

"Turn," he ordered and ran his hand through the silky locks before quickly and haphazardly braiding them into a single thick rope down her back.

While she tied some ribbon around the end of the braid, he skimmed one hand over the ashes in the hearth and rubbed the soot between his hands. Understanding his intentions, Sansa held her face up to him and when he was done rubbing his hand over her face, she looked dirty and bedraggled enough to maybe pass for a servant if one didn't look too closely.

... Joffrey laughed heartily when he saw them entering his private chambers.

"Ah, the proud Lady Sansa," he said in an oily tone, "looking like a kitchen wench."

Sansa - sensibly - said nothing.

"I have good news for you," Joffrey continued, all the while circling her like a hungry predator while she visibly gave her best to hold herself perfectly still. "Or bad ones, as it might turn out."

"What news does his grace have for me?" She asked quietly and Sandor once again had to admire the spine it took to ask that question without a waver in her voice. He'd seen grown men being shaking messes at this point.

"Your sister Arya, the one who had evaded us so sneakily, has - as you might know - married Ramsay Bolton, the son of a man whom we are indebted to for your brother's death."

Sansa nodded. "I knew that, your grace."

"Today we received a raven with the message that Lady Arya has been delivered of a healthy babe... a son. The long awaited, true-blooded heir to Winterfell."

A flicker of dread went through his stomach at those words. He knew what that meant.

"Congratulations, you're an aunt!" Joff enthused with cloyingly sweet cheerfulness.

"Thank you, your grace."

She knew, too, he could tell.

"Now, the bad news," Joffrey said, taking a step closer to her until he almost touched his nose to hers.

"That means, Lady Sansa, that you have now become undeniably... utterly... and completely worthless."

He turned away from his prey again and took measured steps through the room. This was his favourite part, Sandor knew, dragging out the announcement what he intended to do.
"So what is a merciful monarch to do with you?" Joff mused idly. "No one will marry you anymore now, that's a given."

Sandor bit back a snort at that. He knew plenty of men who would give an arm to be wed to a woman like her. Claim or no claim.

"And I wouldn't advise it to anyone, seeing as you have been such a trial to my patience for all those years."

He tapped his fingers against his lips as if deep in thought.

"I have it," he said after a while. "Mother tells me the kitchens are woefully understaffed, I think you find working there... educational. And seeing as you are already dressed for it..."

Her shoulders slumped for a fraction, but Sandor knew it might be too early to be relieved. This was not the sort of punishment Joff would have made such a fuss over, degrading and demeaning though it had to be for her. There was something far worse to come yet.

"But first," he went on, thrusting his face into Sansa's once again. "I want to make sure no sentimental fool will want to marry you anyway, so I want to do away with your spotless reputation and your precious maidenhead."

She flinched. Too visibly. While she had her reactions admirably under control most of the time, Joffrey still managed to get under her skin sometimes and he pounced mercilessly on the slightest sign that she wasn't as dead inside as she seemed.

A slap cracked across her face so hard her head snapped to the side.

"Did you think," the boy screeched, "that I - a married man, no less - would sully myself on the likes of you?"

"No... no, your grace, I am sorry, your grace."

"I'll have my dog drag you to the barracks," he hissed into her face, "and strip you naked, and I will stand up on this balcony and watch as my soldiers have their way with you. Every... single... one of them."

Sandor's stomach clenched. This was worse than everything he could have imagined. His mind worked quickly through the options he had. Maybe if he appealed to Kevan Lannister - again - or to the small council, they might be able to talk sense into the boy. Maybe even Cersei wouldn't stand for this atrocity.

Then again, when had any of them ever been able to sway Joffrey in a decision he had made?

Before he knew what he was doing, he had taken the three long strides that took him to her side.

"Give her to me."

Joffrey gaped at him, his mouth hanging open in a way that made him look completely dim-witted.

"I meant, please, sire, let me have her."

The boy's eyes narrowed in displeasure.

"Why the fuck would I do that?"
A drop of sweat ran down Sandor's temple as he contemplated his answer. He had one ready, but in Joffrey's current mood, there was a good chance that answer could quickly get him acquainted with the business end of Illyn Payne's sword. But there was no help for it.

"After the Blackwater, you told me I can ask of you whatever I wanted. I couldn't come up with something back then..."

Green eyes glittered at him suspiciously and Sandor knew full well he had to offer more than that. It wouldn't do to make Joff feel as if Sansa got away unpunished.

"She'd be ruined just as thoroughly if you put it about that she's your Hound's bitch now and I can fuck her bloody just as well or even better than those limp pricks at the barracks."

Delighted malice glittered briefly in the boy's eyes, but died again. He had to do better.

"None of them can match my size," he said, gesturing into the general direction of his crotch for the boy to catch his meaning. "If you want her hurt, no one can hurt her as I can."

A thoughtful look came over Joffrey's face.

"You could have had a lordship and lands," he said slowly, "gold enough to buy every whore in King's Landing. Why her?"

Sandor shrugged carelessly.

"I like it here well enough," he lied smoothly. "And I can afford whores enough already, but the chance to plough a highborn girl's virgin cunt won't be coming to me that easily again."

As had been his aim, Joffrey cackled at that.

Beside him, he could feel her trembling.

"You're right, I guess," Joffrey said. "Who else would want you?" Then he sighed dramatically. "I've really looked forward to giving her as a treat to my soldiers," and with a look in Sansa's direction he added, "I still think I should."

Next to him, there was only stillness now, as if she had even stopped breathing. To him it felt as if she had turned to a thing of glass that could be shattered by as much as a careless touch.

He would've liked to tell her that she needn't fear, that he wouldn't let her suffer the fate Joff was envisioning. He'd slit her throat personally before he let that happen.

"Fine," Joffrey finally said with an impatient wave of his hand. "A king's word shouldn't be broken, so yes, you might as well have her."

"Tha..."

Only half a life's worth of instincts had him react as quickly as he did when next to him, Sansa sank to the ground in a dead faint. He caught her just before she hit the floor.

Joffrey sneered.

"Don't thank me yet, dog. See what a pathetic thing she is? You'll have no joy of her, I tell you. Don't come to me complaining when she bores you."

"I won't," he assured him, inclining his head while slowly backing away from him. "Thank you,
your grace."

Then he turned and walked out of the chamber, the King of Westeros's gift hanging all but lifeless in his arms.
Breathing

Chapter Notes

You find me floored and humbled at the overwhelming response I got for the first chapter of this story. I hope I can live up to the expectations.

Enjoy. :)

Content warning: mention of past abuse

Also:

I was so nervous when posting the first chapter, I totally forgot to give credit where credit is due:
While my first story was written mainly under the impression the books have left me with, this story is heavily influenced by all the SanSan reading I did over the past months. The talent assembled on this site is just astounding!
Stories like SquidProQuos "Cost Benefit Analysis" have inspired me as to the premise, the Sandor characterizations in Maroucia's "Adrift" and SassyEggs' "Rumor Has It" made me look at Sandor from a different angle, trying to get a grip on his darker aspects. I could not possibly name every story that has made an impression on me, but I am trying to catch up not only with reading, but with reviewing as well, to let every author know what her/his story meant to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 2: Breathing

Sansa had come to her senses wrapped in the Hound' arms - a not entirely unfamiliar occurrence - but with the added twist of being atop his horse, making their way through what looked to her like the merchant's district of King's Landing.

She stirred a little, pins and needles in her hands and feet, trying to get her bearings.

"Ah, the little bird is awake," he grumbled above her.

"Where are we going?" she mumbled, her head swimming and mouth so dry her tongue barely cooperated.

"Your new home," he said shortly.

She had no idea what he was talking about, so she just leaned her aching head back against his chest.

This felt a lot like that one time when Joffrey had forced her to drink cup upon cup of some vile spirit that had burned all the way down to her stomach. Back then, she had woken hours later when someone slapped a wet, ice cold rag across her face. Only seconds later she had emptied the content of her stomach into a bucket while the Hound held her hair back from her face and recounted what had been done to her.
He never spared her, not even the things she had forgotten. True to his nature, he seemed convinced that she was better off knowing exactly what she had endured and at whose hands.

She wondered sleepily what had made her pass out this time and gingerly took stock of her body. Pain was conspicuously absent and while the horse's gait did nothing for her swimming, aching head, her stomach was curiously settled.

Snuggling closer into the warmth Clegane's big body offered, she closed her eyes and wished - not for the first time - she could just stay where she was forever, nestled securely against the chest of the realm's most fearsome warrior.

Try as she might, she couldn't clump him in with her tormentors, even if it was him who took her there, him who stood still as a statue, unflinchingly witnessing her suffering until he called a stop to it.

But she saw the pity in his eyes every time he had to fetch her and she knew how big a risk he took every time he stepped between Joffrey and her. And she knew that he went beyond what was expected of him when he took care of her afterwards.

He always took care of her. When she came back from Joffrey bleeding, he ordered the maids about and sent for a maester. When she was crying and shaking, something she only allowed herself afterwards and only with him, he held her tightly to his chest until the worst of it was over and then saw to it that the maids tucked her into bed as comfortably as they could.

He always made sure her windows were barred and nothing with a sharp edge could be found in her bedchamber for her to hurt herself with. On some occasions he had told a maid to keep watch.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he was the only reason she was still breathing, even though that might be about the only thing she did that felt like she was still alive.

"What happened?" she asked, while rubbing her hand wearily over her eyes to get rid of her sleepiness.

She only got an unintelligible grunt in response.

"We're here," he said a few minutes later and dismounted in one fluid motion.

Robbed of the support of the firm body behind her, she began to sway, but was quickly lifted from the saddle and tucked to his side.

They were on a relatively quiet street somewhere on the eastern flanks of Visenya's Hill. She could see the Great Sept of Baelor but not the Red Keep. Between the Street of Steel and Cobbler's Square, she surmised, a maze of streets and squares that was home to all sorts of craftsmen and merchants.

Across from where they were standing, a cobbler had his shop and right next to him in a neat looking house with flower pots next to the doorway, a shiny new sign advertised the services of a barber and apothecary.

A few women, huge shopping baskets on their arms, were clustered together in front of a milliner's shop animatedly talking, and next to a carpenter's workshop, some children played at spinning top.

A scene so normal and peaceful, it seemed unreal to Sansa.

"My lord, it's good to see you again."
Sansa turned to see a middle-aged woman standing before them, hands clasped demurely in front of her, her gaze averted.

The Hound neither replied to the greeting nor seemed upset about the woman's obvious reluctance to look at him.

"Is everything as I requested?" he rasped instead, while Sansa felt indignant at his behalf.

"Yes, my lord," the woman replied eagerly, bobbing the beginning of a small curtsy. "Everything is cleaned."

The woman's eyes quickly fluttered to Clegane's face and down again apparently looking for his approval.

"Show me."

"Of course, my lord," the woman said and, eyes still on her shoes, preceded them to the house. "This way, my lord."

...

The Hound had dismissed the woman quickly after they had finished taking a look around.

Sansa had eyed everything critically but found no reason to fault the woman's work.

"I didn't know you owned a house in the city," she stated, still not knowing why she was here.

"Bought it a couple of years ago," he said. "To have a place to sleep whenever Gregor was in King's Landing. No one knows about it. They all think I spent my time...," he caught himself before completing the sentence.

She nodded. She knew the rest anyway. Whoring and drinking. That's what everyone probably thought he did while in truth he had only tried not to sleep under the same roof as his monster of a brother.

"I sent someone to clean and set everything to right, since I didn't know what condition it was in. Haven't been here ever since his death."

She tasted bile at the back of her throat at the mention of Gregor Clegane's death. She quickly slammed the door shut on that particular memory. Madness lurked there.

"It's nice," she said.

"You think so?" he asked as if truly valuing her opinion.

"Yes," she answered truthfully. It was a neat half-timbered house, two stories high with a light-flooded sitting room, a moderately sized kitchen out in the back, a storage room, a non-too shabby room in the attic for the servants and a spacious and comfortable bedroom on the upper floor. More than enough for one man.

"Good," he said. "You'll be spending a lot of time here. I will be at the keep most of the time, but I'll try to be here every night. I'll hire a maid and a cook tomorrow, tonight we'll have to do without. Your things will be brought later in the day, and..."

She lifted her hand to stop the uncharacteristic effusion, because nothing of what he said made any sense to her.
That was when she saw the soot on her hand from where she had touched her face before, saw the
dress she was wearing and she suddenly knew how her hair looked and why.

"It wasn't a dream," she stated tonelessly.

"No."

He reached out towards her arm as if afraid she would faint again, but she took a step back, suddenly
needing the distance.

... worthless

Give her to me.

...the Hound's bitch

... fuck her bloody

... no one can hurt her as I can

...might as well have her

Memory came back to her in a rush, bringing back the bottomless black terror she had felt when
hearing Joffrey's plans for her, the crushing relief when - as always - the Hound came to her rescue,
even if with a completely unexpected suggestion.

She remembered holding her breath and praying silently and fervently to every god she knew that
Joffrey would let her go, remembered the feeling of her blood leaving her fingertips, of sounds
receding, when it seemed as if he wouldn't.

She remembered gasping for air when finally he agreed, but there her memories ended.

"Stay here," he said to her, his insistence bringing her back to the present. "I have a few things still to
do, I'll be back tonight. Just... stay."

She gave him a dazed nod. Before she could ask any more questions, he was gone.

...

If her time as Joffrey's favourite victim had taught her one thing, it was that staying in a dazed and
confused state for long was something you did at your own risk. Taking action, regardless of
whether or not you felt up to it, whether or not you knew what was going on, was always more
advisable.

Even the Hound, in the cases when he had held her to him during a breakdown, had growled to her
she had to get a grip, told her "snap out of it". Sometimes he had squeezed her so tightly in his arms,
it seemed he wanted her to stop falling apart by pure physical strength alone. Sometimes she had to
start fighting back just to be able to draw a breath again.

So she forcefully shook herself into a more alert state and tried to come up with something to do.

Water.

She was thirsty and needed to wash her face, so she went to the kitchen to get a bucket and made her
way to the well on the street she had seen when they had ridden past it.
When she stepped out of the door, she worried how people would react to her, but since she was dressed as she was, looking like a poor woman or a servant, they paid her no mind at all. She relished being inconspicuous, not having malevolent stares and hissed whispers following her wherever she went.

At the well, she helped a young mother who had to balance her child as well as a full bucket, earning a grateful smile which made her smile back.

To find she still knew how to smile came as a bit of a surprise.

The smile stayed with her all the way back to the house as she asked herself when she had done work like this the last time. Maybe at Winterfell, but she couldn't remember.

Her memories of her home were like a half-forgotten dream by now, hazy and distant, growing more indistinct the more she tried to recall details. The only thing not fading was her longing to go back, to be home again, even if her home would be empty now. She was a Stark and she belonged to Winterfell, if only to wait to re-join her family in the crypts beneath its walls.

Chasing her maudlin thoughts away with a decisive shake of her head, she filled some water into the washbasin and proceeded to scrub the soot off her face. Then she filled a cup and drank to her heart's content, delighted at getting something refreshing and cool to drink.

The water she got at the Red Keep had always been already warm and stale when it reached her room. Nobody had ever bothered to get her water fresh from the well.

With the rest of the water she filled the two pitchers next to the washbasin, one of which surely belonged upstairs.

She would light a fire in the bedroom's fireplace, she decided. The nights were getting noticeably cooler lately and maybe the Hound would appreciate having a warm place to sleep.

Only when she stepped into the room and was faced with the big, four poster bed that dominated it did it occur to her that this was the only real bed in this house.

As he had told her, her trunk had arrived at some time before dusk, giving her the opportunity to at least redo and comb her hair and put the few dresses she still owned - too small for her as they were - into the dresser.

A basket with food had been delivered together with the trunk and she had eaten something, even though it had been a challenge to keep the food down. Not eating, however, would just be stupid, as Clegane was wont to remind her often enough, because she needed her strength.

So she had eaten as she always did, mechanically and not quite tasting what she put into her mouth.

What was left of the food she had arranged on a wooden platter and carried into the sitting room for him to eat when he came back.

Then she had built a little fire in the bedroom, somewhat proud of herself for managing it, and was afterwards left with nothing else to do but sit and wait for him, all the while contemplating her new situation with mounting disquiet.

There was not enough innocence left to her to leave any uncertainty of what her lot in life would be from this day on. He had claimed her for his own and even though she had had no say in the matter,
it would be demanded of her as a matter of course to give herself to him.

Just as Joffrey had intended, as of this night, her reputation or her worth as a potential wife would be a thing of the past. As would be her maidenhead.

Dread curled coldly in her stomach at the thought and she hated herself for it.

The Hound had saved her from an unthinkable fate and done so at considerable risk to himself. She'd seen the displeasure on Joffrey's face at having his cruel plans so cunningly thwarted, had seen how it had torn the king apart to have to keep his word.

And it wasn't the first time either that Clegane had risked his life to protect her.

She owed him everything she had to give, including her body. She should be doing this with gratefulness, grace and good cheer.

It wasn't the pain she feared. There would be some, she knew, but she had endured so much these past months, she was sure it would be nothing in comparison. Despite his eyes and words speaking of anger and brutality, his hands had never been anything but gentle and she'd always felt strangely safe with him. There was no reason this should change.

But still she sat here close to tears, more than once entertaining the thought of just running away, avoiding the business-like exchange that was to take place tonight.

Access to her body for his protection. Opening her legs for him as payment for not having to do the same for a hundred soldiers.

They'd call her Clegane's mistress if they were polite, or the Hound's bitch if they weren't; they'd call her a whore, and they would be right.

Again she chided herself for her girlish foolishness. Of course it would be business. It would never have been anything else, regardless if she was given to someone in marriage or if the Hound now claimed her as his paramour.

No one would ever think to ask her for her opinion or consent to anything. She was only a woman, after all. A worthless one, as she'd learned today, without a claim to anything. This was just another decision in a long list of decisions made without her participation, but she was expected to hold up her end of the bargain regardless.

And she would, she resolved when she heard the door open downstairs.

Because he had saved her, because she owed him her life and therefore by extension her maidenhead as well.

Because she was a Stark and had been through worse.

Chapter End Notes

to be continued
Thanks to everyone who has been with me so far.

Content Warning!

This chapter is the one all the dire warnings at the beginning were about. Please take them seriously. This chapter will not be pretty and it will not be romantic. I found it necessary to write for where I want this story to go, but if descriptions of borderline abusive, awkward and painful sexual encounters (both physically and emotionally) upset you, I would strongly recommend not to read this!

Chapter 3 : Bleeding

She heard him come up the stairs with slow, almost halting steps and with every one of them, her heart clawed its way further up her throat.

He had to duck his head to step through the doorway and even in the room had not an inch to spare to the ceiling. His intimidating size made the room seem to shrink around him and she had to remind herself to breathe when the thought occurred to her that maybe not only the room would be too small for a man like him.

His eyes were oddly bright when they flitted first to the fire in the hearth, then to her and then came to rest on the bed.

"I...," she began but her voice broke and she had to clear her throat before attempting to speak again. "I brought some water, if you'd like to wash."

At her gesture, he turned to the wooden screen behind which a washbasin and the pitcher were standing on a sideboard.

He nodded and held out his hand to her. Only then did she notice that he carried a packet.

"Put this on the bed," he commanded in a voice that seemed curiously unsteady as well.

She took the packet while he turned and walked behind the screen.

When she saw what it was she held, her head started to spin for a moment and she wished she were still naïve and stupid and just wouldn't know.

It was a linen bedsheet. Not of good quality, but clean and almost white.

A bedsheet that tomorrow he would bring back to Joffrey with her blood on it.

... *fuck her bloody*

Shame and despair swamped her. Her throat burned with the urge to cry, her stomach clenched
furiously with the need to throw up and her hands shook so badly, she barely managed to unfold the piece of cloth and drape it over the mattress as she had been bid.

With her hands still shaking, she undid the laces of her dress and let it fall to the floor before she lost her nerves completely.

Behind the screen, water splashed and the sounds of leather, mail and metal buckles falling to the floor could be heard and she wondered if he would come out naked. She had never seen a naked man before.

As it turned out, it would be a while yet until she did, because he emerged from behind the screen clad in a linen undershirt and halfway unlaced breeches. He looked as if he had dressed again after washing himself. Strands of raven black still stuck wetly to his face and left dark patches of wetness on his shirt where his hair lay against his shoulders and back.

She wondered what his hair felt like to touch, if it was as silky smooth as it looked, or coarse like men's hair usually was.

He made no move to undress himself further, nor did he stir in any other way.

Sansa felt a bit at a loss.

For some reason, she had always surmised that what they were about to do would be done naked. And she could readily admit to some curiosity regarding how the fearsome Hound would look underneath his armour and his clothes.

Her musings had distracted her for a moment, but when he finally took a step towards her, her misgivings came back with a vengeance and she couldn't stop herself from flinching.

He stopped dead in his tracks and looked at her from across the room, eyes blank and unreadable.

"I'll not force you," he said.

"I know," she gave back with a slight nod of her head. "You won't have to."

When dragged in front of Joffrey, she had always found something to hold on to, some inner strength to face what lay ahead of her with stoic dignity. But now, here with only the one man she had sometimes believed to be the source of her strength, she had none left.

She held herself together by the skin of her teeth and prayed he wouldn't see how dearly she wanted to throw herself at his feet begging to spare her.

But she couldn't do that to him, he didn't deserve her weakness.

Taking a deep breath, she grabbed the hem of her shift and drew it over her head and then stepped out of her smallclothes, kicking them away with one foot.

He stared at her, his eyes roaming her body from her toes to the root of her hair and she shivered under the intensity of his gaze. There might have been a time when she would have been ashamed of her nakedness, when she would try to cover herself with her hands, but he'd seen her thus often enough in the meantime, if under different circumstances.

This time, though, there was no mistaking he wanted her. If not for the way he devoured her with his eyes, she also noticed the sizeable bulge that had formed in his breeches. She couldn't remember him ever looking at her like that before.
After he closed the distance between them, he reached out a tentative hand, but instead of touching her face to pull her in for a kiss, or maybe grabbing her breasts, he gingerly traced a scar on her belly that went all the way from her right hip to under her left breast.

"I would've liked to kill him for that," he rasped.

She nodded, her throat closed so tightly she couldn't speak.

The scar had been Trant's doing.

Eager to comply with Joffrey's wishes to rip yet another dress from her, one sharp edge of his vambrace had dug into her skin and cut diagonally across her belly when he kept ripping.

She wouldn't even have noticed, the wound not being deep despite bleeding rather copiously, if the Hound hadn't startled everyone in the room by hollering so loudly the walls seemed to shake.

Trant had stopped what he was doing, Joffrey had started to whine and screech at Trant that he wasn't supposed to kill her and look what he'd done, while she stood there dumbfounded, looking on in fascination as the remains of her dress slowly turned a deep crimson.

Only seconds later, she had been swept off her feet and carried out of the room, while the Hound had snarled at everyone that "this is over for today".

She shivered at the memory and the involuntary movement brought him up short. He quickly snatched his hand away and something flashed in his eyes that was gone before she could identify it, replaced by cold indifference.

"Get on the bed," he commanded.

Obediently, she did and lay down on the white sheet, feeling more and more like a sacrificial offering instead of a maid about to be bedded.

"Spread your legs."

It was all she could do to hold back a gasp at this request.

While she didn't mind him seeing her naked, having him look at her... there, was an altogether different matter. She knew, of course, that she had to open her legs to him at some point, but somehow it hadn't occurred to her that he would actually want to look at … that.

She hesitated while he stood at the side of the bed, waiting.

The fire was low in the hearth, only a few little flames just flickering over embers, painting the room in a deep orange hue and casting long, dark shadows.

Still, for what was expected of her, it was not nearly dark enough.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she slowly bent her legs and then let her knees fall apart.

There was a longish silence and then she felt the mattress dip beneath a considerable weight, but nothing else happened.

She found him kneeling between her legs, when she opened her eyes again, his palm over the bulge in his breeches while his gaze was glued to the spot right at the juncture of her thighs.

The effort it took to keep still, to not snap her legs together again, not to squirm away and out of this
bed and this room and this house was making her tremble.

If he noticed her watching him, he gave no sign of it. Intend on where he was looking, he stopped touching himself and touched her between her legs, dragging two fingers along her cleft and probing her entrance. Rough, calloused fingertips scraped over dry flesh and he shook his head.

"This won't do."

While she was wondering what this meant, he left the bed to rummage around behind the wooden screen and came back with a little earthenware jar in his hand.

Kneeling between her legs again, he reached into the jar and his fingers came back thickly covered in some sort of pale salve. She didn't have to wonder for long what it was for, when he reached down and put the stuff on her lady parts. It was so cold she could barely suppress a shudder.

A smell of lavender and chamomile permeated the room, informing her of the ingredients used in whatever he'd put on her.

Then he leaned forward, bracing himself on one outstretched arm and fumbled with the other down there somewhere.

She closed her eyes when she felt something hot, huge and insistent pressing against her entrance.

*It will happen now,* she thought, steeling herself against whatever was to happen next. *I'll soon be a maid no longer.*

A piercing pain lanced through her for a short moment.

She was about to heave a sigh of relief that this hadn't been so bad, when the blunt pressure against her went on relentless, invading deeper and deeper, stretching her until her inner walls felt as if on fire.

She tried to do what she always did, holding herself motionless and gritting her teeth, but to no avail. He didn't stop pushing inside her and she soon reached the point where she couldn't stop the tears anymore that rolled out of the corners of her tightly closed eyes.

After what felt like an eternity of agony, he stopped. She opened her eyes, hoping against hope it might be over now, that he'd withdraw.

Above her, his face was in a rictus of pain as if he could feel what she did. The muscles in his neck stood out in sharp relief with the effort it apparently took him to hold his weight on his arms, almost no other part of him touching her but the one that felt as if it ripped her apart.

Then, to her relief, he did indeed withdraw... only to thrust back in again. Much faster this time and with so much momentum she was rocked back on the bed.

Her whole body howled in pain at the impact and she closed her eyes and bit down on her lip to keep herself from crying out. He did it again and again until she tasted blood.

*If you want her hurt, no one can hurt her as I can.*

The room rang with the creaking of the bed and the harsh, desperate breaths the man above her was taking.

She tried to concentrate on those sounds, on the smell of lavender in the air and on the chafing of the
rough wool of his breeches against her inner thighs. Everything but the burning pain inside her.

And then, when his thrusts had become so forceful and quick she was sure she wouldn't be able to take it much longer, it stopped, he was gone from inside her.

Opening her eyes at the sensation of something warm and sticky splashing onto her belly, she saw him over her, holding himself in his hand, furiously pumping while long strings of a whitish fluid spurted from him.

More tears gathered in the corners of her eyes and when he lifted his head to look from the mess on her belly into her face, she turned her head away.

She couldn't look at him right now, not if she didn't want to break down completely.

His breathing slowed to normal after a while and at last the bed creaked when he left it. She heard his heavy footsteps retreating and then the splashing of water. There was some rustling and the unmistakable clink of mail being put on and buckles being fastened. Then the footsteps came back.

"Get up and clean yourself," he growled.

Reluctantly, she did. While she would have liked to just stay there and feel sorry for herself, it probably was a good thing he didn't let her. He never did.

The spot of blood on the sheet was as big as the palm of her hand. Knowing first hand that even shallow wounds could bleed quite a lot, she was astounded that something that had caused so much pain had bled so little.

There was some blood on her thighs as well, she noticed when she went to wash, and she was certain there had been some on his manhood and his hand where he had touched himself, but still she thought it should've been more.

Her shift and dress landed on top of the screen and she took them and hurriedly dressed herself, grateful for not having to be naked around him anymore.

When she came back out from behind the screen, he had already stripped the bloody sheet from the bed and bundled it tightly together.

He looked ready to leave, dressed again in full Kingsguard regalia, pristinely white and a marked difference to her shabby grey dress.

They stood almost as they had before, on opposite ends of the room, looking at each other as if they'd never met before, with no words to say.

His eyes were like polished steel; blank, cold and impenetrable. "I am going back to the keep," he said finally, breaking the painful silence.

She nodded and watched him walk toward the door, but then a thought struck her.

This arrangement was not only contingent on her compliance; it was also very much about the pleasure he derived from it. No man would stay with a mistress who didn't please him.

"Was it... did you enjoy it?" she asked, eyes downcast.

He snorted.

"It was worse than with a whore."
He left her with those words ringing in her ears and once she heard the door fall shut behind him, she threw herself on the bed and cried like she hadn't cried in a very long time.
Regretting

Chapter Notes

Let me start by apologizing to everyone (if still here) who was disturbed by the last chapter, because I haven't been clear enough in tagging this story and warning of its content. It was not done on purpose and I am sorry for it.

Second note: I usually have a lot more chapters of a story already written than I am posting. This has mostly to do with the way I am writing and editing. This means that this chapter has been written before the last chapter had been posted.

Content warning:
This chapter contains references to dubcon sex, to borderline abusive behavior (both physical and emotional) and contains mention of past abuse. Please consider skipping this story if you are expecting something less dark or have previous personal experiences with this sort of abuse.

Everyone else: Please enjoy.

Chapter 4: Regretting

Regret, guilt or shame were things Sandor had not use for. Never had, never would.

When he had first put his sword through a man's gut, not older than twelve at the time, he'd understood with undeniable clarity that most things you do in life, most decisions you make, are final. A dead man would not come alive again, no matter the amount of regret or guilt you felt, no matter how often his horrified face, his dead eyes appeared in your dreams.

So he had learned not to look back. He did what he was ordered to do and sometimes what he decided to do and that was it.

And just as a dead man would not come alive, just like a scar would not magically disappear, a broken maidenhead would not repair itself and lost trust could not be won back again.

The bloody sheet in his saddlebag was just one item on a long list of things a weaker man like him would feel guilty or ashamed for, but he wouldn't.

He had not even planned on following Joffrey's orders.

Yes, Joffrey had demanded he'd bring him the bloody sheet and told him he would be extremely unhappy if he found out the blood wasn't Sansa's. But Sandor had figured that as long as the sheet looked sufficiently rumpled from having been slept on, Joff wouldn't be able to see the difference between a maiden's blood and that of a freshly slaughtered chicken.

But then he had come into that room, with its cozy warmth and she had been waiting for him. Had looked at him with something in her eyes that might not have been an invitation, but acceptance and determination.
And she'd told him she would give herself to him willingly. Hells, she had even been partly undressed already when he came back from having a quick and much needed wash. Had undressed herself completely right in front of him without him even having to ask.

Had bared her beautiful body to him alone, his for the taking.

What more could a man like him wish for? He knew she hadn't really wanted to have him take her; that she'd rather he hadn't, that she'd been seconds away from asking him not to; but when had any woman ever wanted him? For his whole life, he'd paid solid coin for every single kiss, every caress and every fuck.

Just as he'd paid for this one. He'd paid with whatever it would cost to maintain a household that would cater to her needs. He'd paid for it with the risk he had taken.

He had a right to what she had offered and she had been smart enough to know it.

He thought he owed it to himself to take the opportunity to have for once something precious only to himself.

Maybe he could've been gentler, maybe he could've kissed and caressed her first. He had never done any of this with whores since they preferred to have it over with quickly, but it couldn't be that complicated after all.

He had even tried, but after she had flinched from him as if his touch had burned her, he decided it would be no use. If she behaved like a skittish horse, he had reasoned, the kindest thing to do would be to break her to the bridle quickly and without much fuss.

Little did he know that he would almost literally be breaking her.

For some reason, he'd always thought that taking a maidenhead would be like a successful siege. Once you've smashed the portcullis, you're all the way in. But even after he'd pushed through her veil, her body had fought him relentlessly for every inch it gave. It had been exhilarating and terrible at the same time, having her cunt grip him so tightly he saw stars, while the smell of her blood was invading his nostrils; knowing he was the first man to ever be there, while noticing the pain he inflicted.

Having seen her in pain often enough, he'd known the signs. The way cold sweat had pearled on her forehead, the way her lips had been almost white where she had pressed them together to make no sound, the way her hands had clawed into the rough straw mattress beneath her, almost tearing through Joffrey's fucking bedsheets. The way she had tried so desperately to breathe through her agony.

He had forced himself to stop then, even though he was barely more than halfway in. He determined it would be enough like that, he was close enough as it was. Still, it had taken torturously long for him to come, especially once he saw the drop of blood running down her chin from where she had bitten her lip and the translucent wetness seeping out of the corners of her tightly closed eyes.

He hadn't lied to her when he told her this had to have been the worst fuck of his entire life. Daring to touch something as perfect as her had probably tempted fate too much and thus ended in pain and blood as it always did, leaving him with the bitter taste of defeat.

He had been more relieved than satisfied when it had finally been over.

Maybe he shouldn't have said it to her like that, though. But then again, she had asked and who was he to lie to her.
Joffrey was singularly unimpressed with the amount of blood on the sheet when he demanded it to be presented to him under the watchful eyes of his mother and her uncle.

"You said you would hurt her," the boy complained, while his mother silently wrung her hands and looked down at her feet. "This is nothing."

Before he came up with a suitable reply, Cersei, to his surprise, came to his aid.

"This is quite a lot of blood, Joffrey, trust me," she said sweetly. "When your father took my maidenhead, I didn't bleed even half that much."

*I bet you didn't*, Sandor thought surly. *You surely were all wet and ready for that pretty brother of yours.*

Joffrey sulked.

"Did she cry?" he asked.

It would be a satisfaction for Joffrey to know she had, Sandor knew. For months now she had managed to keep her eyes dry through whatever Joffrey thought to inflict on her.

A weird sort of pain stabbed at him at the thought that he had managed something all of Joffrey's carefully executed cruelties hadn't yet achieved.

"She did."

A nasty smile flashed over the king's face.

"Present her to me a few days from now," he commanded and then gave a wave of dismissal.

"A word, Clegane?"

Kevan Lannister's words shook Sandor out of the half-sleep he managed sometimes during guard duty.

"Cersei and I wanted to speak with you."

With a sinking feeling, Sandor followed him to the council chambers, where not only Cersei, but also Pycelle, Mace Tyrell and Littlefinger awaited them.

On the table around which they sat, the bloody sheet lay like an accusation.

"Let me first apologize to you, Ser, for not heeding your warnings regarding my grand-nephew much sooner," Kevan Lannister said and managed to actually sound as if he cared. "I am fully aware I am to blame that the mistreatment of Lady Sansa has been going on for so long unchecked."

Sandor held himself expressionless, refraining from pointing out that he had tried to get through to Lannister - and not only to him - a hundred times. Not mincing words, not sparing the gruesome details. All of them as they sat there had only nodded and assured him of their concern, but none of them had acted.

"I am also aware," the man droned on, "that we have you to thank that no permanent harm has
befallen our guest as of yet."

Sandor snorted derisively.

"She has more scars than a battle hardened soldier," he spat. "I'd not call that 'no permanent harm'."

Cersei had the grace to look ashamed, the other men just stared at him rather blankly and Lannister waved his hand dismissively.

"Aside from that," he said.

Sandor's gaze fell on the sheet again and suddenly it dawned on him. Of course. Her precious fucking maidenhead. That was all that counted. That was all she was to them. A sealed cunt, fit to be made a present to whoever needed to be won over at the moment, despite her not having a claim to Winterfell anymore.

For a moment, he felt a grim satisfaction at the thought that he had finally done away with the stupid thing.

"So I trust," Lannister continued. "That the blood on this sheet is not Sansa Stark's."

Regret twinged through him for a moment, despite himself. If he had waited just this one night, gone with his original plan, maybe things could've been sorted out. The little bird needn't have been brought as low as she was now.

"It is."

Cersei's eyes widened and Littlefinger shot out of his seat.

Kevan Lannister lifted a hand to calm the others and smiled at Sandor encouragingly.

"Surely you only cut her to pacify Joffrey," he said as if trying to convince him. "You didn't..."

"I fucked her."

"You filthy animal!" Cersei was out of her seat and nearly had her claws at his throat before Lannister could stop her. The performance was almost convincing.

"It was either me or the soldiers at the barracks," he said evenly, honestly not caring about the fuss they suddenly decided to make. There was nothing they could blame on him; he had acted on the king's orders. "And I guess Lady Sansa preferred to have her maidenhead taken by just one filthy animal than by a hundred soldiers as Joffrey had originally intended."

That at least served to shut up Cersei who abruptly turned, grabbed a cup from the table and proceeded to stare out of the window while guzzling her wine.

Littlefinger stood where he had jumped out of his seat, fist pressed against his mouth, seemingly deep in thought.

"Dammit," Lannister said finally. "What is wrong with the boy?"

Cersei shot around again, spilling wine over her dress. "Have a care what you say, uncle! This is treason."

The twinge of guilt vanished without a trace. This, Sandor knew, was exactly what would've happened had he tried any other approach than the one he had. They would have been concerned
and outraged and then would've decided that speaking up against the king was high treason and sacrificing Sansa Stark was the lesser of two evils.

"Where is she now?" Littlefinger inquired.

"Safe."

"I could take her with me to the Vale and..."

"No."

"That's not for you to decide, dog!" the little man spat at him. "She is a highborn girl and..."

"... and the king of the realm gave her to me. That's where she'll stay."

"She needs to be protected," Littlefinger pointed out.

Sandor raised an eyebrow, deliberately turning his full attention on the little man.

"You left her to Joffrey's tender mercy for years and now she needs to be protected?"

Baelish took a step closer.

"You insolent..."

Sandor glowered and only lightly moved his hand toward the pommel of his sword. Littlefinger scrambled backwards, almost falling back into his seat.

"What about what she wants?" Mace Tyrell piped up.

Sandor couldn't help himself. He started laughing. Even to his own ears, his laughter sounded more like a bark, loud and grating, but he didn't care. That question didn't even deserve an answer. As if what she wanted had ever mattered to anyone!

"Then have at least the decency to marry her!" Lannister suddenly shouted but instantly calmed again. "I had intended her for Lancel since he seems to be getting better now, but ..."

Sandor narrowed his eyes in suspicion. Something smelled foul.

"Why would you still have her as your daughter in law, if her claim is void?"

There was some hemming and hawing, but finally Lannister made a might-as-well gesture.

"There are doubts as to the identity of the woman Ramsay Bolton married and fathered his son on."

Truth be told, he had had those doubts himself. Pity only that Joffrey didn't.

"You should've told that to Joffrey yesterday," he said.

"We were about to, when he ran out."

"And you didn't think to run after him?" Sandor asked, honestly baffled. "You left his dog to deal with the mess and now I get blamed for how it turned out?"

"Marry her," Lannister repeated. "With your brother dead, you're a lord now, a Lannister bannerman. If her claim is still valid..."
"No," Littlefinger interrupted. "Clegane is Kingsguard, he can't marry. Besides, if I understand his intentions correctly, Joffrey would never consent to a marriage anyway. He meant for her to be ruined. So if I take her with me to the Vale..."

"...and ruin her to your heart's content," Sandor finished for him, showing his teeth in what for him passed as a grin. "Sorry, my lord. This bone was thrown to me, fetch your own."

With that, he turned and walked out on them.
Chapter Notes

No special warnings for this chapter (I hope).

Thanks to everyone for your continued support and your thoughtful comments.

Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 5: Learning

Sansa woke to the familiar sounds of a maid bustling around in her chambers and the unfamiliar feeling of rough fabric under her skin.

A straw mattress. Why was she...

She shot upright with a cry and heard one in return.

"My lady!" the little maid in her room exclaimed, hand on her chest. "By the Seven, did you just scare me!"

The maid looked familiar.

"Who are you?"

"Name's Betsy, my lady," she answered promptly. "I was your maid sometimes back in Maegor's. But when the master asked me if I could recommend a good maid and a cook for his new household and to take care of his... of his..."

"Mistress," Sansa supplied helpfully.

"His lady," Betsy continued, "well, I was all for it. I also told him there'd be no need to hire a cook for only two people and most times only the one and that I could be very well do all the work especially since it's not that big a house and I never liked it in the keep anyway and..."

Sansa held up a silencing hand.

"I think I understand," she said. "Would you mind giving me a minute?"

Betsy nodded and curtsied respectfully and then made to leave the room but turned at the door.

"Just so you know, I prepared warm water in the kitchen for you to wash with and I made breakfast and..."

"Betsy..."

"Yes my lady, I'll leave, I am sorry."
When the door closed behind the girl, Sansa buried her face into her hands.

But after last night, she had no tears left. And no clue how to go on.

*One step at a time,* Clegane's deep voice was in her thoughts. Even though his was the last voice she wanted to hear right now, it was the voice she always clung to after an especially trying night with Joffrey.

She clambered out of bed, wincing at the soreness between her legs. And at the memories the pain woke.

*Worse than with a whore.*

Tears threatened again. She had given him the one thing everyone had always told her was the most valuable gift she had to give a man and he had sneered at it.

She had suffered and bled, had done everything he had asked of her, no matter how humiliating, and he had found it less pleasant than the services of women who spread their legs for everyone who cared to pay them.

And it couldn't have been because she had not really known what to do. She was not so innocent that she didn't know that men took their pleasure from women regardless of their consent or participation.

What had she done so wrong that she couldn't even achieve what all other women could, even against their will?

Staring at her bloodshot eyes in the mirror over the washbasin, she decided she needed to talk to someone or she'd go insane.

...

Betsy was all too happy to talk.

Sansa wasn't sure she even needed her to be there for her incessant prattling, but she found the girl's effusions soothing.

Betsy did her hair, helped her to get dressed and served her a hearty breakfast. After a while, the girl's unbridled enthusiasm for having the running of the little household was starting to get infectious.

Since apparently "the master" had given Betsy money to make all the purchases Sansa thought necessary, they were soon discussing what needed to be bought.

Although she didn't want to spend the Hound's money on herself - especially not after last night - Sansa couldn't help admitting that her wardrobe was severely lacking, even for a kept woman.

The grey dress she had worn yesterday - and was dressed in right now - was the only one that wasn't too short or too tight and while Betsy promised to see if something could be done about the other dresses she owned, there was a general consensus that she needed at least one simple dress for everyday wear.

The matter of buying feather mattresses, beddings and linen for the bed was more controversial. While Betsy thought it the height of unnecessary luxury, Sansa just couldn't imagine spending one more night on a scratchy, lumpy straw-mattress.
After much back and forth, pointing out that "the master" would be used to that sort of comfort from his lodgings in the white tower finally did the trick.

Grumbling, Betsy cut back at some pots and kitchen implements she had wished for.

Then she decided that with all the errands to run and dinner to be prepared in order to be ready when the master came home, she had to hurry and was out of the door before Sansa could hold her back.

She slowly stood and walked through the house.

Worse than with a whore.

That was what she was now, she thought. A whore. She had taken Clegane's gold for new dresses and a feather bed and the food Betsy would put on the table tonight.

Gods bless Betsy's heart for acting as if she was still a lady, but she knew she wasn't.

Her steps led her up to the bedroom, where she spent some time staring at the bed as if it was an enemy.

Worse than with a whore.

The more she let that insult echo through her thoughts, the angrier she became.

She was a highborn lady. She was well educated in the arts of conversation and etiquette. She could embroider a piece of cloth with the finest silk thread, had been taught to run a household a hundred times as large as this one. She knew how to read and how to calculate numbers; how to treat minor wounds and common illnesses. She had been taught history and could name all the important houses of Westeros including describing their banners.

She would not concede something that seemed as simple as pleasing a man between the sheets to women who had not even learned how to read.

If this was something that could be learned, if this was now the life she was expected to lead, she would excel at it.

Sandor Clegane, she vowed, would never again prefer another woman's services over hers.

…

Unfortunately, her heroic vow all too soon threatened to crumble under the weight of reality.

Sansa needed someone to teach her the secrets of her new profession and she had determined to look for one such person on the Street of Silks. She was soon to discover, however, that as freely as most of those women shared their bodies with every man who paid them - oftentimes not even caring to take their business away from public scrutiny - they were surprisingly unhelpful when approached by a woman.

Exhausted from wandering around and hearing one impolite rebuff after another, she finally knocked on yet another door of a brothel that at this time of day was closed.

A bleary-eyed woman opened the door, clearly just roused from a too short sleep.

"We don't need another girl here," she snapped - a sentence Sansa had heard more than once this morning - and was about to close the door, when Sansa suddenly was fed up with having yet another door closed in her face.
She quickly planted one of her feet into the doorway.

"I am not here to offer myself," she said, trying her best to sound like her mother. "I am here to offer money in exchange for your help."

The woman's eyes clouded with something that looked like fear.

Quickly, she stuck her head out the door, looked left and right and then pulled Sansa into the house rather ungently.

"Who sent you?" she hissed.

"No one," Sansa answered, puzzled she'd be asked such a question.

The woman took a step back and eyed her critically, while Sansa took off the ugly cap she was wearing to hide her hair.

"Dress almost fooled me," she said. "You're a highborn one, ain't ye?"

Sansa nodded.

"If it's an unwanted bairn you want to be rid of, girl, you're at the wrong place," the woman said, supressing a yawn. "Old Maggie two houses down does things like that."

Sansa's stomach dropped. So far, the thought that what he had done could plant a child inside her had not even occurred to her.

'Stupid, once again,' she thought dejectedly.

"I only did it once, last night," she said slowly, only belatedly realizing she was trying to defend herself to a woman of ill repute.

The woman looked her up and down for a moment.

"Might not be too late then," she said. "Go to old Maggie and let her give you some moon tea."

Sansa fell silent, still mulling over the possibility of becoming pregnant. Then again, hadn't the Hound spilled his seed outside her body?

"Anything else?" the woman demanded impatiently.

"Well, that wasn't what I have been coming here for," Sansa said, finally finding her voice again. "I came because it was... unpleasant."

The woman gave her an once-over again, her lips quirking slightly at the corners.

"It's supposed to be unpleasant the first time," she said, chuckling. "Thought they teach you highborn girls at least that much."

Heated embarrassment crept up Sansa's cheek. This plan had been a horrible idea. She had no idea how to even ask what she really wanted to know.

And now she stood here in the ill-lit corridor of a brothel, confronted with a whore who quite obviously would rather be sleeping off whatever she had done last night and found herself struggling for words as if she was a simpleton.
"No, what I meant was... he... he put something on me, to make the way easier for him. Something that smelled of camomile and lavender..."

"Mag’s finest," the woman muttered, looking surprised and a bit more alert than before.

"But still afterwards he was angry and seemed so dissatisfied and he said... he said..."

As if remembering the humiliating scene wasn’t worse enough, repeating Clegane’s words to this woman who was of the profession Clegane seemed to have only slightly more use for than for herself seemed impossible.

"What did he say?" the woman prodded, clearly intrigued now.

"He said it was worse than with a whore," Sansa said, looking at her feet.

The woman was silent for a long while, but when Sansa dared to look up and see how much she had offended her, she looked somewhat amused.

"Come with me," she demanded and turned to lead the way.

Sansa trailed after her through a public room that still bore the signs of raucous going-ons from the night before. Half-empty pewter cups stood on the tables, some of them knocked over with their content spilled on the tables and on the floor, women’s undergarments lay strewn on the chairs and benches and in one corner a man slept with his head on his arms, having apparently spent the night here.

The smell the establishment gave off was a nauseating mix of sour wine, unwashed bodies and stale ale.

How anyone could willingly seek out such a place to find amusement was beyond her.

Sansa carefully picked her way through the room, meticulously avoiding the puddles of unidentifiable liquids on the floor.

"Name's Sibyl, by the way," the woman said when she opened a door to her to let her in.

"Sansa," she replied, just in time swallowing her last name before it spilled out. "Sansa Snow."

"Aah, that explains it," Sibyl said and then plopped down behind a rickety looking desk, strewn with all sorts of papers.

"Brothel’s mine," she explained, indicating the papers. "More paperwork than one would think, ‘specially ever since the dwarf’s penny."

Sansa vaguely remembered the uproar that had reached even her ears when Tyrion Lannister had decided on a special tax for whoring to pay for Joffrey’s wedding. Sansa shuddered involuntarily at the thought how close she had come to end up the dwarf’s wife.

Somehow, word of Tywin’s plans had reached the Tyrells just in time and after a lot of ugly words had been exchanged, Tyrwin had to call off the wedding as not to anger his allies, much to her own and even to Tyrion’s visible relief.

In turn, the Tyrells had to vow not to marry her to anyone without Tywin’s or the king’s consent.

She had never felt more like a sack of grain haggled over by greedy merchants than that day, but even so, relief had been prevalent.
She'd asked Clegane once who it might be she had to be grateful to for her timely deliverance from that particular fate, but the Hound had just angrily grunted something about "sodding idiot who doesn't know what's good for him" and she had never asked again.

If it hadn't been for Dontos Hollard having been found days before swimming in the harbour bottom up with a slit throat, she might have been inclined to think the former knight her saviour, but as it was, his identity remained a mystery.

"So," Sibyl resumed their conversation. "Your man wasn't too happy with you, I gather, and you wanna change that?"

Sansa nodded again.

"Can't see how that should be profitable to me, even if you pay me," Sibyl said, lazily leaning back in her chair. "Might lose a good customer."

Sansa could see her point and was just thinking how to convince her of the opposite, when something seemed to occur to Sibyl.

"He used Mag's grease, you said?"

"I don't know if that is what it's called," Sansa answered.

"That's what it's called. Old Mag has once been a whore, too, she has a few tricks up her sleeve. And that grease is one of the finest," Sibyl explained conversationally. "But there's just the one man I know of who uses it so regularly as to carry it around with him," Sibyl went on, staring off into space. "Some think him considerate, but I guess he just prefers cunts to be wet and ready, which doesn't come naturally what with the way he looks."

Sansa wouldn't have believed it possible to feel even worse about last night than she already did, but apparently, she had been wrong. She bit back a tart reply that this had nothing to do with his face and everything with quite a different part of him.

Sibyl's attention turned to her again.

"So the Hound has found himself a pretty little mistress," she said with a broad smile. "And the 'Crippled Kate's' stands to lose its most generous customer."

She threw her head back and let out a throaty laugh and still cackled with ill-concealed glee when she turned her attention to Sansa once again.

"Am I right?"

Sansa contemplated for a while if it was smart to give the woman that much information, but since she had already figured it out herself, she saw not much sense in denial, especially since it seemed to further Sibyl's inclination to help her.

"Yes."

"In this case, girl, listen up."

_Sansa sat up a bit straighter, just as she had back when her septa had spoken in serious tones to her. She didn't try to think about what it said about her that now instead of a septa, she listened to a woman who made her living selling herself._
A woman with dirty blonde hair that was mussed from sleep, red blotches on her cheek that might have been paint a few hours ago and eyes rimmed with black, most of which was smudged and would have given her a ghoulis look if not for the lively green eyes, bloodshot but clear, with which she held Sansa's gaze.

"I expect you to feel bruised and sore after what happened, especially with a man like him," she said almost kindly. "Go to Old Maggie after we're done here, she can give you something in which to bathe your cunt so it'll heal faster and everything you need to prevent getting pregnant."

That Old Maggie seemed to be a veritable cornucopia of all things to do with carnal relations, Sansa thought sourly and with a sigh nodded her consent to doing as she was bid.

"He... did not spill inside me," she felt obliged to supply for honesty's sake.

Sibyl arched a badly painted eyebrow in apparent surprise.

"Be that as it may," she finally said. "He might not think of it every time and you'd do well to be prepared."

She turned and rummaged through some chest until she had apparently found what she was looking for and put a little statue right in front of Sansa. Made from some black, exotic wood, it was smooth and polished to a sheen.

Only it wasn't a statue, it was a wooden representation of a man's… appendage.

Swallowing her misgivings and the urge to just turn from her foolish mission, Sansa eyed it critically. She might not have gotten a good look last night, but...

"It's not very accurate."

Sibyl chuckled.

"How so?"

"There are more veins, here," she said, indicating the places with her index finger. "And it's way too small."

Now the woman laughed openly.

"Heard as much about the infamous Hound," she said, still amused. "But trust me, girl, most men would be glad to have as much as this."

Sansa came home from her outing with her head full of advice, but was distracted by the mouth-watering smell of freshly cooked food that emanated from the back of the house.

Sneaking into the kitchen, she had a look at what seemed to be a sumptuous dinner being in the making.

"Are we expecting guests?"

Betsy gave her a withering look.

"We," she said, stressing the word, "are expecting the master to be here tonight and I won't have him think badly about my abilities as a cook. He should have no reason to regret hiring me."
Sansa sighed. Seemed like she was not the only one afraid of underperforming.

Her mood darkened quickly, however, when she remembered that unlike Betsy, she already had disappointed "the master".

For the last time, though, she thought, straightening her back.

Chapter End Notes

*Note: The name of the brothel "Crippled Kate's" is borrowed from "Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt". Novigrad is my visual reference for a densely populated medieval city like King's Landing.
Chapter Notes

Thanks to all of my readers for your continued interest and support, it means a lot.

Content warning:
Overall tags of the story still apply (explicit, dubcon) and the situation is still emotionally problematic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 6: Practicing

Since they both had no idea when the Hound was going to make his appearance, Betsy had prepared something she could keep warm over the fire and had busied herself with something or other in the kitchen, while Sansa had nothing to do but wringing her hands, replaying her conversation with Sibyl over and over and wait.

The long awaited entrance came after darkness had fallen.

After a stiff greeting, she informed him that dinner would be ready at once and he nodded and went upstairs to get rid of his armour and refresh himself.

There was a slight stagger to his steps as he walked upstairs, probably meaning he was drunk. He hadn't been for quite a long time, at least so far as she had noticed when seeing him, but maybe he didn't drink when he was on duty on principle. She had no idea what he did when he had time off. Well, aside from visiting brothels, that was.

Betsy was just done serving when he came back down again. Wearing just a light tunic and breeches, he still looked as big and intimidating as he did wearing full plate. While other men seemed considerably smaller when out of armour, the same couldn't be said about him.

He started on the food without preamble and manners and Sansa couldn't help but looking at him censoriously.

Clegane was a lord's son, had been around highborn people most of his life, so he knew how to behave properly, he just chose not to, in what felt to her like a calculated insult.

Noticing her stare, he looked up, still chewing with a half-open mouth.

"I am a dog, girl, I eat like one. Get used to it."

Gritting her teeth, she gingerly took up her eating knife and started to pick at her own food without much desire to eat anything at all.

"So, how was your day?" she asked in an attempt to start something resembling a conversation.

"Stop your chirping," he said around a mouthful of stewed mutton, not taking his attention away
from his food. "I've no need for empty talk."

She fell silent, anger slowly creeping up inside of her. \textit{Well}, she thought, \textit{let's make it less empty.}

"Did you give the sheet to Joffrey?"

That, at least, got her his attention and he looked up at her sharply.

"Aye," he said, his eyes fixed on her face to gauge her reaction.

"Was he... pleased?"

\textit{More pleased with the result than you were with producing it?} she added silently.

"Not so much," he answered.

Sansa was tempted to laugh. Apparently, she couldn't even get bleeding right.

"The small council decided to make some fuss about it though," he continued, still looking at her out of watchful eyes. "Blamed me for what happened."

Her stomach dropped. The small council had thought to intervene?

She had known the Hound had spoken to them about her situation before, she had received a couple of visitors who were mainly concerned that nothing "untoward" had happened. They looked at her wounds and listened to her story with compassion, but nothing had ever come of it.

Had she been precipitous in giving herself to Clegane during the very first night? Had she made a gigantic, irredeemable mistake?

He'd told her he would not have forced her; she had offered herself to him. If it turned out the small council would have helped her had they known about Joffrey's plans, she had no one else but herself to blame.

"Why do they care, all of a sudden?" she asked quietly.

Again he looked at her intently, as if deciding if and what to tell her.

"They have doubts whether or not Bolton's wife really is your sister."

Of course, she thought bitterly. It had to be about her claim all over again. It would've been too much to ask for them to just care about her being treated well.

A very small voice inside her piped up with the notion that now that she was ruined, she would never again have to worry about whether people just cared about her claim or her as a person. The thought was almost liberating.

"You don't look surprised," his rasping voice broke into her thoughts.

"I am not," she said honestly. "Arya is four years my junior, she is barely past her twelfth nameday right now. For her to have flowered and already born a child... I cannot believe it."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Besides," she continued, suddenly needing to say it out loud to convince herself that her little sister couldn't be in the claws of that monster, "Arya would never just submit to being the bastard's wife. 
She would rather kill herself. She was... is... a lot stronger than me."

His gaze snapped towards hers, anger blazing at her, but soon enough his eyes went blank again.

After some more minutes of eating in silence, he leaned back in his chair and carefully wiped his mouth and hands clean with the wet cloth Betsy had provided.

Sansa stood, knowing the time had come to do her part.

Hiding her shaking hands in the folds of her dress, she walked over to him.

Even seated, he was but a head smaller than her, so she had to bend down not too far for her lips to reach the underside of his jaw to place a gentle kiss there.

He inhaled sharply, but she kept moving her lips slowly down his neck.

Find something about him that you like, Sibyl's voice echoed in her thoughts. Don't focus on what you don't, it'll only make things harder for you.

It hadn't taken her long to decide she liked the look of his neck, the only part of him besides his face and hands she had ever seen uncovered before last night's events. Liked the play of muscles and tendons underneath bronzed skin when he moved his head.

With her nose so near to his skin, she was reminded that she liked the smell of him as well. Having been close to him many times before, she would've recognized him amongst hundreds by his smell alone. Lye soap, horse and leather - wine, sometimes, although not today - and something that was unique only to him. A smell as clean as the man it belonged to. She'd never known anyone who was as meticulous about cleanliness as the Hound. With him, it certainly wasn't vanity, apparently he just liked it.

Which made what she was planning to do that much less daunting.

"Sansa what...," he said hoarsely when her lips had reached the edge of his shirt.

Going with what she had been told, she placed one hand on the inside of his thigh, slowly moving it toward his groin.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him reaching for the table top, gripping it as if he needed something to hold on to.

Moving closer to him, she was reminded of something else she liked: he was always warm. Right now, he was fairly radiating heat. Oftentimes after she had been stripped, or sometimes when Joffrey had found it amusing to have her repeatedly doused with ice-cold water, having him hold her afterwards was the only thing that brought a semblance of warmth back into her body.

Yes, she liked that a lot.

When her hand reached its goal, she found him already hard under the thin material of his breeches. And so huge she had to stifle a gasp.

Damn Sibyl and her inaccurate model! She was severely doubting that what she had practiced today would even work with something this size. But since backing out now was not an option, she cupped him a bit more firmly with her hand, eliciting a soft groan that vibrated against her lips where she had still pressed them to his throat.
Since it sounded as if he liked what she was doing, she started unlacing his breeches, only to be stopped by a large hand clamping around her wrist.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a whisper.

Reluctantly, she moved her lips away from his neck and sank to her knees between his legs, using her other hand to do what the now restricted one had done before.

"You can't tell?" she asked just as quietly.

He looked at her for a seemingly endless moment, but then closed his eyes, leaned his head back against the high backrest of his chair and let go of her hand.

Taking this as a sign to continue, she made quick work of the rest of the laces and finally freed him. Her insides quaked with remembered pain when she held his manhood in her hand, feverishly hot, hard and so big it was no wonder it had felt as if she was torn apart last night.

He had not meant to hurt her, she realized, he just couldn't have helped it.

No one can hurt her as I can.

Even in this, he had not boasted or lied.

For a panicked moment, she drew blanks on how she was to proceed, until scraps of advice started coming back to her.

Pay attention to the head, it's the most sensitive part... never use your teeth... hold him tight at the base... stroke his balls... hollow your cheeks and suck... swirl your tongue...

It had been quite a lot to remember and she soon was so occupied following Sibyl's instructions, that she almost missed the soft curses muttered above her.

Most men like it so much, it takes them no time at all to come.

Judging from the agonizing eternity it had taken last night, Sansa thought that a bit of hyperbole, until she noticed how rigid he had become, every muscle flexed, and his knuckles white where he still had a death grip on the table.

Their balls draw tight to their bodies when they are close and they are getting a bit bigger. By then you should be prepared to either swallow or have them come over your face, whatever you prefer.

Sibyl had only laughed when Sansa had told her indignantly that she preferred neither.

Now that the moment was there, she was sure the Hound wouldn't like the messier of the two choices, so - following Sibyl's words to the letter - she let him fill her mouth and then took a long swallow.

"Fuck!"

She wasn't quite done when he suddenly shoved her backwards, his manhood leaving her mouth with a plopping sound, while his seed trickled out of the corner of her mouth and down her chin.

He stared at her out of wide eyes, chest heaving with panting breaths and he looked... angry. Furious, even.

What reason she could've given him to be mad at her, having followed all of Sibyl's instructions so
diligently, she had no idea.

"Go...," he panted, "go clean yourself."

She blushed and averted her eyes. She'd been right about him wanting to avoid a mess. Apparently, this was what he was angry about.

After washing and rinsing her mouth, she was about to slink back to the sitting room when a solid wall barred her way.

A solid wall of seven feet plus, very angry male.

He had his hands braced against the sides of the corridor, barely having to stretch his arms for that, and glared down on her.

"Where did you learn to do that?" he demanded, his voice strained as if he kept himself from shouting.

Sansa was taken aback at that request and somewhat reluctant to name her source. She didn't want to get Sibyl into any trouble.

"I..." she began haltingly, but was interrupted when he shoved his angry face closer to hers.

"And don't even start telling me that sucking cock was taught you by your septa somewhere between embroidery and polite conversation."

If she hadn't been so flustered by his irrational behaviour, the mental image would have made her smile.

"I went to the Street of Silk and asked..."

"A whore?" he barked, making her jump. "You went and asked a whore?"

Angry tears shot hotly into her eyes but she fought them down.

"Yes I did," she hissed back. "You were not satisfied last night, so..."

His eyes, angry slits before, rounded for a moment before narrowing in anger once again.

"You are not my whore," he grated, stabbing a finger in her direction. "And I won't have you act like one."

With that he turned abruptly and went upstairs.

"Then what DO you want from me?" she screeched after him, not getting an answer.

He came back down minutes later, fully attired and apparently set on spending another night away from his own house.

"Did you enjoy it?" she asked with forced calm when he opened the door.

He paused, hunching his shoulders as if uncomfortable in his armour, but didn't turn around to face her.

"You couldn't tell?"
Anger, Sandor found, was oftentimes too tame a word for what he felt. Right now, he was livid; a fire churning in his gut that he knew would only be quenched if he went and used his fists on something... or his sword.

He was spoiling for a fight so badly, he would've liked nothing better than to find some squalid fighting pit somewhere in Flea Bottom and beat some of the residing champions to pulp. Sadly, his reputation preceded him already, so he would find no opponents there.

There was not much left for him but wait for the morrow so he could let go of his frustrations in the training yard.

A whore!

He couldn't get past that thought and every time he came back to it, the flames in the pit of his belly roared up anew.

He knew that he shouldn't have said what he did last night, but how was he supposed to know she would think it was somehow her fault and therefore she had to try and remedy it?

How should he have foreseen in his wildest imagination that she would traipse through the city all by herself – risking gods knew what – to get the advice of a whore?

And by the seven hells, the girl had taken her lessons seriously!

He wasn't a man who lost control with a woman, ever. Even last night, he had to some extend been able to control the depth and force of his thrusts to spare her pain, even if at the expense of his own pleasure.

But tonight...

He cursed under his breath and Stranger sidled about nervously under him as if aware of his master's mood.

She had already impeded his ability to think straight when she had put her silky soft lips on his neck, softly snuffling at his skin like a curious cat. He had been so dazed, it had taken him way too long to see where this was going and by the time she was kneeling between his legs, hands on his cock and looking up at him with what he had thought was a plea in her eyes... how was a man to say no to that? Even one who had resolved to never touch her again, because all he ever seemed to do was put her in harm's way.

And how was he to call a halt to things once she had wrapped her mouth around him, all eager and hot, had stroked him with her tongue and fondled him with her dainty, soft hands - so unlike those of the women who usually performed the service for him?

Still, all the while he was determined to draw back in time, to not sully her with his seed, but then he had made the mistake of looking down, of seeing her sweet lips, the ones that had felt so heavenly on his skin, moving up and down on his cock.

He'd lost it then. Just for a short moment, mind, but it had been the one moment that had pushed him over the edge, had him spill into the mouth of one of the land's most highborn girls as if she was a common whore.

He'd always wanted to protect her from exactly this sort of debasement, had always done his best to
threaten anyone who even as much as suggested it. Little did he know how spectacularly he would fail when it came to protecting her from himself.

She had to be thoroughly disgusted with him.

Hells, he had been disgusted with himself.

And damn him, but he should at least have apologized. But while she was gone cleaning herself, the question of where she might have learned to do what she had just done had wrought havoc on his ability to behave with some decency - again.

Had someone forced her to it while he hadn't been there to watch her? Or did she know it from a tryst with one of the handsome knights she used to adore? Who did he have to geld for shoving his prick into her mouth?

But once again, as it turned out, no other man was to blame for another bit of Sansa Stark's innocence going down the drain than he himself.

He had done such a fine job of ruining her in the timespan of only two days, Joffrey should be proud.

Cursing once again, he kicked Stranger into a gallop, the clatter of his horse's hooves ringing hollowly through the night darkened streets.

It would be a long wait until practice tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

*runs to hide under a rock*
I am awed and humbled by all the positive and supportive responses I got for the last chapter. My worries seemed to have been entirely unfounded, even though I really thought that Sandor's reaction would not go over all too well.

So, without further ado, onto the next one. It's only a short, transitional chapter (with no content warning as well) by I hope you'll enjoy it anyway.

Chapter 7: Waiting

The Hound hadn't come back to the house for three nights in a row.

Sansa wasn't too upset about it the first evening, still smarting about the way he had treated her despite her best efforts to please him.

She spent a nice evening in Betsy's company chattering amiably while sewing some hangings for the windows and walls and afterwards had the luxury of the new featherbed all to herself

When he didn't come the second night, Betsy started looking at her accusingly, because it obviously had to be her fault "the master" was steering clear of his own house. Conversation cooled off considerably and after the third night, Betsy didn't talk to her at all.

Fed up with the silly girl's silent treatment, Sansa grabbed her cloak and wandered aimlessly around the city for a while until she found herself back in the Street of Silk, knocking at the door of Sibyl's establishment.

After the fiasco of three nights ago, she had decided not to visit Sibyl again. For one thing not to bring Clegane's ire on Sibyl as well, for another because her lessons had been far from being helpful. But once again she found herself in need of someone to talk to.

Sibyl looked as tired as last time, but welcomed her much more warmly than before. She offered her a seat in the room that seemed to serve as her office, brewed some tea for them and asked her how she had applied her newly acquired knowledge. Apparently it was all the prompting Sansa had needed to pour out the whole story in all its sordid details.

"And?" Sibyl inquired after she was done, looking at Sansa with honest curious. "Could you tell?"

"He was almost completely quiet," she said with a sigh.

"Some men are," Sibyl said, resting her chin on her folded hands. "Mostly those who have grown up as soldiers from an early age. They haven't known much privacy growing up, so they have learned to be very quiet when they come. Others perceive it as a weakness to let a woman know what they are feeling. So, since he came and so fast at that, you can be pretty sure he enjoyed himself."

Sansa shook her head.
"But he was so angry afterwards!"

Sibyl shrugged. "Who knows what goes on in their heads sometimes. Most men would've been mellow and nice afterwards, but your man seems to be a special case. There's naught to do but try to find out what pleases him."

Sansa got up to stare out of the window, mutinous. Why should she exert herself trying to find out how to please the man, when he didn't make even the slightest effort of being nice?

"Speaking of trying," Sibyl said, pushing herself up from her seat at the desk. "How's your cunt?"

Still not quite inundated to Sibyl's overly coarse way of putting things, Sansa winced before she turned.

"I think my … my lady parts are much better, thank you."

Sibyl cocked her head to the side, obviously not convinced.

"No trouble walking or sitting down?"

"No."

"Burning while peeing? Itching?"

An almost painful blush started creeping upwards from her neck to her face.

"No."

"Does it still look inflamed or bruised?"

The question had her gaping for a moment, but then she closed her mouth with an audible snap and raised her chin.

"How am I supposed to know?"

Sibyl chuckled.

"By looking at it?"

"What?" Sansa cried, scandalized.

"Putting her hands onto her hips, Sibyl huffed.

"Girl, I have quite enough of your high and mighty bullshit!" she said. "You are selling yourself to this man, whether you like it or not. You are selling your pretty face and your nice hair and you are selling your cunt. Now I am pretty sure you spend a lot of time in front of a mirror prettying up your face and hair, but since you are selling your cunt as well, you should damn well know what it looks like."

Tears of shame welled up in Sansa's eyes as the woman positioned a chair in front of a large mirror and motioned for her to sit.

"Don't make such a fuss," Sibyl said, not unkindly. "I promise you'll thank me for the lesson one day."

Taking a deep breath, Sansa finally walked towards the chair, rucking up her dress as she went.
Sibyl was right after all, there was nowhere lower to go than she already had.

Sibyl gave a low whistle when Sansa finally sat – utterly exposed with her legs apart – on the chair.

"A true redhead, I see", she said, "Nice pink lips, a real beauty. You could've become quite rich and famous at a place like Alayaya's."

Sansa sighed. If there ever was a compliment she could've lived without...

"I think it ugly," she said, not seeing the appeal of her exposed flesh.

The woman who eyed the mirror with unwavering attention laughed quietly.

"See it from a man's point of view. For them, it's the door to paradise. They love looking at a nice young cunt like yours, knowing it's theirs to do with as they want."

With a violent shudder, Sansa remembered how the Hound had looked at her two nights past. Well, at least that explained it.

"Putting their cock into it, touching it… some even like licking it."

She froze.

"Licking?" she repeated tonelessly.

"If you're lucky," Sibyl said with a wide smile. "Never heard of 'The bear and the maiden fair'?"

She had, but it was just a funny little song about a maid falling for a bear because he could dance so well. Most men found it hilarious, she still remembered how King Robert had been red in the face at hearing it performed, slapping his meaty thighs with mirth.

"He licked the honey from her hair…" Sibyl sang softly and decidedly off-key.

Sansa glared at the woman's reflection.

"You just ruined that song for me," she complained.

Sibyl's lips quirked, then she snorted and finally burst into laughter. The absurdity of the situation could not be denied and before long, Sansa had joined her, almost doubling over with hilarity. She didn't know if she had ever laughed like that in her life and if, it had to be a long time ago.

"Can I get decent again?" Sansa asked after she had calmed.

"In just a moment," Sibyl said, wiping tears from her eyes. "See that little bundle of flesh right atop your opening?"

"Yes."

Sibyl gestured for her to pull her skirts back down.

"That's your sweet spot," she explained. "If you're in the mood, touching it will bring you more pleasure than you could imagine."

Sansa nodded obediently, not believing a word. None of things she had learned from Sibyl so far had been even remotely pleasant.
"You seemed to have healed nicely," Sibyl gave her final verdict. "Probably wasn't half as bad as it had felt to you. It shouldn't hurt when he takes you again, although you shouldn't expect pleasure either, it takes a bit to get used to this."

Sansa almost snorted at the thought that not being in pain would be pleasant enough for her taste. She put a few stags on Sibyl's desk since she had taken some of her time once again. When she turned to go, Sibyl stopped her, scrutinizing her with narrowed eyes.

"No," she said. "Can't let you go like that, there might be a thing or two you still need to know."

...  

When she came back to the street where she now lived, she marvelled as always at the peacefulness of the mundane life around her, at the joy of just seeing people going about their various tasks and chores, of children playing in the street, unafraid and heedless of the bustle around them.

This time, however, a couple of figures disturbed the serene scenery, men who somehow looked out of place with their military bearing, only very badly concealed under civilian clothes that looked rather too fine for a district like this one.

They tried to give the impression of being deep in conversation, but nonetheless peered at Clegane's house every now and then and looked anxiously up and down the street.

She couldn't even begin to guess whose men they were. Probably not Joffrey's, he could always just order Clegane to bring her back. There was a chance they were sent by someone trying to help her, but that sort of help never came without its own price and since she was already paying for protection and not entirely unhappy with her current circumstances, she had no inclination to find out whether she was right or wrong.

Let her protector sort out this mess, she decided, lowered her head and drew her big cap deeper into her face before marching purposefully into a shop right next to the house that was now her home. As it turned out, the shop's owner was husband to the young mother she had helped on her first day here. They helped her climbing the wooden fence that separated their backyard from hers.

Betsy almost dropped the bowl she was holding when Sansa made her dishevelled appearance from the back entrance.

"My lady," she gasped when sufficiently in control of herself again, but still flustered enough to have forgotten she wasn't speaking to her. "You almost gave me a heart-attack, what happened?"

"Maybe it's nothing, just me being paranoid, but there are some strange men lurking outside the house," Sansa explained her unusual entry.

"Spoke to one of them," Betsy said, nodding. "He asked 'bout the master and if this 'ere was his house and whether a woman lived with him and some such."

Sansa's misgiving hadn't been unfounded then.

"What did you tell him?"

Betsy shrugged.

"Told 'im I'm just minding the house and don't know who it belongs to and that no one lives here besides me."
Sansa smiled.
"Clever girl."

The words brought a glow of pride to the girl's cheeks.

"I'd like you to go the Red Keep and give a message to the... master. Would you do this?"

"'course, my lady."

Sansa ran upstairs to fetch some writing utensils from her belongings, but then it took her quite a while to come up with what to write.

Strange men outside the house, come quickly!

No, that sounded like a command. Besides, if someone were to intercept that message, she might as well have given her full name along with it. She had to think of something that sounded more harmless, like a message a wife would just write to her husband or something.

Please come home.

She pondered that one for a while. It didn't get across that the situation was urgent.

Men are watching your house, what do you want me to do?

Just as useless as the first one.

Please come home.

She shook her head, annoyed with herself for coming back to that again. Besides, this wasn't her home. Her home was Winterfell.

We are in danger, need your help.

If anything would get him to drop everything and come running to her aid it would be this, but what if she was misjudging the situation and there was no danger at all? He'd be furious with her and she had had quite enough of that.

Please come home

Just to rid herself of the thought she wrote it down to see if it looked even more ridiculous on paper than it sounded in her head.

It didn't. The rest wrote itself.

Please come home, but be careful. S.

...

Betsy came back about two hours later, having done some shopping on the way.

"And?" Sansa asked as soon as the girl stepped inside the door.

She had been pacing almost the entire time, alternately envisioning a dire fate befalling either Betsy or herself in the meantime. She imagined the men outside suddenly deciding to storm the house and kidnap her, imagined Betsy being tortured for information about her whereabouts, imagined Clegane
being commanded to stay with Joffrey for the next several weeks.

"Gave him the message," Betsy said and then winked at her. "Must have been quite something
naughty you wrote to him," she continued. "His good ear turned all red and he cleared his throat a
few times and then barked at me to hurry back to you and await his return."

"It was an open piece of paper," Sansa said, indignant that Betsy thought it had been some sort of
love missive. "You could've read it, there was nothing naughty about it."

"Can't read," the girl said with a shrug. "Just telling you what I saw."
Chapter Notes

At the moment, I am lagging a bit when it comes to writing. Meaning I am posting faster than writing new chapter, so to catch up, the next one will be posted after the holidays (next Sunday).

Thanks to everyone with me so far, your support is fantastic and always a great inspiration.

Hope you all enjoy this one.

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Chapter 8: Sleeping

The hour had grown so late when at last the master of the house made his appearance, she had been convinced he would not come at all, despite what Betsy had said.

He stumbled into the door, looking utterly exhausted.

"Littlefinger's men," he said after having wolfed down the food Betsy had put on the table. "They were trying to see where I'd go, so I let them tail me through the city for hours until they've lost the scent. Offed one of them as a message to the little fucker so he knows I am onto his games."

A slight wave of unease hit her at the thought that he'd just murdered someone.

*Killing is the sweetest thing there is…*

Despite what he once told her, he didn't look as if he had enjoyed himself. Much like he hadn't after he'd killed...

*No,* she reminded herself forcefully. *Not that, don't go there.*

"Why would Lord Baelish try to find me?" she asked to distract herself.

He turned his head to her and regarded her with something akin to surprise.

"Still that naive?" he asked and it didn't come out angry or disdainful as usual, but as if he honestly couldn't believe it. "What Joffrey did… giving you to me…," his eyes lingered for a moment on her as if he expected her to say something to that, "it made you fair game. And hardly any man wants you as badly as that little shit wants you."

Sansa shuddered with disgust. She knew why the man wanted her.

"He doesn't want me; I am just a stand-in for my mother."

He let his head fall back against the chair, closing his eyes.

"Be that as it may," he said with an air of finality. "I've no intention of letting him have you."
Hardly any man wants you as badly, resounded in her head.

*Are you one of those men,* she wanted to ask but kept quiet. *Do you want me so badly? Is this the reason you saved me time and again?*

*And why, if you truly want me, are we still so far apart?*

She didn't even know what kind of answer she'd like to hear to those questions, so they were better left unasked.

"Don't wake me in the morning," he grumbled and then got up and stumbled into the direction of the stairs.

...

She followed him quite a long time later, after having done not much more than staring unseeingly at the needlework in her hands and hoping he would already have fallen asleep and wouldn't demand anything from her.

He'd come back, he'd taken care of Littlefinger's men. He'd ensured her further safety.

She should be glad, happy, even.

But all she felt was that once again something out of her control had happened and someone else had to handle the situation because she hadn't known what to do and how to take charge of the situation.

On an impulse, she threw the needlework against the wall.

She hated that feeling of helplessness. It felt as if through all her life, she'd been helpless, left to the whims of the men around her. A toy for them to do with as they wished. Hurt her, mock her, sell her, take her, protect her. All as they saw fit.

For once she'd like to have power over something, anything... anyone.

The intensity of her anger was a novelty to her, something she had never allowed herself to feel to such an extent, but there was something invigorating, almost refreshing about it and for once she could understand why it seemed to be the only emotion Clegane ever showed.

It was much better than feeling nothing.

...

When she came into the room with the bed she had to share this night, the air was chilly.

The Hound hadn't bothered to put new logs into the fire so it had gone out. He'd probably done it on purpose, too, she surmised. Knowing his story, it might be possible he wasn't comfortable sleeping in a room with a burning fire.

Opting against cleaning the hearth and lighting a new fire, she walked towards the bed, taking in his sleeping form, faintly illuminated by moonlight.

Even horizontal, sprawled out on his belly with his face pressed into the pillow, he was an intimidating man, his strength apparent in his thick limbs, in the muscles bunching under the thin material of the linen shirt he wore untucked from his breeches.

She wondered grumpily if the man was ever without his clothes, when all she did lately was having
to bare her most private parts to anyone who asked it of her.

As she tried to get under the covers, she discovered to her even greater disgruntlement that he had fallen asleep atop them, making it all but impossible for her to cover herself.

She almost growled with irritation as she tried half-successfully to have at least her naked feet covered before she tried to fall asleep, severely hindered to do just that by the anger grumbling in her belly and the cold sending shivers over her body.

...

Sleep must have come to her eventually, though, because she woke what could only have been a few hours later, shivering and teeth chattering, because the man in her bed had somehow managed to pull the last bit of bedding away from her and she lay there completely exposed to the night's chill.

She huffed angrily and was about the get up and find herself something else to huddle into, when she was kept from doing so by a strong arm pulling her against a broad and warm chest.

For a moment, she shivered even harder as the warmth of his body penetrated her own.
"M'sorry," he mumbled sleepily and, surprisingly adroit, wrestled the cover out from under himself and wrapped it around her.

Too tired and cold to contemplate her position nestled inside his very close embrace, she just relished the comfort and warmth it provided and was quickly pulled into the blackness of sleep again.

...

When she woke, it appeared both of them hadn't moved.

His arm was still around her, his front against her back and they were both still insulated against the morning cold by the thick featherbed, its inside comfortably heated by the warmth his body gave off in copious amounts.

Grey light only slightly tinged with orange shone through the windows, informing her that it was still very early in the morning. Even Betsy seemed to be not up yet; the characteristic bustling downstairs not audible for the time being, meaning she could stay where she was for a while longer.

She felt so languid and complacent, it took a long time before her mind started telling her that she shouldn't feel so safe with him.

That she should be afraid after the pain he'd inflicted on her, after the way he'd treated her.

She should, her mind kept insisting, be alarmed by the way his hand was cupping the curve of her breast through the thin material of her shift and the way his erection pressed against the small of her back.

But she wasn't. For such a long time, on so many occasions, she had relished to be close to him, always liked the warmth and safety closeness to him provided, she just couldn't find it in her to be afraid right now.

As she allowed herself to bask in the joy of feeling held and protected by a man as capable as he was, she realized with a sudden clarity that it was this she had sought to barter for when she had given herself to him.
She liked this so much, needed it so much, she would have done everything to have a right to it. That it would not only be given out of pity or duty, only ever when she was too hurt and weak to really enjoy it, but that she could just walk into his arms whenever she wanted to.

After everything Sibyl had taught her, it had certainly been foolish to expect as much, but she'd somehow thought that if he took her, it would be more like this. Warm and intimate and… nice.

Still enjoying the comfortable embrace, she wriggled a bit closer to the body behind her, having forgotten about his arousal for a moment.

A throaty groan came from behind her at that and she froze, barely daring to breathe.

"Stop moving, if you know what's good for you," he warned, voice even scratchier than usual.

As if to underscore his warning, his hand firmed on her breast, sending a strange sensation from there down to her belly.

From his words she deduced that for now he was content just lying there, holding her to him. She was sure, too, that he would even let her get up and leave the bed if she wanted to. But she still didn't want to. And if that meant having to deal with his needs, well, as Madame Sibyl's most eager student, she was prepared to do that.

She turned in his arms, facing him.

He opened his eyes when she did, looking at her with a carefully guarded expression. An expression that changed to surprise, when she slowly ran her hand up his arm.

"Why would that be good for me?" she asked.

His hips jerked towards her, pressing the heavy ridge of his manhood into her belly. The sudden movement sent a sharp spike of fear stabbing through her and it was all she could do not to flinch from him, not to let her eyes reflect the panic she felt at the thought of having once again to endure the painful intrusion of what lay hard and demanding against her.

"Because," he said and then moved so he could gently nuzzle her neck, mirroring what she'd done three nights ago, "I very badly want to fuck you."

A jolt went through her at his blunt admission, a feeling not clearly identifiable as good or bad. Before she could censor herself, a question made it past her lips.

"Even though it was so bad last time?"

He grew eerily still next to her, his breath whispering against her skin. She wondered if he would be angry again or if he would turn from her now when reminded of how she had disappointed him.

"Wasn't bad," he murmured. "Just could've been better."

Even she could tell that this was a lie to placate her, but she thought better of calling him out on it. What purpose would it serve to fight with him over this?

"Then let's make it better," she said softly, trying to sound inviting rather than afraid.

He lifted his head to fix her with one of his enigmatic stares again.

"You do not have to do this," he said.
"I know," she said and at least that was no lie. She knew that not only would he not force her, his protection and care of her was not contingent on her compliance either, regardless of what she had told herself. He had never demanded anything from her before, it was silly to think he would start now.

If she gave herself to him, now that it wasn't about Joffrey's order anymore, it had to be because she wanted to repay him, not because she had to.

He nodded shortly at hearing her answer and lowered his head to her neck again, while his hand cautiously stroked over her breast as if afraid of hurting her.

There was so much care in his handling of her, she forgot her fear for a moment. Long enough to think that the feel of his hand through the fabric of her shift was not unwelcome and the way his lips caressed her exposed neck was actually quite pleasant.

Fear came back with a vengeance, though, when his hand wandered to the hem of her shift to pull it up to her waist and he proceeded to probe the place between her legs.

She took a fortifying breath and opened her legs for him.

"You still sore?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He rolled away from her for a moment, doing something at the side of the bed she didn't see because she kept her eyes closed.

When he was next to her again, she smelled lavender and chamomile and sure enough felt the cold of the paste against her opening when he put his fingers on her again, spreading the ointment.

_Breathe evenly in and out, _Sibyl's advice came to her, _imagine your cunt being a flower that opens and blooms with every breath you take_.

She had giggled when Sibyl had told her that, but was very far from laughing now as Clegane positioned himself between her legs and fumbled one-handed with the laces of his breeches, while the other still stroked her.

His fingers didn't hurt, though, so she found the calm to do what she had been advised and prepare herself as well as she could.

Control of her fears almost slipped her leash once again when she felt him press against her. But before panic could fully form, he had already pushed inside and curiously enough, there was no pain at all. Some discomfort at being stretched tightly around the intruder, but nothing even close to what she had felt four nights ago.

She was so relieved at the discovery, tension drained out of her in a rush, making her realize that she had not been nearly as relaxed as Sibyl had told her to be, because something inside her softened and gave and she felt him slip even deeper.

He grunted when he did and then held himself motionless for a few seconds. Even with her eyes closed, she could feel how he fought to control whatever it was that usually drove men when they were with a woman. Despite her ignorance when it came to these matters, she knew he tried not to hurt her, that even in this he meant to protect her from the worst of it.

"Open your eyes," he demanded after a few moments and she obeyed.
He moved inside her with slow, controlled movements while his eyes bored into hers, a deep frown on his face.

"Does it hurt?"

She shook her head again. He frowned a little less and breathed out deeply in what sounded like relief.

Carefully holding his gaze, she tried to concentrate on what she truly felt... down there.

He slid in and out of her easily now, probably thanks to 'Mag's finest' and instead of feeling torn apart as last time, she felt... filled; slightly proud that she could accommodate him like that on only the second try. The sensation of being stretched to her limit had given way to a slight tingling that was almost pleasant, a bit like blood flowing back into cold fingers.

If this was how it could be, she could do this without fear, with joy, even. Just like she should've done the first time.

He was still watching her with hawk's eyes, as if looking for any sign of discomfort, so she decided to show him she didn't mind what he was doing. She lifted her hand, put it on his face and smiled at him.

She didn't quite know what reaction she had expected of him at that, maybe an answering smile or a kiss or something like that.

What she had not expected was for him to suddenly be the one who closed his eyes and groaned as if in pain. He jerked into her with thrusts that were far from being the careful movements from before and finally ripped himself away from her to spill his seed onto her still partly clad belly.

"Fuck," he muttered barely audible amidst panting breaths and then moved to the side to plop down on his back, still fighting for air. He'd said the same crude thing after she had pleased him a few days earlier and she still had no idea why he did.

She carefully watched him to see if he would blow up at her as he had last time, but curiously enough, his anger didn't seem directed at her. If she should take a guess, she'd say he was somehow angry at himself.

For what, she had no idea. Or maybe she had, now that she thought about it.

Something had changed when she had touched him, as if something he meant to rein in had slipped his leash and now he was angry he had let it.

*I made him lose control.*

She smiled as the thought took root in her, waking a heady feeling of accomplishment.

*I made him lose control.*

On the heels of the victorious feeling came another thought. She had wished for something she could control, something to which she was not just a helpless victim and maybe this was it.

It might not be much and it certainly wasn't something to boast about, but in this, with him, she had some sway. She could somehow direct how the encounters between them played out, and all she needed to learn was how.
At long last, Sandor's heart stopped its desperate attempt to hammer its way out of his ribcage after the most intense release he had in... forever, probably. Right now, he couldn't remember.

He knew he should be basking in it, slap himself on the back for having managed to both not hurt her and still get satisfaction for himself.

But something didn't feel right about this, something seemed off and he couldn't figure out what.

It had already started yesterday, when he held her missive in his hands that had in equal parts alarmed and weirdly unsettled him with its sweetness.

*Please come home,* she had written and the one thing that struck him most was the word 'home'.

He couldn't remember ever having called any place home. Certainly not Clegane Keep and no other place afterwards. The house in which Sansa now lived had never been more than a bolthole, a place to sleep when Gregor was in the city. He had never so much as eaten anything there, let alone that it would have occurred to him to make himself comfortable there.

When he had come into this house three nights ago, there had been a fire in the hearth and the scent of food in the air. Upstairs, a fresh pitcher of water and a bar of fine lye soap had been waiting for him and when he had sat down for a hearty meal, the most beautiful girl in the whole of Westeros was sitting across from him, trying to lure him into conversation.

Was this what people meant when they talked about home? Was this what he could expect every night if he went there?

He had not tried to find out. As subsequent events of that evening had proved, he could not trust himself to make the right choices when he was around her and he was sick of making the wrong ones.

Heat had blazed inside of him at the memory of what Sansa had served him as dessert that night and only when the little servant in front of him (Betsy, he had to remind himself) had started to giggle very quietly had he remembered that she was still waiting for an answer.

She'd curtsied and run after he had given his orders and left him to ponder the note with a mounting sense of impending danger.

Sure enough, he had barely cantered out of the keep on Stranger's back, when he noticed a man following him. There seemed to be about a handful of them, more or less skilfully tailing him to see where he was going, but it took more than a few hired thugs to fool him. Instead he had fooled them. He was pretty sure they now suspected Sansa's hideout in quite a different part of the city.

He'd hoped that eliminating the threat Sansa had been rightfully worried about would put his mind at ease once again, but it didn't. He was even more on edge than before when he reached the door of his house.

Instead of the warm welcome some foolish part of him had hoped for after his efforts, he found Sansa unsmiling and taciturn, interested only in Baelish's little intrigue. Although he had not truly expected her to be as openly willing to please him as she had been last time – not after the way he had thanked her for her efforts – he was inexplicably disappointed that he had to crawl into a lonely bed just like the three miserable nights before.

He fell asleep to the nagging feeling that something unknown was irrevocably shifting beneath him,
between them. Something over which he had no control.

His dreams were not helping either.

Dreams of finding her standing in the snow, only clad in a thin shift, teeth chattering and her feet two blocks of solid ice. For some reason, it seemed he himself had taken away her cloak and he vaguely remembered giving it back, wrapping her into it and taking her in his arms to warm her up as he had done many times before.

This morning, when he came awake from an arousing dream to an even more stirring reality, with her firm breast in his palm and her pert little ass rubbing against his cock, the notion that what was different needn't be something bad had very shortly been in his head, but dissipated as soon as she reminded him what he had done to her.

Only that she threw him even more off-balance moments later when she told him he could do what by then he so badly wanted. He'd seen that she had been afraid, but there had been courage and resolve as well and as always, her strength made him desire her even more.

Despite himself, despite all his heroic resolutions to the contrary, he once again couldn't resist temptation. As if something in him had come alive that didn't heed the commands of his conscious mind, but solely followed the primal call of everything that was Sansa.

How her body had so readily accepted him, how she somehow had managed to take even more of his length than before had made his blood boil and his head spin, but it was her smile and the gentle hand on his face that finally undid him.

As if the last couple of days had never happened, as if he had never hurt and bloodied her, the crazy girl had smiled at him while he laboured above her. She who hadn't smiled for such a long time it felt like forever.

No woman had ever smiled at him during a fuck.

If well paid, they had pretended ecstasy instead of being indifferent or disgusted, some might not even have pretended it, but none of them had ever smiled.

But she had; and together with her gentle touch on the ruin of his face, it had turned him inside out. The hold he had on his baser instincts had been precarious at best and at her smile he'd let himself go for a few blissful seconds. It was a miracle he had somehow found the wherewithal to withdraw in the nick of time to spill outside of her.

He felt her eyes on him and wished it was dark so he could carefully reassemble himself before facing her again.

"Did you like it?" she asked.

There was a certain note of spirit in her voice, a hint of pride, maybe.

He sincerely started to loathe the stupid question, but didn't find it in himself to tell her so.

"Aye," he managed tersely.

To prevent her asking any more insipid questions - and to keep her from leaving the bed - he rolled to his side and drew her against him with one arm.

She fit into his embrace as if made for it and was blessedly quiet while he was drawn under into
sleep once again.

...
Chapter Notes

Hope you all had happy holidays.

Thanks for reading and commenting, hope this chapter will be an enjoyable one, it's not very heavy on the plot part. ;)

Chapter 9: Touching

"Good morning, my lord," Betsy said and curtsied when Sandor stepped into the kitchen, drawn there by a delicious smell of fried bacon and scrambled eggs. "Will Lady Sansa be down to breakfast?"

"Morning Betsy," he said, trying his best not to be gruff.

The girl was a marvel and it wouldn't do to make her think twice about wanting to work for him. Sansa seemed to like her and her food was among the best he'd ever tasted.

She was a pretty little thing, about a head smaller than Sansa and quite plump, with smiling, light-brown eyes and curls of brown hair peeking from beneath her neat cap.

"Lady Sansa is still asleep and I don't want to wake her," he said.

Which was more or less the truth. Sansa would probably need a bit more sleep after last night.

When he had come awake half an hour ago with her in his arms, the memory of the delicious fuck in the small hours of the morning still warm in his blood, he very nearly had woken her up just to ask for another go.

He lacked even the most basic discipline when it came to her. One of the reasons he had decided to leave despite not being needed at the keep was that he feared he'd scare her to death with how badly and how often he wanted her. If he'd stayed in this bed, or even just in this house, there was no telling what he would do.

Betsy smiled in that somewhat saucy way she had.

"I understand."

His glare seemed to be wasted on her; she had been unafraid of him from the start. Respectful according to her station, but not scared and she never once had tried to avoid looking at him. He was inclined to like her just for that, it was uncommon enough.

He gestured in the general direction of the frying pan.

"I just wanted a bite to eat and then I've to be off."

Betsy swirled around and ran toward the hearth.
"Of course my lord," she said, while busying herself with preparing his breakfast. "Right away."

…

He slipped quietly out of the house, not before he had commended Betsy on the deliciousness of the breakfast she'd served him and reminding her to tell Sansa he would be back in the evening. The girl had blushed at the compliment, nodded and assured him everything would be done as he had requested.

As it turned out, Joffrey had gone on a hawking trip with the queen, taking Blount and Tyrell with him, leaving him with nothing at all to do.

He spent some time in the training yard, but couldn't quite get into it as he used to. So after loitering about the stables for a while, grooming Stranger and feeding him a bunch of apples and carrots pilfered from the kitchens, he finally decided to saddle him up again and go back.

Back to where he was master of his own property, back to where food, warmth and smiles awaited him. Back to the beautiful woman who shared his bed. Back home.

…

He surprised Betsy and Sansa while they were balancing on chairs and tables, trying to fix some new hangings to the windows and walls.

While Sansa just smiled awkwardly at him and said they would have to finish their work another time, Betsy made a few thinly veiled remarks about how they really could use a tall and strong man to help them with their chores.

So he quite unexpectedly found himself roped in to hold up what felt like acres of fabric, had then to nip over to the carpenter's workshop to buy a hammer and nails to fix some shelves that had come loose, see about window frames that were apparently rattling at the slightest gust of wind and generally make himself useful in various capacities.

Despite those being menial tasks he wasn't exactly used to, he felt rather proud of himself for managing them with credible success, and at least Betsy didn't stint on praise.

His industry was rewarded with a filling lunch consisting of dark bread with a fine, strong smelling cheese, cold beef and a few apples.

Sansa suggested to take a nap afterwards. While he for a moment hoped she had something else in mind; as he fell into bed, he found that getting a bit of sleep might not be that bad of an idea.

He wasn't even sure he did finish the thought before he passed out.

…

"My lord?"

Sandor groggily opened his eyes to see Sansa lying on her side, a proper distance away, looking at him.

Her eyes looked luminous in the brightly orange afternoon light that shone through the windows, giving the illusion of warmth. It made her hair look as if aflame, a softly undulating sea of fire. The
air smelled deliciously of freshly baked bread and something even sweeter, making his stomach rumble.

He chuckled despite himself, too relaxed and comfortable at the moment to be miffed at her form of address.

"This bed isn't the place to 'my lording' me, little bird."

"What am I to call you then?"

He turned to her fully and carefully lifted a strand of fire from where it had fallen over her eyes.

"Don't you know my name?"

She fell silent for such a long time he wondered if she truly didn't, unfeasibly as it might be.

True, people never called him by his given name, but they usually used it to express which Clegane they meant, even if these days there was only one left.

"Sandor," she whispered.

His heart stuttered for a second and he had to swallow a few times to get rid of the lump that had formed in his throat. He had no idea his name could sound like that. He'd like to hear her say it more often.

"I meant to ask you something," she started again after a moment. "Sandor."

His pulse quickened slightly at her careful words. What kind of question would be so important to her she found the courage to ask him directly? She, who for months had not asked for anything? Had not expected anything from anyone anymore. She who would not even ask Joffrey for mercy, because she knew that whatever she asked for would be withheld from her out of pure spite.

"Betsy is pester ing me about it for days and..."

Disappointment, surprising in its intensity made him grit his teeth. Of course she asked for someone else.

"Just spit it out," he grated.

"She wants to know if there is something you'd like her to cook for you, if you have a favourite dish."

That curious disappointment still gnawed at him, so he didn't feel in the mood to even contemplate the question.

"Wouldn't know if I had," he said, speaking what was quite probably the truth anyway. "I eat when I'm hungry, I drink when I'm thirsty and I fuck when I'm randy. As long as it's not rotten or tastes like shit, it's a means to an end."

Her eyes clouded over and he saw wetness glistening in their corners when she abruptly turned from him.

She didn't leave the bed, just lay there with her back to him, stiff and unmoving.

Was the foolish girl mad at him for not having a favourite food? Or was this about something else? Had he inadvertently said something wrong again?
He reached out a tentative hand and skimmed his fingertips over her shoulder, wishing she wouldn't still wear that stupid shift and he could reach her naked skin. It occurred to him that he had barely touched her at all during their encounters so far and right now it felt an unbelievably inexcusable oversight.

His hands fairly itched to feel her skin, but although she didn't flinch from him, she was as immovable as a stone and tense with something he couldn't understand.

Once again he thought back on his words and realized that maybe she'd picked up on the wrong part of his speech. Again.

Gods, why had things to be this complicated all of a sudden? Why did he have to mince words with her now? Now when she wasn't constantly threatened anymore, when she was relatively safe. Although she was just an arm's length away, he felt as if a vast expanse divided them that he had no idea how to cross. There was thin ice he had to be walking on, he knew, and he was certain to drown once it broke.

He'd much rather stay on dry land, keep things how they had been. So he just grabbed her around her waist, drew her to him and fit himself around her from behind. She didn't fight him - he knew by now she never would - but that was no consolation.

She was still motionless in his arms, no trace left of the softly warm acceptance she had shown him this morning, which he now craved with steadily mounting desire.

"Don't be silly," he grumbled to her, intent on smoothing the little bird's ruffled feathers so she might a bit more inclined towards what he wanted to do with her. "You know I didn't mean it that way."

She still didn't stir, still was stiff and tense, but with her so close, with her perfect backside nestled against his groin, he rapidly found himself back in the grip of that mindless lust that apparently only she could incite in him.

And maybe, he mused as he let his hand roam over her covered body, maybe that was what she wanted to hear.

"I might not have a favourite food," he whispered into her ear and was rewarded with a slight trembling, "but the hunger I have for you...," he continued, grazing the exposed skin of her neck with his teeth to illustrate the point, making her tremble once again, "...could not be sated by anyone else."

After another tense second, she mellowed in his arms, moved into his caresses and gave a barely audible sigh that kicked his arousal up another notch.

He tugged at her shift impatiently, hoping she'd forgiven him enough not to say no to what he intended.

She helped him getting the cursed shift off her body and he was dumbstruck for a moment when she was bare under his hands, all soft skin and gentle curves. For a deranged moment, he wondered if his rough hands hurt her, so delicate did her skin feel to him.

But then she sighed once again and he surmised that maybe his fear of hurting her was turning into a quite unhealthy obsession.
Touching, though exhilarating, suddenly wasn't enough anymore. He had to see.

With one sweep of his arm, he threw the covers aside, exposing them both to the nippy air, but oblivious to it. The way his blood was boiling, he could heat up the room all by himself.

She shivered a little and looked at him with huge eyes.

Yes, he'd seen her naked before. Seen her stripped to be humiliated, beaten or otherwise tortured. Back then, the only desire he'd felt was the one to protect her, to cover her and hide her away from the pitiless eyes of those who delighted in her suffering.

And back that first time... he shook his head to rid himself of that memory. Better not think of that now.

Because now... now was different. Now she didn't flinch from his touch, now he knew he wouldn't hurt her. And it was only the two of them with all the time they could want on their hands, so she was his to touch for as long as she did not say no.

So he touched her.

Placed a hand on her belly, right over the scar that crossed it as an ugly reminder of what she had been through. What he hadn't had the power to prevent.

She flinched.

He lifted his eyes to hers, expecting to see fear again, the same desperate anxiety he'd seen a couple of nights ago.

"It's very... sensitive," she said as if in apology. "I can barely touch it myself."

On an impulse he could not have explained if his life depended on it, he bent down and carefully placed his lips on the scar. When she didn't flinch this time, when instead she made some very soft sound in the back of her throat, he repeated the action. His lips felt what his calloused fingertips could not: the thinness of the skin that had grown over the gash, the curious difference in texture between her soft, healthy skin and the smooth, taut scar tissue. It was an astounding discovery that his mouth was so much better suited to this particular task than his hands were, so he let his lips touch their way along the mark of her torment until he reached the underside of her breast.

Deciding that exploring the exquisite softness with his lips was still more rewarding than just touching her with his hands, he kept at it, running his lips over the swell of her breast, marvelling at the way the fragile skin gave to his slightest touch, delighting in her responses that were as timid as they were genuine.

Touching her with his mouth had another unforeseen upside as well. With his nose so close to her skin, he drowned in the sweet smell of her and with only a flick of his tongue, he could taste her, too.

He carefully circled one soft, pink nipple with the tip of his tongue and watched with wonder as the skin around it crinkled and her nipple stood erect as if begging for more of his attention, which he gladly gave. Her appreciative sounds were whipping him on to be as carefully thorough with her other breast as well.

She was a feast for every one of his senses, inciting unknown sensations that very much reminded him of being drunk, of indulging himself in something way past sense and reason, but still unable to stop. In a remote part of his brain he wondered how something that seemed rather innocent in comparison, could feel as if something exquisitely naughty drove him insane with pleasure.
Once again she shivered, from cold, maybe, so he moved over her, trying to shield her from it with
the heat of his body.

She gave a small sigh of contentment when he covered her with himself and for a moment he wished
he was as naked as she was, that he could feel even more than he already did with his hands and lips
and tongue. That he could feel her skin and limbs alongside his own, that she could feel him in the
same way and not just the scratchy material of his shirt and breeches.

He chased the thought away quickly. It would certainly not serve his purposes to have her see the
ruin that was his mangled hide, it was already a wonder she had learned to take his ugly mug as well
as she did.

Lying on top of her brought his original purpose rapidly to the point where he felt he could not deny
himself any longer.

Lifting himself a little away from her, he reached between her legs to get her to open to him. He
couldn't suppress a groan when he found her slick and heated. His fingers didn't meet the slightest
resistance when he slipped them inside and his cock twitched in eager anticipation of plunging into
this damp warmth that he had somehow managed to bring forth without even trying.

She was quiet now and he almost missed the enticing sounds she'd made before, although he might
not have heard them anyway what with the pounding of his own blood so loud in his ears.

Not seeing any sense in fucking her with his fingers when he was painfully hard by now, he took
himself in hand and guided his cock to her entrance. It went in on a smooth glide until he reached the
point where he knew he'd hurt her if he pushed farther.

As he had to last time, he kept still for a moment afterwards, holding a tight grip on the brutal urge to
just pound into her until he was sheathed completely, until there was no telling anymore where she
ended and he began. Until he had claimed her for himself so completely she'd never forget she was
his.

The sensation – or maybe it was just the knowledge – of the wetness between them coming only
from her was maddening, as if he was even closer to her now than he'd ever been before. Every
move he made was delightful torture in itself, a torture he took great care to prolong for as long as
she didn't look as if she minded.

He even somehow dealt with seeing her smile at him as she had that time before, held onto his
temper when she stroked her hands up his arms and finally wound them around his shoulders.
Giving in to the gentle nudge, he moved closer and buried his face against her neck, her silky hair
caressing his cheek.

While his whole body screamed for release, he oddly wished this would never end. That he could
stay like this with her arms around him and the smell of her hair in his nose, pretending he was
welcome where he was.

Deliberately, he slowed his thrusts even more, while his lungs burned with the effort of breathing and
sweat beaded all over his body, making him curse his clothes once again.

Usually, fucking didn't take so much out of him. Usually, he wasn't a panting, sweating mess,
trembling and shaking. Although he usually didn't draw it out either.

She shifted under him then, only slightly and before his mind could really catch up with what she
was doing, she had lifted her legs and wrapped them around his hips, holding him close in the cradle
of her thighs.

As if she had deliberately opened herself to him, he slipped deeper into her on the next downward thrust, almost buried to the hilt. Feeling her tight warm wetness around the base of his cock like that was more than he was prepared for and way more than he could handle.

Sweet agony punched into his gut and ripped a roar from his throat, muffled against the side of her neck, while his hips bucked against her in mindless ecstasy.

Much too late he thought of pulling out but found himself unable to while his release went on with an intensity that blackened his vision and had his ears ringing. His muscles turned to jelly while he fought for breath and his heart laboured in his chest like a sledgehammer.

How was he to ever stop wanting her after this? How to stop craving and needing her as much as the next breath?

And how to explain to her that he might have planted a babe inside her in his careless self-absorption?

Cursing, he tried to lift himself away, but she held him tight in a surprisingly strong grip, winding both her arms and legs more firmly around him, holding him to her in this most intimate of all embraces.

"It's alright," she whispered to him, her hands ghosting over his back, barely felt through his shirt. "It's alright, Sandor. It's alright."
Thanks everyone for letting me know you liked the last chapter, the comments were a late Christmas gift for me.
The following chapter, sadly, won't be as fluffy, which brings me to the:

Content warning:
If abuse, verbal or physical, as well as public humiliation is not something you want to read about, I recommend giving this chapter a wide berth.

Chapter 10: Lying

Her world had shifted once again, Sansa thought as she peered at her reflection in the full-length mirror that stood in the bedroom she shared with Sandor.

_Sandor._

She let the sound of his name wash over her as she thought it and then again as she said it out loud, mesmerized at the notion that he was Sandor to her now. Not a ser, not a lord or anyone addressed in a way that enforced distance and submission. Just Sandor. The man she shared a bed with, a table and a house.

And her body.

The thought was not nearly as abhorrent now as it had been just a few days ago.

Back then she had felt so powerless, had felt demeaned and dishonoured whereas now she felt... she didn't quite know how she felt.

She searched her reflection for some sort of change, but other than a heightened colour in her cheeks and the brightness of her eyes, there was no notable difference to the Sansa Stark she had been a week ago.

If it wasn't for the slight soreness in her inner thighs, she might have been tempted to believe she had dreamed what had happened between them only a few hours ago.

But no, no dream could be as visceral, as frighteningly intimate as what they had shared.

This encounter had been so completely removed from what he had done to her a couple of nights ago, it didn't even seem to be the same act. His care of her had moved her almost to tears, the sensations he elicited with his hands on her, with his gentle, questing kisses had sent her reeling and when he moved inside her, so slow and careful, it had felt much more like a caress than an intrusion.

A caress she would have no problem getting used to.
So she had found the courage to slay the rest of her fears and do what Sibyl had advised her to, wrap her legs around his hips to take him as deep as she could to intensify his pleasure. Once again his reaction had surprised her, but this time she had been happy as he came apart in her arms, groaning and shaking.

Much more than that first night, when it felt as if something had been taken from her in a brutal, painful act; this felt as if she had actually given something of her own free will.

Something of true worth to Sandor; not just a scrap of skin and a few drops of blood for Joffrey to gloat over.

Not having given anything for far too long, she had revelled in how good it made her feel about herself. So good, in fact, that she had forgotten for a long while what it made her to give herself to him that way, what people thought about this, what everyone would say if they knew.

For some reason, at this moment, it hadn't mattered.

So when once again he had started cursing, started to pull back in some sort of unhappy self-deprecation, her instincts, so long buried, came to the fore and commanded her to do for him what all those months before he had done for her. To soothe him and hold him and give him the feeling that at least one person still cared.

They'd stayed like this for a long time. He had trembled above her and she had felt the coolness on her cheek that was his sweat, and a hot wetness that wasn't. She had held him through all of this until eventually he'd got up and turned from her wordlessly.

After washing and dressing, he had walked to the door and she was afraid he'd leave without so much as a word when he turned to her, averting his eyes.

"Thank you," he had said before walking out, too fast for her to even reply.

...  

By the time she had come down to a very late breakfast, he was already gone.

Thankfully, Betsy didn't seem to be too disappointed about it, because he had taken the time to explain to the girl that he was urgently needed at the keep.

So she remained the only one being disappointed at his sudden departure, even though after what had happened, she didn't know how to talk to him either.

She sighed at her reflection and was about to turn to walk downstairs again, when she heard the unmistakable sound of heavy boots walking up the stairs. Seconds later, the object of her musings ducked through the door and in a sudden rush of embarrassment, she quickly turned back to the mirror, only to encounter his gaze reflected back at her.

She was mesmerized by the way his eyes held hers and didn't even notice that he stepped closer until she felt him at her back, gently enveloping her in his arms from behind.

He ran his lips over the side of her face and she closed her eyes in contentment, leaning back into his embrace with a sigh.

"I am sorry," he whispered into her hair and her eyes flew open.

What did he have to be sorry for?
"Joffrey wants to see you."

She shuddered violently and was at once reminded why things had felt different today. For a moment, for a few hours, she had felt safe, even though she should have known it was an illusion.

For a short moment, that cold, painful lump of constant fear that served as her heart these past months had ceased to exist, replaced by something pulsing, living and warm.

Dread wound like a cold serpent around her lungs, squeezing until she was sure she’d suffocate.

"I am sorry," he said again as she fought for breath, tried and failed to reach for the icy resolve she needed to face Joffrey.

"I do not want to go," she said through frozen lips, in a whisper that sounded small and broken as a child’s plea even to her own ears. Never before had she dared voicing a wish like that.

He closed his eyes for a moment, his arms tightening around her.

"And I don't want to take you," he rasped.

There was a "but" in that sentence, she could hear it as if it was spoken.

But he had to take her, otherwise someone else would. Joffrey probably didn’t even know Sandor had taken her away from the keep and should better not be made aware of the fact that she had been removed much farther from his influence than he had meant her to be.

Sandor would be in grievous danger if Joffrey decided to make a fuss about this, if she didn't appear as promptly as if she was still living in her chambers at the keep.

The thought finally gave her the strength she needed to face whatever lay ahead of her.

"Give me a minute to make myself presentable," she said, drawing herself up straight.

They locked gazes in the mirror but then he closed his eyes again.

"He'd likely want to see that you haven't been... treated too well," he said haltingly. “He might not expect me to have hit you, seeing as I’ve never have before, but…”.

She nodded, composed now.

"Do what you think is needed," she said. Her voice sounded not her own, but then it never did in such situations.

As she was used to do, she tried to draw back from herself, hide somewhere where nothing and no one could hurt her. But within the safety of his arms, she did not feel in peril, did not quite feel the need to guard herself.

In horrified fascination, she watched as he slowly trailed his hands down her arms and wound his fingers around her wrists, gently, carefully. A lover's caress.

Then he lowered his head to her neck and placed a hot, open-mouthed kiss on her skin, making her close her eyes and shudder with a completely different kind of feeling than the cold dread from before.

But as she was about to relax into him again, the fingers around her wrists closed tighter and tighter, like iron manacles. A brutal, crushing grip that was sure to leave angry marks once he released her
A very thin and small lament escaped her throat despite her best efforts to hold it in.

"I am sorry," he murmured against her neck and she could almost forget the pain in her wrists at the feeling of his lips on her, when suddenly she felt teeth sharply sinking into her flesh and the sting of blood being sucked to the surface of her skin, tiny blood vessels breaking to form a darkly purple biting mark no one could miss.

An overwhelming sense of betrayal forced tears to her eyes once again.

He looked at her when he was done and for once didn't hide behind his usual indifference.

Pain and sorrow clouded his eyes.

It was for Joffrey, she reminded herself to get rid of the stupid sense of being ill-used by the one who only ever sought to protect her.

This pain, this ugliness, this perversion of everything she had only seen a glimpse of this morning, hurt him as much as it hurt her.

That first time, she realized, had been like that as well.

For Joffrey. Her pain, her blood and her tears. For the one who could not get enough of either and might find it diverting to use the one man as a weapon against her who'd never so much as raised a hand to her.

Which meant, she realized with a start, that every moment of peace they found with each other, every moment of warmth and gentleness was a victory over Joffrey's cruelty.

She opened her eyes and searched his gaze in the mirror once again.

And then she smiled.

"Let's get this over with."

...

Sandor's hands were tight on Stranger's reins and as usual the beast reacted with capriciousness to his foul mood, acerbating his anger.

In front of him, Sansa sat sideways on his lap, distant and cold like the fucking Wall up north, despite the blinding smile she had given him a short while ago. He knew why she was drawing back like this, knew she was preparing herself for her "audience" by donning an armour that was as invisible as it was impenetrable. It had never really bothered him before, because he knew how vital it was for her to protect herself like this, but right now her remoteness chafed over his senses like a blunt file, made him want to snap and growl and bark at her until she reacted naturally again.

Before they had left, she had asked Betsy for an onion and had rubbed her eyes with it, which made her look as if she had done nothing but weeping her eyes out for the last few days.

Joffrey would be thrilled. Delighted by the marks of brutality Sandor had forced himself to inflict on her, overjoyed to see her misery and the evidence of tears.

He should be glad they were so well prepared, that they'd be fooling the boy so easily, but nothing of this sat well with him. For one thing because she was supposed to be his now. It should be him who
decided where she went and why. Being commanded to present his woman to another man, king or not, enraged and insulted him on a primal level, just as the thought did that everyone would look at her and think he'd raped and brutalized her.

While he usually didn't give a flying shit about what people thought of him, there was a nagging feeling that this impression did not only demean him, but even more than that it demeaned her. Made a mockery of the bravery she had shown him, of her almost heroic determination to please him as well as she could and of the warmth and compassion with which she could treat even a monster like him.

... 

Joffrey, as expected was all but crowing with delight.

To Sandor's ever growing anger, Joffrey had chosen to have Sansa brought to him in the throne room with at least two dozen onlookers assembled. Handpicked, as it seemed, ranging from maids and men-at-arms to high-ranking ladies and lordlings. With his choice of audience, Joffrey had effectively ensured that after this was over, Sansa's fate would be no secret anymore, however much the small council might wish it to be. Her downfall would be fodder for gossip in the kitchens and the barracks just as it would be in the chambers of lords and ladies.

Behind the throne, the small council stood trying to act as if it was an everyday occurrence to have an abused woman dragged to court to be utterly humiliated. Only Cersei looked somewhat green around the gills as if she dreaded whatever was to come and Pycelle stood looking at the ready, with a leather bag at his feet as if he expected his services to be needed.

With a sickening jolt Sandor realized why. Of course Joffrey would use this opportunity to determine whether or not his orders had been followed. He felt himself sway a bit at the thought that Joffrey would have her spread her legs and let Pycelle…

Something inside him roared with unleashed fury at the mere thought and it was only by holding his sword in a death grip that he managed to stay where he was, next to Trant with a prime view on what was going on.

He'd cut them all down, he swore to himself, before he let happen what Joffrey intended.

The only ones conspicuously absent from the spectacle were Queen Margery and Mace Tyrell. Loras too, now that he thought of it.

"Lady Sansa," Joffrey drawled and stood from the throne. "What a pleasure to see you again. How have you fared over the last week?"

Sansa kept her eyes on the ground and was visibly searching for words. He couldn't quite tell which of her actions were an act and which were genuine.

Her trick with the onion had astounded him, to be honest, and so had her insistence to wear a shawl haphazardly thrown around her neck to hide the bruise he had left, when the whole point had been for Joff to see it. She had also changed into a dress with rather long sleeves, albeit way too revealing for his taste in other regions, to cover the marks on her wrists.

Right now, she nervously tugged on those sleeves, and only after way too much thinking did it occur to Sandor that she meant to draw Joffrey's attention to them.

"Very well, your grace," she said with a waver in her voice, once again tugging at one sleeve.
Joffrey circled her for a moment and then quickly snatched one of her arms and lifted it. The wide sleeve fell back to reveal most of her lower arm, the blueish bruises standing out like a beacon on her otherwise unblemished white skin, their origin clear.

"Tsk, tsk," Joffrey said, shaking his head. "You'd better not lie to me, Lady Sansa."

The audience first gasped and then quieted again, the stares that hit him ranging from horrified to judgemental.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Sansa almost whispered. "It was my fault."

Joffrey's eyes glittered and his cheeks glowed pink. The little prick was enjoying this to the fullest and Sansa had known he would be even more pleased if he could make all the nasty discoveries himself.

Sandor couldn't count how often he'd seen Joff grow hard with excitement at Sansa's pain. Often enough it was the sign for him to call a halt to things, hoping Joff would be too occupied with beating off while he whisked Sansa away.

The king circled Sansa once more and then his eyes fell on the shawl draped over her shoulders. For a moment Sandor marvelled at her cleverness to place the piece of cloth just so that it would not look an adornment, but something worn to conceal.

With exaggerated slowness, Joffrey drew the silky thing away and let it flutter carelessly to the floor.

The onlookers in the front row gasped, those father behind craned their necks to see.

To Sandor's horror, the bruise looked considerably worse than he had intended it to. From the marks of his teeth, now looking red and inflamed, blood had seeped under her skin and instead of like a rather harmless lover's bite, it looked as if a savage beast had tried to gnaw off part of her neck.

A red-hot haze rose in him as the stares in his direction grew more vicious and he had to force his fury down again, hide behind cool detachment or otherwise he wouldn't be able to help her. Sansa wasn't the only one who had a role to play in this mummery.

Joffrey drew his fingertips over the mark almost lovingly, his eyes heavy-lidded.

"Maybe I should've warned you that dogs bite at times," he murmured.

"It barely hurt," Sansa said and blushed, clearly marking her words a lie for all to see.

Joffrey walked a slow half-circle around her once again and came to stand behind her back, caressing the bite-mark again.

"It's been done from here," he drawled. "From behind." Then he took Sansa's arm to look at her bruises there, his eyes gleaming while a lazy smile spread over his face as he matched his own fingers to the marks to see from which angle they had been caused.

Joffrey took a hissing breath when he closed his fingers, pressing them into the already bruised flesh. Sansa flinched a little, but made no sound. Joffrey stepped closer, his body almost flush against Sansa's backside, only a hand's breadth separating them.

"Tell me, Lady Sansa," Joffrey said close to Sansa's ear, his voice so low, the audience went eerily quiet to better understand every word being spoken. "Is this what dogs do to wolves? Is this how my hound fucked you?"
Sandor was tempted to close his eyes. To block out the stares for one thing, but even more than that to block out the sight of Sansa being once again at the mercy of this twisted little shit who got off on bringing her low. And on hurting her. To block out a sight that all but commanded him to take the five steps separating them and sinking his sword into the boy’s gut.

Quite irrationally, he almost wished she would tell him the truth, that those injuries were fabricated to make a fool of him, that they'd never fucked like that (and never would, he swore to himself), that once this was over, they’d be laughing at his stupidity.

But as always when watching over her like this, he kept his eyes open, ground his teeth and balled his fist around the pommel of his sword, knowing he would be the one to end this eventually – one way or another.

“‘Yes… your Grace,’” Sansa whispered.

“I did not hear you, my lady,” Joffrey said, walking away from her. “Can you repeat that? And make a whole sentence out of it, while you’re at it.”

“Yes,” she said, louder this time, with a pitiful catch to her words. “That is how he… took me.”

He should be proud of her, Sandor thought, that she could deceive the king so skilfully. He should not mind the stares and the whispers, should not be tempted to run over there and wrap her in his cloak to hide her from all those prying eyes feasting themselves on her pretended misery. He should not want to draw his sword and spread death and mayhem amongst those who gawked at her, who judged and whispered.

"Do you have any other... injuries that barely hurt" Joffrey asked silkily. "Maybe I might revise my decision if I see that it was done in poor judgement."

Sansa swallowed and then lifted her eyes to Joffrey with a look so full of hope, it surprised Sandor with the cutting pain it sent through his intestines.

"There are some... marks on my … legs," she said quietly, indicating her upper thighs with a nervous gesture and it was blindingly clear to everyone just what kind of marks she meant.

Marks left by a large man carelessly shoving himself between milky-white, satiny soft thighs, thrusting so brutally that she was black and blue afterwards.

Had he done this? He was inclined to think he hadn't, but he couldn't be sure, he had not looked at her afterwards, hadn't been able to even face her after behaving like a bloody green, lovesick fool who'd cried after his first fuck.

"Show me," Joff demanded, his voice just a husky whisper now.

Sure enough, the bulge in Joff’s trousers spoke for itself, but the court's attention was on Sansa.

Sansa, who forgot her acting for a moment and looked at the king with horrified disgust.

Sandor was about to take a step forward, when hands clamped around his upper arms on either side...
of him.

"Can't ruin this for him, dog," Trant smirked at him. "We're to stop you whatever it takes."

On his other side, Kettleblack looked much more sourly but equally determined to make good on this threat.

As if those two idiots could really stop him.

"Joffrey, this is quite enough!"

All eyes turned to Cersei who had stepped from behind the throne, her cheeks blotchy.

"There is no need to embarrass the girl like that, she’s been through enough."

Joffrey turned slowly, smiling amiably. Probably only a few people knew him well enough to see the tightening around the corners of his mouth that spoke of his anger at being thus interrupted.

Cersei blanched.

Joffrey turned to Kettleblack.

"Ser Osmund," he said, his artificial smile still in place. "My mother is clearly not used to such disturbing sights and very unsettled, please escort her to her chambers. She is to rest and restore her nerves at least until tomorrow and not allowed to leave her chambers sooner."

Kettleblack obediently went to Cersei who shot daggers at him from her eyes and made it clear she wished not to take his offered arm.

She stalked out of the room with her head held high, but Sandor knew her well enough to know from the way she walked that she was indeed deeply disturbed, just not in the way Joffrey had hinted at.

They had barely left, when the doors flew open again and the Queen herself stormed into the room in a gust of billowing silk, her brother and father following on her heels.

"My dear," Margery enthused, hands dramatically clasped over her heart. "I'm afraid I was not informed there was to be court today, I hope you'll forgive my tardiness."

Margery's eyes fell on Sansa and Sandor almost took another step forward at the look of pitying contempt she gave her.

You have nothing on her, he wanted to shout at Margery. She's twice the queen you will ever be, and a lot purer besides.

Joffrey's bright mood turned sour in a heartbeat. He knew well enough it wouldn't do to go through with what he intended with his wife looking on. The Tyrells were a force even Joffrey knew better than to have on his bad side.

"Lady Sansa," Joffrey said with clipped words that betrayed his displeasure. "Since you claim yourself that you have been treated well, I see no reason to go back on my word to Lord Clegane. You may go."

…

Before Sandor had a chance to reach Sansa, he found her suddenly encircled by the remaining
members of the council.

Lannister and Baelish especially seemed determined to prevent him from getting any closer.

"We intend to speak to Lady Sansa in private," Baelish informed him, nose in the air as if that would make him in any way taller than he was.

"She's mine," Sandor growled, "I'll take her back."

"That remains to be seen," Lannister cut in. "This is a matter of the small council now."

"I will not..."

With a flick of his hand, Lannister summoned a couple of gold cloaks who stood with their hands on their swords but visibly uneasy. With good reason, too, Sandor thought, glowering at them.

Sadly, he couldn't risk a bloodbath right now, there had to be another way out of this.

"You heard the king," he said. "I don't think you want to cross him in this."

"The king will hear our opinion and surely see its wisdom," Baelish said.

Sandor grit his teeth.

*Let's see what the king thinks about this*, he thought.

With a last look at Sansa who looked back at him pleadingly, he turned and left.
Kissing

Chapter Notes

Sadly, I haven't quite managed to make up for the time lost during the holidays, so I guess the next chapter (after this one) will be next Sunday.

I hope you enjoy this one.

Chapter 11: Kissing

Sansa was exhausted.

As always when confronted with Joffrey, it felt as if she had done battle. As if every word, every gesture had cost strength, as if every one of his jabs and questions had drawn blood.

As always, she wanted nothing more than for Sandor to take her to the relative safety of her chambers... or their house now, to be able to lick her wounds and sleep it off.

Unfortunately, she was suddenly ringed by people who barred her access to her one source of peace. People with concern wrinkling their brows and pity oozing from their gazes.

She was torn between wanting to laugh or to scream.

*You think this was bad?* she wanted to spit at them. *You think that's the worst he can do?*

But when she found them eyeing her neck, she knew they weren't even bothered by Joffrey's behaviour, they only cared about what Sandor had supposedly done to her.

She brusquely bent to retrieve her shawl and wound it around her neck.

Had she known how this would turn out, how much of public spectacle Joffrey would turn this into, she would not have let Sandor do what he'd done. She would have walked into this den with her head high and a smile on her face. She wouldn't have exposed Sandor to a censure he deserved least of all the people assembled in this room.

Now, when it was way past being too late, they thought to play knights in shining armour and rescue the damsel out of her pretended distress.

If it wasn't so infuriatingly annoying, she'd laugh in their faces.

They led her out of the throne room and into the chambers of the small council. She was offered refreshments and – finally – a place to sit.

"Please allow me to express my deepest regrets regarding the injuries inflicted on you by the Hound," Petyr Baelish said to her, his face so disconcertingly close to hers, she smelled the mint on his breath.

She drew back as far as the chair in which she sat allowed.
"Courtesy of King Joffrey bestowing such honours on his late brother; Sandor Clegane is lord of his own lands," she said tartly, "a property superior to your own if I remember correctly, Lord Baelish, so you might be well advised to address him correctly in my presence."

Baelish stepped back with a smile that looked a tad forced.

"And that aside," she continued, taking a look around, "those injuries you mentioned are nothing in comparison to what I've suffered before, as all of you well know."

"Alas, you are quite right, my lady," Kevan Lannister cut in. "And the small council owes you an apology for that."

Sansa waited, but the owed apology never came.

"You might be glad to know that the small council has devised a way to remove you from your… unfortunate situation," Lannister droned on instead. "Lord Baelish has generously offered to escort you to the Vale, where you will stay with Lady Lysa Arryn. Neither Joffrey nor the Tyrells could object to this arrangement, since Lady Arryn is your aunt and has declared allegiance to King Joffrey, so he needn't fear that he would have no influence over any decision made regarding your future."

She was about to tell them where Lord Baelish could put his generosity and exactly what sort of influence Joffrey needed to have over her, when the door to the council's chamber flew open to reveal a fuming Joffrey and an equally enraged Sandor.

"What is the meaning of this?" Joffrey demanded. "Is the council now second guessing the king's orders?"

Behind him, Sandor smirked darkly at Lord Baelish.

"Your Grace," Baelish said unperturbed, bowing to Joffrey. "We only just now received quite disturbing news regarding Lord Bolton's wife and son which might make it necessary to reconsider your decision regarding Lady Sansa's… uhm… position."

Joffrey was clearly in no mood to reconsider anything.

"What news?"

"The woman the bastard married might not be Arya Stark as we originally were led to believe," Kevan Lannister explained.

Joffrey's brow furrowed.

"That means that Lady Sansa's claim is still valid and worthy of protection," Baelish pressed his point. "And my suggestion would be…"

"He means to take her away from here," Sandor cut in.

Joffrey rounded on Baelish.

"She's a prisoner of the crown and she will stay in King's Landing," he hissed at Littlefinger who in turn gave Sandor a dirty look as soon as Joffrey had turned his back.

_Actually, I am a ward of the crown_, Sansa thought. Not that it had ever made any difference to Joffrey.
"Your Grace, Sansa Stark needs to be legally married, I am sure you'll see the wisdom of that," Lannister tried.

Joffrey turned again, this time to her and a grin spread over his face.

"Did you sleep through the last hour, uncle?" he asked maliciously, not taking his eyes off her. "She's ruined, dozens of people have seen it today, who would still marry her?"

Since it seemed to serve her purpose, Sansa tried to look sufficiently embarrassed.

"Lancel would be willing...," Ser Kevan started.

"No," Joffrey cut him off, sneering. "She might well be carrying the Hound's get by now and I will not have a pup called a lion."

"How long ago was the first time you took her?" Pyrcelle asked Sandor, "it might not be too late for moon tea."

"About a week ago," Sandor mumbled and gave her a guilty look which she didn't understand.

"Have you always spilled inside her?"

Sandor didn't answer right away. Instead his eyes sought hers again. With a start, she understood that he was leaving the decision to her. That he was prepared to let her go if she wanted to. That he was giving her something very precious, something she rarely had before.

He was giving her a choice.

If she told the truth, that the only time he spilled inside her had just been mere hours ago, that she had taken other precautions as well, she would be free of Sandor Clegane, free to be given to yet another man not of her own choosing, to whom she would be sold with the most profit for all involved. She would be respectably married, maybe even redeemed in the eyes of others.

If she lied...

"He... took me every night," she said haltingly, feeling a painful blush creeping up her neck at the boldness of her lie. But maybe they would just think her shy and embarrassed at having to confess to her downfall. "And he... spilled in me every time."

As always, Sandor's eyes were carefully devoid of expression, but she saw him holding the hilt of his sword in a white-knuckled grip.

Joffrey lifted his hands as if in surrender.

"See, as I told you, there's nothing to be done," he said. "The Hound gets his whore back and if any of you ever so much as breathes her name to me again, I'll have his head."

Baelish, quite astoundingly brave, opened his mouth to make a last protest.

"Your Grace..."

"The King of Westeros," Joffrey yelled, making Baelish swallow whatever he had intended to say, "doesn't need the help of a cunt to claim Winterfell."

...
Sandor's hand rested at the small of her back as he led her from the council chambers and at first she was too preoccupied with her own thoughts to really take note of anything around her.

When she forcefully shook herself out of her unproductive musings, she not only noticed that they were long past the stables she had thought were their destination, but that Sandor was in a state she wouldn't even know how to name.

The steps he was taking seemed wooden and jerky, every muscle in his face was drawn tight, the good corner of his mouth bloodless from his lips being pressed together in a thin line. The hand on her back was shaking.

He kept something terrifying inside and she feared she would be there when he let it loose.

It soon enough became apparent that he was taking her to the white tower and she wondered what his Kingsguard brothers would say to him bringing a woman to his quarters. The halls were empty, though, and they reached what apparently was the door to his chambers without meeting a single soul. She would have liked to take a look around the room, to see how he lived when not with her, but she was given no chance to do so.

The moment he had closed and locked the door behind them, he pinned her against it, the frightful expression still on his face as it hovered closely over hers, holding her still with his gaze alone.

"Why?" he asked hoarsely, crowding her even closer against the door with his body, his eyes glittering with something she could not identify. "Why did you lie when it meant you'd have to stay with me?"

"Because," she said, lifting her hand cautiously to his face, "of all the men in that room, I preferred to trust my fate to you."

For a moment, his gaze drilled into hers, as if trying to get through to her brain to see whether or not she meant what she said. Then he closed his eyes and leaned his face minutely to the side, into her hand, as if savouring her touch.

His whole stance softened a bit, although whatever raged inside him was still there, but although volatile and clearly directed at her, it didn't seem dangerous.

"After all I did to you?" he asked quietly when he opened his eyes again.

"After everything you did for me," she corrected and then moved her hand to his neck, pulling him toward her to place a light kiss on his lips.

It seemed the right thing to do, considering how much they had already shared. It was meant to be a thank you, a declaration of trust, of friendship, maybe.

His lips were soft under hers, at least the unscarred part of them, but closed and unmoving.

She pulled back, intending to end the kiss he didn't seem to like, when his mouth followed hers, seeking her lips again as if drawn by a magnetism he couldn't resist.

At first it was only a restrained meeting of lips, not unpleasant but somewhat disappointing in the light of what great fuss people made about it all the time. Then he pulled back a fraction, relieving some of the pressure and slowly moved his lips against hers as if exploring the shape and texture of them, much like he had done last night with her scar and breasts.

And just as he had back then, at one point he opened his mouth a little, his tongue flicking out to...
taste her, to feel with the tip of his tongue what before he had touched with his lips.

The careful caress brought back what she had felt when he had paid the same focused attention to her breasts, that sensation of melting heat that lazily crawled through her veins to converge in a core of heavy warmth in the pit of her belly.

She sighed at the feeling and their breaths mingled as she did. Only then did it occur to her that she might do with him as he did with her. Slowly, carefully, she opened her mouth a little further and tentatively touched the tip of her tongue to his.

The effect on him was as frightfully immediate as it was on her. While her knees almost gave beneath her at the sudden flash of almost terrifying excitement that went through her, Sandor reacted with shoving his whole body flush against her with so much force, the door behind them creaked in protest.

She didn't mind, though.

It meant she wouldn't have to hold herself upright on her unsteady legs and there had never been anything wrong with the feeling of having his huge body close to hers, shielding her from everything around them.

Where his mouth had been gentle and questing before, as if he, too, didn't quite know what to do, he slanted it over hers now, pushing his tongue deeply inside her mouth to delve into her in a way that turned the ball of warmth in her belly into a furnace.

She tried to match him in ardour, as fascinated by this new discovery as he appeared to be. Letting her tongue glide against his, she heard him groan very deeply in his throat, the vibration felt all along her body.

In some way and for a reason unclear to her, all of this seemed way more intimate, even way more indecent than anything they had done before.

Not that she was complaining.

Was this still what people called kissing or was it something entirely different? And if it was, why had Sibyl never told her about it? If she'd known, she might have tried it earlier. Much earlier.

It certainly was way more thrilling and exciting than anything else. And since Sandor very much seemed to enjoy it too, it surely might have been preferable to all the painful and humiliating experiences she had to go through.

Probably fed up with having to stoop to reach her mouth, Sandor suddenly grabbed her bottom with both hands and lifted her against him, directing her to open her legs so he could settle between them, all the while never breaking contact to her mouth.

It truly was more comfortable that way. Her back rested against the door and she could wrap her arms around his shoulders, her legs around his hips. She felt a very secret but nonetheless profound thrill at having him handle her as if she weighted nothing at all, at realizing he was so strong he barely seemed to notice the weight resting on his arms.

With her legs spread like they were and his hips in between them, her body reacted with readying itself for being taken. She felt a disconcerting rush of warm wetness seeping through her smallclothes and hoped he wouldn't notice. She did not want this to end any time soon.

He stilled for a moment and took a very deep breath through his nose. For a panicked moment, she
was afraid he could smell her, that he would somehow be appalled by it, but he resumed kissing her 
with even more fervour and the silly thought dissipated in a cloud of heady excitement.

So enthralled was she by his kisses, she noticed only after a while that he was shoving his hips 
against her in a rhythm by now familiar to her. She wouldn't have minded either, if not for the way 
parts of his armour started to dig into the flesh of her thighs in a rather painful manner.

She made a small sound of discomfort, which had him draw back so abruptly, she yelped with fear 
that he would drop her.

"Your… your armour," she panted, entirely more breathless than she had thought she would be. "It 
hurts."

He didn't let go of her then as she had expected, but instead firmd his grip on her thighs and slowly 
walked toward the large bed that stood across the room.

His eyes were pools of darkness, their usual colour only a slim silvery corona around unrelieved 
black. That something that had frightened her before still worked inside him, still shone from out of 
the blackness, all-consuming and powerful.

With heartrending care, he placed her on the bed and then proceeded to fumble at the buckles 
holding his armour with trembling fingers.

He was almost done with ridding himself of all the plate he was wearing, when it finally dawned on 
er that instead of gawking at him as he shed his armour, she might have used the time to rid herself 
of some of her own clothing as well for what surely was to come.

She had barely unlaced the front of her dress, when he deemed himself sufficiently undressed for 
whatever he had in mind – not that this was much of a secret, looking at him – and crawled over her 
on all fours to claim her mouth once again.

Her body answered with a new rush of heat through her veins, another kick to her heart that sent it 
galloping like a spooked horse and a pulling sensation low in her belly that she had never felt before.

His mouth left her then, blazing a wet trail of kisses down her chin and neck, only to travel up to her 
ear.

"I want you, Sansa," he murmured. "I want you so very badly I am burning up with it."

"I know," she said stupidly, the thought the only one in her mind at the moment.

She knew he did, had known for a long time; had always known on some level, even if her mind felt 
fit to acknowledge the notion only just now, only now letting her realize that the force raging inside 
him was undiluted passion and desperate need, born out of the experience of nearly having lost her 
today.

It must have been strange for him, a man used to decide things for himself, to be at the mercy of a 
woman's decision and she could not even begin to understand what it must have done to him. She 
could only observe the symptoms.

Being the object of so much desire was at once exhilarating and frightening, so she desperately 
thought of what to say to tell him he could have her, even if she'd much rather just kept kissing.

"I… I want this, too," she finally said, hoping he wouldn't notice that this wasn't exactly the truth.
She wanted… something, of that she was sure, but giving him what he wanted was nice enough for now.

If he’d noticed the untruth of her words, he didn’t acknowledge it. He certainly didn’t second guess her statement, because he all but tore her skirts in his haste to ruck them up to her waist.

When his fingers dipped in between her legs, he let out something that sounded like a sob.

"So… so wet… so wet for me," he murmured insanely against her neck and his words proved to be entirely true when he slid inside her as smoothly as a key into a well-oiled lock. She would've been embarrassed at her body's response, at the wet sounds it made when he moved in and out of her, if it hadn't been for his obvious enjoyment of it.

*Wet and ready.*

Wasn't that what Sibyl had said how he preferred his… women?

A sharp bite of something nasty came with the thought, but she shoved it away, concentrating instead on his movements inside her, on the bliss on his sweat-covered face.

*The hunger I have for you could not be sated by anyone else.*

That was what he'd told her and he would never lie to her. She had no reason to have this ruined for her by the thought of women he’d been with before.

The almost painful, pulling sensation she had felt before intensified with every one of his powerful movements, drawing every muscle inside her taut with the expectation of she didn't know what, despite her trying her best to keep herself soft and relaxed as she had been told she should.

When she felt him near his climax, she wound her legs tighter around his hips to keep him from pulling away and to her delight, he stayed with her this time. His release came on him with a sobbing groan and the familiar shaking of his big frame, something she would probably never tire of experiencing.

To have this powerful man so much at the mercy of an ecstasy she was the cause of was a potent reward in itself, despite a nagging feeling that there ought to be more, that she had missed out on something.

He rolled to his side after a moment, brought her with him and tucked her as close to him as he could, his chin resting on top of her head.

The storm, it seemed, had calmed, the urgency vanished from the way he held and touched her and she listened with fascination as his heartrate slowed back to normal.

His shirt was soaked with sweat and she wondered why he had not taken the short moment to remove it. She really wished to see him undressed and – even more than that – she wished to feel his naked skin under her hands when she touched him. Maybe she should tell him at one point, maybe he tried to preserve some modesty, although that seemed rather ridiculous, all things considered.

"Did you…" she started, but was interrupted.

"Don't," he rasped. "I am sick and tired of that question."

She snapped her mouth shut. Sure, the question seemed somewhat superfluous, but it shouldn't be too much to ask for him to tell her he liked it. She would have liked to hear it.
"But…"

He drew away from her then and if she had been able to, she would have shrunk back from the anger blazing in his eyes, unguarded for the moment.

"Sansa, I enjoy being with you every single fucking time," he pressed through gritted teeth. "I enjoy just sitting down for a meal, just talking. And the Seven help me, but I even enjoyed repairing those bloody window frames.

"I enjoy being able to touch you whenever I feel like it without it having anything to do with dragging you to Joffrey or carrying you bleeding back to your chambers. And I feel like dying when my cock is in your sweet wet cunt, so please for the love of the Seven, do not ever ask me that again."

This unexpected deluge of words left her speechless, while she carefully picked through what he had been saying.

He felt like dying? Was that supposed to be a compliment?

"So it was only bad for you the first time?" she finally asked,

He turned fully to her then, looming over her.

"Did you expect me to enjoy seeing you in that much pain?" he asked with a pained frown. "Knowing I am the one hurting you, knowing I could make it stop and still somehow not wanting to?"

She shook her head, speech momentarily impossible due to a lump in her throat.

Shame suffused her at the realization that she'd been wrong all this time. Despite the fact that she should've known better, she had thought all men the same in this. Thought that rape came natural to each of them, that a woman's pain was of no account and therefore wouldn't impede their enjoyment of the act.

Why, with everything she knew of Sandor, had she only for a second considered this to be true for him?

"It hurt so much to hear you say that, to think you didn't want me," she whispered her feeble attempt at an explanation. "To think you might come to regret…"

A large hand clamped over her mouth.

"Not another word," he grated. "Do you really not know…"

He shook his head and growled in frustration. Then he abruptly let go of her, turned and swung his legs out of the bed. There he sat motionless, face in his hands, his broad back to her.

"You're driving me insane, girl," he mumbled after a while, sighing deeply. "This feels like getting my guts ripped out and I've no idea how to help it."
Chapter 12: Discovering

They left the White Tower via a maze of underground tunnels she would have been hopelessly lost in had he thought to abandon her there.

On the way, he told her how Lord Varys had always claimed to be the only one able to navigate all the secret passages, but that he had taught himself about them as well. One never knew when such knowledge could come in handy, he explained.

He talked about his various adventures down here and after a while she had the feeling he only talked so she wouldn't, talked to distract himself from whatever still bothered him. She still didn't know what to do or say about his puzzling statement from before, so distraction was welcome.

They reached a rusty iron door after a while to which he had a key.

"There is a book seller's stand only a couple of steps from here. Ask for Eric, he'll escort you home."

He turned to go, but she held him back with a hand on his arm.

"You will not come with me?"

In hindsight, it was a bit of a stupid question. They surely couldn't be seen together out there in broad daylight. She might be inconspicuous enough on her own, but with him parading at her side in full Kingsguard armour, Littlefinger's men wouldn't even need to exert themselves to find out where she lived.

She almost expected him to harshly point that out to her, when he stepped towards her to take her chin in a gentle grip.

"Can't", he said and then leaned down to give her a kiss so deep and thorough, her knees turned to jelly. "There'll be some bloody feast tonight and I've no idea how long that'll last," he said afterwards, a hint of regret in his eyes. "Tell Betsy I'm sorry, but she doesn't need to make plans for my being there for dinner and don't wait up for me."

She was about to reply when silenced by another heart-stopping kiss.

If he was really as new to kissing as she was, as evidence suggested, he was getting good at this frighteningly fast. Deciding that silence was golden for the moment, she sank into his kiss with something close to abandon.
He kissed her with such an earnest intensity, it seemed as if he was trying to tell her something with his kisses that he could not tell her with words.

"Damn," he muttered close to her lips when he broke the kiss and she knew what he meant. She felt the same unwillingness to part.

He turned with an abruptness that left her unbalanced for a moment and strode away with long, hasty steps, not looking back.

…

Eric turned out to be a strapping lad not much older than Betsy, who told her that Sandor had once saved him from being beaten to death in some back alley and since then had given him a few odd jobs here and there.

He spoke of Sandor with something like hero-worship in his voice and after hearing his story, she couldn't fault him for it.

Apparently, Sandor had tasked him with keeping an eye on her and on the house ever since the first incident with Littlefinger's men. He mostly lurked outside the house almost all hours of the day, he explained with audible pride, and shadowed her on her outings.

Sansa felt foolish to discover that she had never even noticed him. Had never thought in how great a danger she was bringing herself by traipsing through the most unsavoury parts of the city unescorted and unprotected.

Here and then she resolved never to be that careless again.

According to Sandor's wishes, Sansa had told Betsy not to prepare a big dinner and had eaten her frugal meal alone in front of the fireplace, not before tasking Betsy with giving a share of the meal to Eric who kept his vigil outside the house as was his assigned duty.

After it had turned dark, she lighted only a single candle, too little for needlework and finally went to bed early.

She had expected to lie awake for a long time, thinking about all the things that had happened this day, but her limbs felt like lead when she crawled under the covers and with the comfort of a warm featherbed on which Sandor's smell still lingered, she fell promptly asleep.

…

The bed was still disappointingly empty when she woke the next morning and the following day brought no other events but a quickly scrawled note informing them that Sandor would be needed at Maegor's for another evening of courtly amusement.

Again Sansa had to go to an empty bed and this time she was very sure she would not be able to fall asleep and proceeded to toss and turn, kept awake by recollections of what had transpired between Sandor and her in his chambers. The memories left her increasingly restless and wishing for him to be there, if only to be able to kiss him again and be overwhelmed by his boundless passion.

She must have fallen asleep anyway, because she came awake with a start when the mattress dipped deeply next to her. Around her, darkness was absolute. The fire in the hearth had gone out and the night was so quiet around her, it could only be two or three hours after midnight.

Without a second thought, she rolled towards him and snuggled into arms that were ready to receive
"Mhmmm, Sansa," he murmured into her hair and she answered with a similar sound of content while all her misgivings were washed away in a tide of sudden inexplicable happiness at having him close once again.

In this moment, it seemed as if it had all been worth it just for this.

He put a finger under her chin and tilted her face to him, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips that felt like a question.

A question she answered at once and with alacrity and it soon became apparent that whatever he'd been up to for the last two days hadn't left him too tired for more strenuous activities.

While they kissed, she let her hands wander down his body, stroking over his linen covered chest down to where it had been untucked from his breeches. She slipped her hand beneath the fabric and skimmed her fingers over a flat stomach, ridged with steel hard muscles. He sucked in a breath and his belly hollowed under her hand as he stopped kissing her. She feared he'd tell her to stop, but he didn't.

So she let her hand travel a bit farther upwards, finding his flat bellybutton and the surprisingly soft hair that trailed from there upwards to where it led to his chest. Her hand's journey came to an abrupt end as his shirt kept her from fully exploring him and she even got distracted from the enticing lure of his skilful lips and tongue by the sudden burning wish to touch all of him.

Grabbing the hem of his shirt, she tried to tug it upwards when he put his hand over hers.

"No," he rasped.

It felt a bit as if doused with cold water.

"Why not?" she asked, not even bothering to keep the pout out of her voice. "It's dark," she added unnecessarily when he kept quiet for a long moment.

Although she had even chided herself for the stupidity of her remark, it nonetheless seemed to have somehow convinced him to comply with her wish.

He sat up and after some rustling and manoeuvring, the nature of which she couldn't discern in the dark, lay down again a few inches away from her as if suddenly unsure if he wanted to have her close.

Her hand, reaching out across the space that divided them, found naked skin, warm and firm, its surprising smoothness marred here and there by knobbly scar tissue, dents and slashes. Without seeing anything, she could not be sure what had been the cause of all that damage, but one didn't need to be a seer to divine the general origin.

On exploring further down, she found to her delight that he had not only shed the shirt, but his breeches as well.

A sudden heat welled up in her and she sat up to hastily rid herself of her nightdress. After having done so, she closed the gap between them and pressed her full length against his body, driven by an urge she could not explain, only feel and act on.

…
In Sandor's former experience, being with a woman was a very simple matter. There was usually only the one thing to do and he did it as efficiently as he could and counted himself successful if he went away moderately satisfied.

With Sansa, none of his experiences seemed applicable and nothing of being in bed with her was even remotely simple. For all he knew about what to do with her, she might as well be his first woman.

The sensation of her body against his naked skin alone was enough to drive him out of his mind with desire. Every square inch of his exposed body was aware of her closeness, every part of him hungered for her touch and that hunger froze him into motionless, breathless suspense, unable to lift as much as a finger as she started to caress him with nimble and curious hands.

Almost desperately, he asked himself how he was to hold himself in check when she had literally stripped him of all that separated them. When her fingers kneaded his muscles and her fingertips slightly pressed into his flesh here and there.

"So hard," she murmured and he hoped it was awe he heard. "So strong."

That, at last, brought him out of his stupor and he abruptly turned to her and claimed her mouth in a kiss only to be faced with another dilemma. There were so many things he wanted to do, and some he felt he urgently needed to do and he had no idea where to start.

He wanted to kiss her mouth, just savour the way she seemed to melt and sink into him when he kissed her. He wanted to explore her body, drag his lips and tongue over every inch of her, learn her taste and her smell, learn if he could make her enjoy any of this the same way he did.

And of course, he wanted to be inside her, feel the tight hold of her cunt while having her under him, her breasts soft against his naked chest, her velvety thighs wrapped around his hips and her hands stroking his unclad shoulders.

Two days away from her had left him with very little patience for all the other things he would have liked to try, so he ended up manoeuvring himself between her legs and pushing his cock into her.

Maybe there was a sound of disappointment in her sigh when she took him inside, her body pliant and soft, but he couldn't be sure.

…

After that night, he made sure he found at least a few hours every night to ride down into the city, sneak quietly into his own house and into the bed of the beautiful girl who lived there.

She never complained that he came to her like a thief, never so much as mentioned that he always left before she woke up. Instead she always came into his arms as if she had longed for him, kissed and caressed him as if she had been starving for both and took him into her body with a natural acceptance that never quite failed to surprise him.

He might even have gotten used to all of it, if it hadn't become more and more apparent to him that he never really took his time. That he always left their bed regretting all the things he hadn't done, all the delights he was sure were still to discover but which urgency and need always kept him from exploring.

So after about a week of his nightly visits, he decided to give himself some time, to eliminate the drive to seek his release right away.
When he snuck into the bedroom that night, he didn't go to bed right after having undressed. Instead he leaned against the wall next to one of the windows, knowing he would be all but invisible there, let his eyes adjust to a darkness that was only the slightest bit relieved by a waxing moon and took himself in hand. His cock had been hard already, happily anticipating what usually happened in this room that smelled so much of her and a bit of what they had done here for the past week.

Unhurriedly, he stroked himself, no other help needed to spur him towards release than the memories from those nights, the thought of silky-cool skin gliding against him, of sweet sighs and heated kisses. Of her wetness dripping from his fingers when he stroked between her legs to see if she was ready.

Some rustling came from the bed as Sansa turned under the covers and he asked himself if he had woken her with his laboured breathing, but to his surprise didn't mind the thought that he had. She could not see him after all and there was something strangely exciting about the thought to have her over there in bed, wondering what he was doing, while he stood here with his cock in his hand and the lewdest pictures of her in his head.

Out of nowhere, another picture popped into his brain, the image of the situation being reversed, of her stroking her cunt while he looked on.

Things were over for him quickly after that one and despite his best efforts, he groaned somewhat loudly when he came, taken by surprise by the intensity of a release brought on by only his own hand.

After having felt his way towards the washstand and back again, he got into bed only to find her already awake. Her skin was warmer than normal and she seemed a bit out of breath when she kissed him hungrily.

Her ardour awed and delighted him, especially once he realized she must have been awake while he had beaten off and instead of her being angry or disgusted, she was actually stirred by what she had witnessed.

This insight only fortified his decision to take it slow this time, to be as thorough as he could.

Since he knew she liked it when he caressed her breasts, it was to them he let his mouth wander after having kissed her breathless.

His mind soared at the sounds she made when he worshipped the perfection that were her breasts with his lips and his tongue. His hand, meanwhile, stroked over her belly down to where he knew he would find her dripping and ready and despite just having spilled into his fist, he grew hard again just at the feeling of her damp, butter-soft folds parting willingly to have his finger slip inside as if she had waited just for this. A shudder of delight passed through him when he gasped as he added a second finger.

Clamping down on what once again shoved at him to just take her without trying anything else, he let his fingers linger where they were, fucking her with excruciating slowness as he savoured every sigh and every trembling of her body.

Sansa's innocence, he had finally understood a while ago, did mean she had no choice about being honest with him in this. She gave herself without holding back and without acting or pretending. Which meant that not only was every reaction genuine, it also meant that if he did something wrong, if he failed her, he would know. The only thing he had to do was pay attention.

He withdrew his fingers after a few more strokes and let them slowly circle her entrance, wet
fingertips gliding easily over the petal-like softness of her nether lips. His actions held him in such a trance, he did not notice that her hand had crept downward until it settled over his.

He stilled his movements at once, afraid he'd done something she didn't like. But she surprised him when she gently directed his fingers farther upwards, until the tip of his forefinger came to rest on a curiously firm bundle of flesh atop her slit.

She gasped when he touched it and gasped again when he let his finger experimentally glide over it.

"Oh...!"

Excitement at hearing that sound made him press down a bit harder, which made her flinch a little.

Fortunately, he knew what to do when his rough hands and large fingers proved inadequate to the delicacy of her body. Often enough already, it had served him more than well, not to mention it had fulfilled more desires than he had known he had, to use his lips and tongue where his hands could only experience so much.

Without a second thought, he dove under the covers and settled between her legs, holding her thighs apart with his shoulders.

She might have made a muffled sound of protest somewhere up there, but that was quickly drowned by a gasp when he carefully put his mouth on her. He then probed with his tongue for the spot she'd showed him before.

There was another, louder "oh!" to be heard when apparently he had found it, a sound that petered out into a soft mewl of pleasure.

He lifted his mouth from her to make sure.

"Is this...," he started to ask, but was quickly interrupted.

"Duhu... don't stop," she commanded and his lips pulled into a broad grin as he bent to do what she had bid him.

He quickly became lost.

When before he had always thought it intoxicating to smell and touch and taste her; having his mouth between her legs was like drowning. She was all around and inside him, the taste of her liquid desire on his tongue, her smell in his nostrils and her sweet juices dripping down his chin. The tremors in her thighs on his back and the sharp bite of her nails as they dug into his scalp while she tried to press him even closer to her wanting flesh. The urgent bucking of her hips that he had to still with a firm grip of both his hands to have her at the mercy of his ministrations. Her cries and the breathless way in which she moaned his name, over and over, pleading and encouraging. Every "Yes, oh Sandor, oh yes" a victory and still only a milestone on a way he was determined to see through to the end.

The end, when it came, was glorious, humbling and not at all quiet.

When he held her thrashing, trembling body to him and heard her sobbing cries that only slowly abated, he thought with a touch of envy that maybe women experienced sexual pleasure much more intensely than men. Then again, considering how rarely they probably did experience it in the first place, it seemed only fair.

Only that for this particular girl, it would not stay a rare occurrence. He would make sure of it, even if his reasons were mostly selfish. While pleasing her was its own reward, having her come for him
was a feeling he would die for to be able to experience again and again as long as she let him.

A feeling that was a heady mixture of pride and victory and something nameless that flowed through his soul like honey, soothing and sweet and incredibly addicting.

He slowly moved up her body, relishing the tremors that still went through her in the wake of her release. Under the cover of darkness, where even she could not see his eyes and face, he allowed himself to dwell in what he was feeling, to smile like and imbecile until his facial muscles hurt from the exertion they weren't accustomed to.

Was this what he had wished for when he first took her? This sweet respite from the world around them, temporary as it might be? Was this having something good for himself for once; feeling more than pain, anger and powerlessness? Was this how it could work between them, being the more richly rewarded the more he gave?

And at those musings, quite unexpectedly, he understood something else.

He kissed her neck and slightly nipped at her earlobe before sucking it into his mouth.

What had begun as a giggle transformed into a moan.

"Did you enjoy it?" he asked in a whisper, hoping he sounded teasing instead of bashful.

"Did I... oh my Sandor, of course I did, I..."

She paused in her effusions and he felt a hand on his face. "Are you making fun of me?" she asked and there was break to her voice that he couldn't suffer, not now. He kissed her, trying to silence her doubts as sweetly as he could.

"No," he said against her lips. "I think I just realized why you used to ask that question."

She chuckled; a low, rich sound, replete with satisfied laziness. It sounded strangely exciting coming from her, because it was a woman's laugh, not a girl's, which made it even more stirring.

Her hand came up to his face and directed him down to her mouth for an unhurried kiss.

"I want you... inside," she murmured still with that low, sensual timbre when they came up for air and he could almost hear her blood rushing to her cheeks at what to her had to be one of the boldest things she'd ever said.

The sweet invitation hit him like a fist to the solar plexus, leaving him breathless and inert at the realization that he had all but forgotten about his raging hard-on. He rushed to comply with her wish a heartbeat later, sinking into her with a groan only to howl with pleasure as he felt her cunt still softly contracting around him in the aftermath of her climax.

_Gods_, he thought, how glorious would it be to have her come with his cock inside her. This was definitely something worth finding out.
Chapter 13: Talking

Sansa fought her tiredness as she lay in his embrace afterwards, busying herself with trying to memorize the feel of his skin under her fingertips, to identify every ridge and bump and scar.

After what had just happened, the thought of letting him go was abhorrent to her.

She never again wanted to wake to find the bed empty. She wanted to sink her nails into him and hold him here; bar the windows and doors and tell the world outside to mind its own business.

Her life, her everything was here in this bed, a world newly discovered, so rich and rewarding she wondered if she might be the first woman ever to have made this discovery, for surely everyone would only ever stay in bed if they knew.

She giggled at imagining what state the world would be in if this were to be the case.

Still, it seemed way better than waging wars all the time.

On second thought, surely they did know, because what Sandor had just done with her, Sibyl had told her about. While back then it had only incited horrified disgust in her, later, after she had already been treated to the pleasures of Sandor's curious, gentle mouth and his wickedly mobile tongue, she had wondered at times how what Sibyl had mentioned would feel.

*If you are lucky,* indeed, she thought, giggling again.

"What are you tittering about?" Sandor inquired sleepily.

She turned to rest her chin on her hands she had folded on his chest. Too bad it was too dark to see him. The ache to do so when they were in bed like this had only grown more pronounced over the last days.

"Just imagined how it would be if everyone knew about how much... joy this is and all people would be...," she balked a bit at using the word both Sibyl and Sandor used for what they had done.

"...fucking all the time?" he finished for her.

A quiet chuckle vibrated through his chest.

"Do you have to call it that?" she asked, somewhat miffed.
A hand softly skimmed her shoulder.

"I don't think I've another word for it," he said, then chuckled again. "At least nothing more appropriate. Bloody singers call it 'making love', but…"

She contemplated the expression for a while. It certainly seemed more fitting. She had felt cherished just then, revered and yes, maybe even loved.

"I'll call it that, then," she said with determination, expecting him to scoff.

"If you think it fits," he said surprisingly softly, his fingertips still ghosting over her back.

"I do," she said.

He kept caressing her, the lazy movements soothing her towards sleep which had almost reached her when his chest rumbled under her ear again.

"How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"Where you needed me to touch you."

The question was asked in a curious tone, as if it wasn't just motivated by curiosity, but by equal parts of dread and hope.

"Sibyl told me."

He let out a deep breath he seemed to have held.

Suspicion had her raise her head from where it was resting.

"What were you thinking?"

"Nothing, I just…"

She couldn't believe her own ears.

"Did you think… have you truly believed I would have let anyone else touch me like this?"

Turning her back to him, she fought the tears rising to her eyes. She knew she had no reason to be offended. She had gone above and beyond what he suspected her of by taking lessons from a whore.

"I didn't believe it," he offered quietly and again it was the gentle touch of his hands that soothed her almost as much as his words did, "but it gets me into the mood to kill just considering it a possibility."

"Was this why you were so angry… that one time?" she asked, remembering the night when she had first practiced Sibyl's teachings.

"Aye."

It was oddly satisfying to think that his outburst back then had been motivated by nothing more than… what was it? Possessiveness? Jealousy? The former would only mean that he considered her his property. Although she knew he did, in a way, had even openly declared "she's mine" in front of the council, she knew she was more than a commodity for him. If nothing else, the last hour
should've proven as much.

But if it was jealousy, if even back then it had been jealousy, wouldn't it mean…? Her heart stuttered almost to a stop and her mind forcefully turned away from where that thought might have led.

"You should've known better," she said sulkily but without heat.

"How?" he asked, quite rightly. "You were so good at that, there was no way you figured it out all by yourself."

She almost laughed out loud at that. Of all the things she had expected, of all the hurtful, dreadful things she had imagined, that had been his chief concern?

"I guess Sibyl was a really good choice as a teacher then," she said, smiling into the darkness.

He shifted and leaned over her, then gave her a kiss.

"I do not know the woman," he said, punctuating the words with tiny kisses, "but I am getting the feeling I ought to thank her."

"Maybe you should," she said chuckling at the thought of how that particular conversation might go down. Then again, she'd rather not imagining him back in that street at all. Although maybe Sibyl should know about the success of her lessons. "I know I will."

"Don't forget to take Eric with you when you go," he cautioned and drew her closer. "I'd much prefer you to stay here, but…"

She pressed a kiss to his chest to express her gratefulness.

"I know," she whispered. "I am glad you're not imprisoning me."

They settled back into a comfortable position, but this time, the alertness she still sensed in him kept her from growing drowsy again.

"What else did she teach you?" he asked after a while.

Sansa felt her cheeks heat up at the memory. Sure that Sandor wasn't asking for the more mundane parts of her "education"., like preventing pregnancies and assorted illnesses, his question brought things to her memory she wasn't sure she could tell him about, even if she wanted to. For once thing because she lacked even the vocabulary for most of it, for another... well, Sibyl had shown her some things she was sure she would not want to try even if Sandor should want to.

"She showed me a few etchings," she said at last and then decided to be as honest as possible. So far, it seemed to be the best strategy with him. "Some of them very disturbing, which I hope you'll never want me to try. Some that seemed… interesting. She told me there were different... positions in which to... do that. And that most men prefer one over the other."

He gave a non-committal grunt to that, which told her nothing.

"Which one is your favourite?" she asked, warming to her topic.

Under her, he shifted a bit, as if uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"I... don't know."

"You're lying."
A deep, put-upon sigh almost lifted her off his expanding chest.

"I am not lying," he said. "It's like that food thing. I never really thought about it, left the choice to the women, usually. Most of them didn't want to see my face anyway, so that was that."

Sansa bit back a gasp at the hurt that squeezed her heart at hearing his overly casual words. Not so much because the thought of him with other women was always a hurtful one, but because there was such a depth of painful, desperate loneliness to his words, she couldn't even fathom how someone could manage to cope with this while still staying sane.

An act that should have brought him nothing but joy, should've brought him respite from the world's contempt had only served to ostracize him even more. Even those whose job should have been to please him had managed to make him feel inadequate and barely human.

"Are you crying?" he asked with alarm in his voice, his fingers seeking and finding the wetness on her face she hadn't even realized was there.

"No," she said, wiping at the wet streaks on her face. She knew he would not appreciate her feeling sorry for him.

"Look who's lying now," he said, but there was a smile in his voice.

"You're changing the topic," she accused him in turn to distract him.

His wandering hand turned to her back and shoulders again and she relaxed against him, not really expecting him to say anything, but content to just enjoy his touch.

"It's strange," he said, "thinking about what I like. Stranger still to think someone wants to know."

"So what is it you like?" she insisted.

His body tensed and suddenly sprang into action, surprising her. Rolling on top of her, he pressed her deep into the mattress with the weight of his body and brought his mouth to her ear, his breath hot.

"I like to have my tongue as deep in your mouth as my cock is in your cunt when I fuck you," he rasped and she recognized his need to somehow intimidate her with this bluntness, get her to back off, to stop asking questions he felt uncomfortable answering. But then his body moved against hers, naked skin touching everywhere they were pressed together, and he seemed to soften, to change. "I... I still cannot believe how great it felt to hear you moan and scream my name as you came," he continued and then paused for a long while, something unsaid hanging in the air around them. "I wish I knew how to make you come with my cock inside you," he continued almost inaudibly, as if afraid of being heard.

Sansa swallowed, more overwhelmed by the fact that he had actually said "I wish" than by what he had wished for. She might have told him that Sibyl had said what he wished for was not possible for most women, that she still barely believed she'd experienced that sort of pleasure just a few minutes before, but another thought was prevalent in her mind.

"I wish I knew that, too." She wound he arms around his shoulders, relishing their hard strength.

He froze for a moment, then found her mouth for a thorough, none too gentle kiss that left her mouth feeling bruised and swollen but her body heated and ready. By now she knew he did that when not knowing how to express himself otherwise, so she basked in his passion and opened her legs for him when she felt him push against her with impatience.
It was short and intense and not the first time he had taken her twice in one night, which sometimes made her wonder how much sleep he had gotten lately. She herself was grateful she could laze about in bed until very late in the morning to sleep off her nightly activities.

"So, tell me," he said after his breath had calmed again. "Which of those etchings she showed you did you find… interesting?"

She laughed quietly, secretly entertained at the question and at her own wonderings if he would insist on trying right now if she told him of her... interest.

"I'll tell you tomorrow," she said, pressing a kiss to his chest. "Good night, Sandor."

... The morning air was warm and the streets wet from last night's rain as Sansa made her way to the Street of Silk, Eric trailing a ways behind her.

She had packed a couple of freshly baked buns, courtesy of Betsy, although the girl only knew that Sansa was visiting "a friend".

With her cap deeply in her face, she carefully observed the streets around her in case she'd see more of those men who had once stood outside her home, but could detect nothing out of the ordinary.

As expected, the door to Sibyl's establishment was locked, but to Sansa's growing disappointment, didn't open even after she had knocked a couple of times. She hammered her fist against the door for good measure, but even that wasn't met with success.

"The place is closed up," someone said behind her.

Sansa whirled around to find none other than Old Mag standing on the street, a basket on her arm filled with various flagons and jars, probably having made a round of her customers.

"Dragged her away, they did," the old woman continued, eyeing Sansa as if she was somehow to blame. "A white knight and a couple of lads in black. Two days ago it was and she hasn't been back yet, probably dead, I wager."

Without even waiting for an answer, the old woman turned and walked away with hasty steps.

Thought had not fully formed in her head, when Sansa felt a large hand on her arm, tugging at her insistently.

"My lady, we've been made," Eric whispered to her, dragging her along towards a gap between two houses, no more than three feet wide and looking unsavoury to say the least. "We've to vanish quickly."

She followed Eric blindly, her thoughts stumbling around in her head as much as she was stumbling along behind Eric. He'd made her leave her basket at some corner, helped her climb fences, directed her to step through back doors and hurry through houses, then climb again, but this time down into a mace of cellars and sewers until they miraculously appeared in front of her house, bedraggled and dirty and foul smelling, but mostly still in one piece.

"I've to let the master know what happened," Eric explained breathlessly. "You're not to leave the house until he says so."

With that, he turned to go, but she grabbed his jacket before he could.
"What happened?" she asked.

"They must have learned about your visits to your... friend," he said and looked at her as if that was blindingly obvious. "Probably took her for questioning her about your whereabouts and thought they'd just lay in wait for you to come back again."

Horror welled up in her as she slowly understood what Eric was saying.

Her nerveless fingers let go of him and she slowly sank to the floor, covering her face with her hands.

"Get him," she said tonelessly. "Get him as fast as you can."

...

Sandor hurried home as soon as he could after having received Eric's report on how nearly Sansa had escaped Littlefinger's lackeys today.

While he knew her to be safe for now, he imagined her to be upset and he proved to be right. He had barely closed the door behind him, when she flew into his arms, clinging to him as if for dear life.

"They've taken her away," she sobbed. "Some men came and took her away, one of them Kingsguard."

"Who was taken?" he asked, worried at the thought something might have happened to Betsy.

"Hasn't Eric told you?"

"He just told me you were nearly caught by Littlefinger's men today, but that he got you safely away just in time."

"They nearly caught us because they knew where to wait for me," she said, voice wavering. "They've taken Sibyl."

"The whore?"

Sansa took a step back from him and sniffed while wiping at her eyes.

"She is the proprietor of an establishment for... for... entertainment," she said as if that somehow made a difference. He decided that now was not the time to discuss semantics.

"What happened?"

"I don't know anything more than I've already told you," she said sadly, sitting down on a chair. "They said she was led away two days ago by three men, one of them in Kingsguard armour. A 'white knight'."

As far as he knew, the description fitted only a few suspects.

"Probably Littlefinger's men and Kettleblack, trying to get her to tell him where you are."

"But she doesn't know!" Sansa exclaimed, jumping from her chair. "I've never told her and she never even asked."

"Let's hope he believes her," Sandor said only to see her become motionless at that, her face white as a sheet.
"You think he might... have her tortured?"

He gaped at her and then clenched his jaw, averting his eyes. Not too long ago, he would’ve laughed at her question, told her how clueless she was to not even have considered that a possibility when for him it was a clear certainty that the woman had not only been tortured, but quite probably killed once she proved to be worthless to Littlefinger. He could not leave witnesses, after all.

He might have told her once, but now something held him back.

"It's... possible," he said, but when she just closed her eyes and fresh tears rolled down her cheeks, he knew he might as well have told her the truth as he saw it. He could not more successfully lie to her than she could lie to him.

Truth was the only option between them, no matter how sharp-edged, painful or brutal it got.

But still she did not seem to fault him for his trying to omit the truth, because she came into his arms once again, pressing her face against his chest.

"Can you please go and find her?" she begged him. "Maybe he just holds her somewhere, maybe you can get Kettleblack to talk, maybe..."

Should he tell her that her desperate hope was useless, that it was a fool's errant she sent him on? That after her being gone for two days the chances were slim to none he'd find the woman alive? Or at least alive enough so it would serve any purpose to bring her back?

On the other hand, how could he say no?

He stroked her hair with one hand and uselessly tried to wipe away her tears with the other, biting back the remark that she shouldn’t cry for a woman so far beneath her. But he didn't because he understood in this moment that this was what made her the woman he would walk into fire for. The fact that she cared, be it for a common whore or a maimed killer. So he nodded his wordless assent and found himself truly hoping despite himself that he would find Sibyl still alive.

Sansa had wrapped herself into a scratchy blanket and huddled on a chair in front of the fireplace in the living room, waiting for Sandor's return.

She'd not heard from him during the day and with every hour that went by, her feeble hope that Sibyl was still alive somewhere slowly turned to ashes just like the logs in the fire in front of her eyes. It had been stupid to hope for that in the first place and she had seen in Sandor's eyes that he had only gone to humour her, not because he had any expectation to be successful in his search.

Her tears had run dry a few hours ago when she had realized it wasn't Sibyl she cried for, but once again herself. Because if Sibyl was dead, it would be her fault.

Her allies always died.

The door creaked in its hinges and she slowly turned to see him walking towards her with a lowered head. Wordlessly, he reached a closed fist towards her and she held out her hand. With a faint tinkling sound, a necklace fell into her hand, a sturdy silver chain with a gaudy pendant of coloured glass. Sansa's hand began to shake as she remembered that Sibyl used to wear it.

"That's all that was left," he said quietly. "Once I found out from Kettleback where they'd taken her, they had already burned her clothes and gotten rid of...," he shook his head and sat down heavily on
another chair, resting his elbows on his thighs. "The man who had this... let's say he won't be torturing anyone anymore."

Sickness crawled up inside her, choking her. It was one thing to convince herself of the truth, it was another to have it undeniably stated, to hold the proof in her own hand.

A fleeting caress grazed her shoulder.

"I am sorry about your... friend," he offered tentatively. The gesture brought new tears to her eyes. He hadn't even known Sibyl, had gone to look for her only at her behest and still he tried to console her. If only she could adequately express to him how much his compassion meant to her, how it helped her to know she wasn't left alone with her grief. Her guilt.

"She wasn't my friend, I barely knew her," she said, shaking her head. "But she didn't deserve to be tortured and killed just because she knew me. Because she helped me." Spoken aloud like this, the glaring truth about her own guilt became even more obvious. "It was me who killed her. Just like I killed my father."

"Stop it," he rasped, anger blazing at her from his eyes. "You never killed anyone in all your life and you know it. You neither put a sword to your father's neck nor did you command Sibyl's murder. You mock everyone's death if you blame yourself and it won't get justice for you or any of those who are dead."

Embracing the numbness that slowly crawled into her, she shook her head, letting his anger wash over her as something she deserved.

"What does it help to nurse hatred for Littlefinger when I will never have the power to take revenge?"

He reached for her then, took her chin in his hand and forced her to face him.

"Never say never, little bird," he said insistently, his eyes boring into hers. "I got my revenge eventually, you will get yours, too."

As always, her mind quickly shied away from the event he alluded to.

But even that glimpse brought a memory of a feeling, an understanding, a kiss and a touch and it slammed into her so brutally, she could barely breathe.

A feeling that made her suddenly long for him with an overwhelming intensity. Maybe to drown her sorrows in passion and ecstasy, maybe to just forget or maybe because she could not really deal with all of this without being in his arms.

And despite her constant wish to finally see him, all of him, she was glad that tonight the bedroom would once again be shrouded in darkness. Right now, she couldn't cope with the harsh, honest warrior in front of her, who looked at her expecting her to be strong and angry and vengeful. Tonight she wanted to be weak, wanted to be held, caressed and pleasured by the gentle, passionate lover he was when she couldn't see him.

Tonight she couldn't bear being reminded of the blood he had on his hands and the scars he bore from violence and pain endured. She wanted darkness that meant peace, safety and intimacy, wanted to feel pleasure brought only by touch and taste. Darkness was close to pleasant dreams and refreshing sleep and she longed for that, too.

She stood and let the blanket fall to the floor, reaching out her hand in invitation.
"I've more bad news, I am afraid," he said, remaining seated.

She sat down again, numbly waiting for the next cruel blow.

Sandor sighed and rubbed his forehead.

"Might not be bad for you... or at least I hope so."

She shook her head at that puzzling statement that didn't tell her anything at all.

"Joffrey might have started a new war," he continued. "Last night, Margery kept pestering him about some street fair or something she wanted to host, with bread and treats given to the poor. Joff didn't want to hear about it and tried to forbid her doing it. It went back and forth for a while and then suddenly he turned and punched her."

"Punched her?" she echoed, aghast.

It was one thing to mistreat a traitor's daughter nobody cared about, but for Joffrey to forget himself so completely as to hit his wife... Sandor might be right, this might very well start a war.

"Yes, it wasn't a slap or anything, he had balled his fist and straight up punched her in the face. She spurted blood from her nose and I think her lips was split as well. Loras went for his throat, Kettleblack and I had quite a fight on our hands to separate them. We've thrown Loras into the black cells on Joff's orders and Trant brought the queen to Joffrey's private chambers later because he needed to 'teach her how to honour and obey her husband'. She still had only that split lip from before when I next saw her, but she seemed... not herself somehow."

Sansa closed her eyes while a wave of compassion went through her. It wasn't only the visibly wounds Joffrey inflicted that could nearly break you in two.

"I know," she said quietly.

"Mace Tyrell came up to me then, demanded of me to free Loras and to protect Margery and... "

He shook his head, taking a deep breath.

"And what?"

"He said it's all my fault for taking you away. That Joffrey was much better able to control himself as long as you were around."

Sansa's jaw dropped.

"So it's my fault Joff beats his own wife for not being there anymore to take the beatings in her stead?"

"Very nearly punched him, too, just for this," Sandor growled. "Told him to act like a man for once and stand up for his own daughter if she meant anything to him."

The longing she felt for him came back as she pondered his words, because she had once been just as much in need of someone to help her as Margery was now.

"Like you stood up for me and saved me, because I meant something to you?"

She didn't know the source of her bravery to ask him that question, when she still didn't know if she could handle his answer.
"I didn't save you, little bird," he said with a terse finality to his words that forbid any further argument.

She had no strength left for a discussion anyway, so she just stood again and extended her hand. This time, he took it and followed her upstairs.

…

He was strangely hesitant about touching her after they had both undressed in the darkness and it took her a while to understand that he thought to give her space to grieve.

But it was guilt she felt, not grief, despite what Sandor had said and she felt she owed Sibyl to at least honour her memory by reminding herself what knowing her had meant to her, what the two hours spent with her had taught her.

Curiously obedient, he let himself being shoved toward the bed and sat down when she lightly pushed at his chest. Then she started to kiss his neck just like she had back after her first visit with Sibyl.

"Sansa...what...," he started to ask, but she silenced him by lightly nipping at his skin, eliciting a hissing gasp.

"Sibyl told me to think about what I like about you," she murmured against his skin. "And not to focus on what I don't." She kissed down his neck, then let her lips wander down the bulge of his shoulder, explored his collarbone and then had the soft hairs on his chest tickle her mouth and lips as she sought out one flat nipple, maimed by a slash about which she meant to ask him some day. When she went further down with her caresses, he put his hands on her shoulders as if meaning to stop her.

He'd done so a few times before, never letting her kiss him anywhere south of his breastbone.

She swatted his hands away decisively.

So much for being weak. Then again, it wasn't her weak self that had decided to seek help from a professional woman. Not a weak girl who had applied her newly acquired knowledge the next chance she got no matter her nervousness. She wouldn't do Sibyl's memory justice by being weak.

Curiously enough, Sandor didn't protest.

"But I found," she continued when she had reached his belly, his erection resting against her naked breasts, "that there isn't anything I do not like about you."

He made some unarticulated sound deep in his throat which might have been an attempt at speech.

His manhood was hot and rock-hard already when she took it in her hand to rub her cheek against it for a loving caress, much like a cat would rub against a beloved owner. "Even this," she said and smiled into the darkness. "Especially this." He groaned loudly when she turned her head to press an open mouthed kiss to the tip of his cock. But she didn't take him into her mouth, not yet anyway.

Straightening up on her knees, she took her breasts in her hands and carefully enveloped his hardness with them, rubbing up and down as Sibyl had told her men might find stirring.

"Gods, I'd kill to see you right now," Sandor groaned, his whole body trembling. The bed behind him creaked and his upper body leaned away from her, so she surmised he'd found it necessary to support himself on his hands.
She tried to picture him, head thrown back with pleasure while imagining how she looked with his manhood between her breasts. Committing his reaction to memory for further use, she kept pleasing him, enjoying his reactions as much as the curious sensation of his hot flesh sliding along her softness, so different than when he was inside of her.

After a while, when his moans and curses spoke of mounting urgency, she bent down to take him into her mouth and he came almost as soon as her lips wrapped fully around him. Unlike last time, his pleasure was audible. This time, he didn't stop her from swallowing his seed, allowed her to experience his release with him to the last spurt, the last twitch of his manhood, the last sobbing groan.

As she settled against him afterwards, when trembling hands caressed her and a broken whisper gave the answer to a question she had not asked; she gave a silent thank you and bade a silent farewell to a woman of whom she knew nothing more than the name and profession.

But she vowed to her memory, silently as well, that should she ever get the chance for revenge - as Sandor was sure she would - her name would not be forgotten, would be part of the list of crimes Littlefinger had to answer for.

...
Chapter 14: Giving

The slim wooden box he carried around with him had all but burned a hole in his pockets for close to two weeks now and continued to plague him daily when he remembered he still had it.

A present for Sansa, he hadn't thought it pious to give it to her the day of the whole Sibyl disaster. It seemed even more inappropriate the day after, because he didn't want it to look as if he was rewarding her for what certainly had to be the bloody best and most intense cock-sucking in the history of mankind.

Even now, a sennight and some quite memorable fucks later, he still grew hard just at the memory of how she had so lovingly stroked and caressed his cock as if it was a beloved pet. The sensation of having his cock cushioned between her soft breasts had nearly unmanned him right then and once she'd put her mouth on him, he was lost to even so much as the thought of protesting or stopping her. He'd been so weak afterwards, it took what felt like an eternity before he could move again.

The following days, he'd been successful in telling himself that she had wanted this, that he needn't feel guilty for having somehow demeaned her by letting her do this and so far he believed himself, especially since he had been very diligent about repaying her favour in kind. Except for three nights during which she had not fully undressed, for reasons he had easily guessed without even having to ask, not one night had gone by in which she hadn't climaxed under his mouth.

Still, giving her his present now might make both of them feel differently about their situation again. As if it was payment for services rendered.

Not for the first time, he mentally kicked himself for not thinking of that before he had commissioned the little wooden box's content.

"You seem distracted," Sansa astutely observed while she delicately cut the juicy piece of beef Betsy had served each of them for dinner. "Are you worried about Lady Olenna's missive?"

Looking up at her, he tried to marshal his thoughts and give the right answer to her question.

"Everyone with half a brain ought to be worried," he said. "Mace Tyrell left King's Landing and took all his troops with him and now they are coming back with Lady Olenna marching in front of a whole Highgarden host under the guise of 'paying a visit to my dear grandchildren'. If that's not worrying, I don't know what else should be."

"Did Joffrey send an envoy?"

"He sent Littlefinger, since that worked so well last time."

Sansa breathed an audible sigh of relief which made him smile a little.

"Yeah, I thought the same. Takes him out of our hair for a spell."

Sansa chewed silently on her food for a while.

"What will Baelish tell them? Is Joffrey going to make amends?"
Sandor snorted.

"Small council pesters him day and night to free Loras, apologize to him and his sister and plead some temporary flare of temper or something. Even Cersei begs him to reconsider every chance she gets before he has her locked up again."

"Let me guess, he's not budging."

He smiled at her perceptiveness. No one probably knew Joffrey as well as both Sansa and he did. He from having been at his side almost from the cradle, her from being so dependent on judging his various moods as correctly as she could because her welfare depended on it.

"No, but he plans a big welcoming feast for them, wants to show off and let them all see who is in charge."

Sansa nodded.

"Sounds like him," she said, "although I am a bit surprised he isn't afraid of a repetition of what happened at his wedding. It's not even a year since Tywin died and they never found the one responsible."

Sandor shrugged.

"He's still convinced the Imp did it, despite his trial by battle proving him innocent. Last they heard he's somewhere far off in Essos, so..."

A shudder went through Sansa and Sandor chided himself for mentioning a subject that seemed off-limits. She took a deep breath then shook her head as if she had to get rid of something she didn't want to have in her mind.

"I'm sure it wasn't Tyrion," she said. "Even if he had intended to kill Joffrey as they are all convinced and Tywin just accidentally took the wrong goblet of wine to drink out of... I don't know, it doesn't add up."

"So you think someone will go after Joffrey again?" he asked. "Might not be that bad of an outcome."

Her smile looked forced.

"For us, maybe," she said. "For the kingdom and the people? Doubtful. Who is going to be next? Young Tommen with Cersei as Queen Regent?"

He shuddered just considering this. Knowing Cersei even longer than Joffrey, he knew that she was equally unsuited to be given power as her son. She craved it, but she wasn't her father. Not by a long shot.

Heaving a big sigh, he decided to broach another worrisome subject he carried around with him for a few days, just like the wooden box.

"The feast I mentioned, it's possible Joff might want you to come, too."

The eating knife in her hand stayed suspended above her food for a while until she put it down with exaggerated slowness. Her mouth was a bloodless line and only her eyes, ice-blue and sparkling, spoke of life in her deadly white face.
"I will not be humiliated again," she said slowly. "And I will not let them believe that you hurt me. Not again, not ever."

"That won't be necessary, I guess," he said, his own appetite vanishing without a trace. "He told me he wants you pretty."

She gave a slow nod. He knew she would understand that this time she was to be living proof that contrary to vile rumours, Joffrey wasn't in the habit of mistreating women.

"I understand; I will do my best to please."

"Sansa..." he began, somewhat taken aback at the pleading note in his own voice. He hated it when she was like that, because it always felt as if she was out of his reach then. Indomitable but untouchable as well, when touching her was something he couldn't fathom how to live without anymore.

With a sigh of defeat, he retrieved the wooden box from the inside pocket of his tunic, pushing it over to her. Might as well get this over with, too.

"Had this made for you, might be you want to wear it at the feast. Thought you might want something pretty."

He stared at the food in front of him, determined not to look up, not to watch her as she opened the box and...

"Oh my... oh this is beautiful!"

He slowly released the breath he had apparently been holding and looked up to see her hold up his gift to admire it in the light of the candelabra on the table.

On a silver chain, wrought from almost white silver, hung a silver pendant depicting the sigil of house Stark. The head of a direwolf, ruby eyes glittering in the candlelight as if the beast was alive and out for blood.

Tears glittered in her eyes as she looked over to him, the remoteness forgotten to be replaced by...

"Can you please help me put it on?" she said almost shyly as she stood, holding out the necklace to him.

Nodding, he stood and took it from her, then carefully studied the catch to see how it worked. Meanwhile, Sansa had turned and walked toward a little mirror near the door, sweeping the mass of her hair to the side with one hand, baring her neck to him.

There was something powerfully alluring about having her before him like this, with the vulnerable white flesh of her throat and neck exposed, and his hands trembled slightly as he delicately put the bit of jewellery around her neck and fastened it. Unable to resist the lure of her soft skin, he pressed an open-mouthed kiss on the very spot where the shadow of the bite-mark he had once given her could still be seen. Another surge of need thundered through him as he felt the warmth of her skin under his mouth, sensed the flutter of her pulse with his lips and heard her gasping intake of breath.

"Thank you, Sandor," she whispered. "It means so much to me, it's... beautiful."

He lifted his gaze from her neck to look at her mirror image, only to become even more entrallled by the way her eyes shone with something he could not identify. Was even more stirred by the redness
of her lips that beckoned him to kiss them.

"It is," he rasped, still not taking his eyes from her face.

"The necklace, Sandor," she said with a smile and he obediently looked down.

It looked pretty enough, just as he hoped it would and he quite liked the way the rubies seemed to glow in the wolf's head.

He put his hands around her waist, thrilled as so often that he could easily span it with his hands and bent down to nuzzle her neck again.

She sighed and swayed backwards against him.

"I never told you what I found interesting among all the etchings Sibyl showed me," she said in that very particular low voice she only used when in bed with him. Immediately, his body to sprung into excited readiness.

"What was it?" he asked hoarsely, slightly surprised his voice still worked at all.

"Something like... like this," she whispered, her face suffused in a glowing pink. "With you... behind me."

His hands tightened around her waist as he bit back a groan, trying to keep himself from doing what she asked right then and there.

"Gods, Sansa," he sighed as he closed his eyes for a moment, still fighting to get a grip. "You've no idea how much..." He caught himself when he remembered he'd never told her, even though she'd asked.

For yes, he liked to have her under him, face to face. Loved to kiss her while inside of her, but it had never even occurred to him she might be willing to try something else, something so base, Joffrey had taunted her with it. Something he'd sworn to himself he would never ask of her. To know that exactly this position had piqued her curiosity opened his mind to imaginings that were threatening to have him embarrass himself even before he got to turn them to reality.

"You could have asked," she admonished him lightly. "You should have."

She said this as if meaning to remind him that it was his gods-given right to ask anything of her that struck his fancy, as if it was his place to demand and hers to give. It reminded him why he had been so reluctant to give her the necklace in the first place.

"Sansa, this...," he began, running a finger over the wolf at her throat, "this isn't payment. You do not owe me anything."

Her gaze flew to him from where she had watched him touching the necklace up to his eyes, looking first startled and then angry.

"Do you think that's why I told you?"

He gritted his teeth, waiting... hoping for her to deny it.

Her angry glare softened after a while and she turned to him, putting a hand to his face, smiling.

"Are all men such great fools, or is this specific only to you, Sandor Clegane?"
He might have protested her assessment of him, might have asked her to clarify her statement, but then she pressed her lips to his and later her tongue into his mouth and he thought it might be enough to know she thought his scruples foolish.

...

There was some haste to the way they both undressed upstairs and he found himself cursing a time or two at the various buckles and fastenings of his clothes that were a bitch to work in the darkness. Then again, Sansa seemed to encounter similar problems, muttering a few choice words of her own under her breath that amused him greatly.

He was done first and proceeded to put eager hands on her, touching every bit of naked skin he could reach under the flimsy pretence of trying to help. Between them, they managed to finally get her out of her dress and as soon as she was naked, she wound her arms around her neck and kissed him with a fervour that indeed made his former concerns seem more than pointless.

Her little hand found his and she dragged him toward the bed, not that he resisted in any way.

"Show me," she gasped between kisses as they had tumbled into the bed in a heap of naked limbs. "Show me what dogs do to wolves."

His fevered brain took a few moments to discern that she was still talking about her suggestion from earlier and another few seconds to puzzle out why she felt the need to bring Joffrey's nastiness into this. She was probably right, though. Maybe this was the only way to truly get the upper hand over how he had humiliated both of them.

Somewhere in his brain the question sparked if he should pleasure her first before plunging into her as his body demanded he'd do, but the question quickly died in a burst of fiery want.

Getting on his knees and pulling her up to do likewise, he turned her around to press his front against her back while his mouth once again found the slope of her shoulders. His hands for once free of the duty of holding up his own weight, he let them roam over her front, curving around her breasts, skimming over her flat stomach and one of them finally venturing between her legs.

Wetness already coated the inside of her thighs, so - with rapidly waning patience - he put his knees between hers and shoved her legs farther apart. He'd had a mind to command her what to do next, but didn't trust his voice at the moment, so he ran his hands up her body again, up to her shoulders and down her arms to take both her hands in his.

Pushing her forward until he thought he'd be close enough, he bent her and placed her hands on the upper rung of the bed's headrest, wrapping them firmly around the wooden bar to signify she should hold on tight.

For a moment, he indulged himself in running his hands back up her arms again, over her shoulders and then down her back, pressing his fingers into her flesh a little. She groaned and arched her back, prompting him to make a mental note to pay more attention to this part of her in the future, if it could elicit such a delightful response. He let his hands wander to her front again where he cupped her breasts once more to marvel at the way they fell full and round into his palms, almost completely filling his paws, different in shape and feel than when she was lying on her back.

Sansa moaned and pushed back against him, reminding him of the urgency he felt as well.

Letting go of her marvelous teats with a pang of regret, he brought one hand to his cock and the other to her cunt, once again dipping into the copious wetness, just to enjoy the way it made her gasp
"Sandor, inside, please," she panted.

It gave him a weird turn to hear her actually *ask* for this. Excitement at her plea had him shake so badly, he missed her opening as he tried to push into her and his cock slipped over her slick folds forward, eliciting a delighted "oh".

An idea sparked in his brain, so as he finally managed to sheath himself inside her, he found the top of her slit with one hand and very lightly skimmed over the bundle of flesh that brought her so much pleasure when he worked it with his lips and tongue.

She moaned and pressed herself against his hand as if urging him to add more pressure, which he did. One hand on her hip, he pumped into her, all the while trying to synchronize his movements with that of his other hand, since that made her whimper and moan his name which was always a good sign.

After a while, she started to use the leverage she had with her hands on the headrest to push herself back against him. With her round ass like a cushion between them, there was no worry this time that he could go too deep, that he'd hurt her, so he hastened to accommodate her apparent need for a harder pace.

As always when he indulged himself in the wonder that was Sansa, reality receded, left him a creature driven only by instincts, ruled by sensation. Basking in the glory of feeling his balls slap against her, of hearing her cries that gained in urgency with every one of his forceful thrusts. Pure pleasure pumped through his veins from where he was so deep inside of her, making him feel as if for this magical moment, his life's blood was set in motion by the pumping of his hips and the delicious friction of her walls stroking his cock, rather than his heart. His heart, which barely managed to keep up with the pace they were setting.

Sansa might be justified in believing that this was way more than simple fucking. He didn't know if it was making love, but it definitely was making… something. Creating something that was more than the sum of its pieces, more than just putting some body parts together.

White hot ecstasy fizzled up his spine into his brain as she suddenly cried out and the walls of her cunt clamped around his cock like a vise, released and then contracted again, while she sobbed and shook and bathed his cock in a gush of new wetness.

He heard a faint roar from a male throat as he slammed into her one final time, letting go of a release that seemed to go on forever, aided by the gentle massage of her inner walls that milked him to the last drop, to the last spark of pleasure.

More out of instinct than conscious thought, he wound his arms around her middle and tumbled them sideways to the bed, desperate to lie down, to catch his breath.

Unlike all the times before, they were both speechless and breathless for long moments, both gasping for air, both sweating and glowing and trembling. Both satisfied.

He pulled her closer when exhaustion started to tug at his consciousness.

Just for a moment, he thought as he closed his eyes. He smiled to himself as he felt her wriggling herself into a more comfortable position inside his embrace. Fortunately, she wouldn't go anywhere in the meantime.
Chapter 15: Confessing

He came awake to find that she had turned in his arms, her face against his shoulder and one arm thrown over his chest. Her skin felt a bit clammy to the touch, so he carefully angled for the covers with his feet and managed to get her under it before she woke from being cold.

She stirred against him and snuggled closer with a sound much like the purr of a cat and as always it woke his compulsion to pet and caress. He stroked his hand over her arms and nuzzled the crown of her head, drunk with satisfied, lazy contentment.

"I didn't know it could be like that," she said quietly and pressed a kiss to his chest.

It seemed pointless to tell her he hadn't known either. After all, after that first night, it had to be pretty obvious to her that he had no idea what he was doing. He saw no sense in reminding her of the way he had failed her back then, it was enough it still haunted him. Kept haunting him with growing embarrassment every time he learned something new about how he might have been able to please her, to turn that first time into something special for her instead of something horrible both of them just longed to forget.

How, after being through dozens of women had he managed to be still so clueless?

Maybe he should've done what Sansa had so smartly decided to do, go to a whore to talk and ask questions instead of just fucking her.

"Didn't Sibyl tell you?" he asked.

"No," she said. "She didn't tell me about kissing either, which always puzzled me."

"They don't like to do that," he answered her unasked question. "Seeing as they have to service sailors with rotting teeth, drunkards reeking of vomit or just plain ugly bastards like me, you can't blame them."

A gentle hand stroked over the scarred side of his face only to be replaced by her mouth.

She did that sometimes. He'd tried to dissuade her from it a couple of times, told her he didn't feel anything there anyway, but she was weirdly insistent about it so he let her, even though his insides tied themselves into a painful knot every time she did.

"You're not ugly," she whispered against his ruined skin. "You're the most desirable man I know."

He desperately wanted to make a jest of it, tell her that either her eyesight or her mind was going begging, or that maybe she just didn't know all that many men. That maybe she just said that because it was dark and he'd just fucked her into the seventh heaven. But part of him clung to her words, wanting them to be the truth, wanting them to be what she honestly thought and felt.

"So you never kissed one of them?" Sansa asked after having given him a kiss that had made him forget what they'd been talking about.

He shook his head.
"I would have to pay extra for it and the whole thing seemed bloody pointless to me."

She kissed him again. "Does it still?"

He sharply nipped at her lip to admonish her for the stupid question, then brought both his hands to her head, speared his fingers through her hair and held her to him for a kiss that further demonstrated his opinion on the matter.

Sansa sank softly against him after that, once again curling against his side.

"Does it still bother you?" she asked a couple of minutes later, when he was about to contemplate whether or not it was too early to suggest a second round. "That I went to her for advice?"

"No, I guess it doesn't," he answered. It was mostly the truth, but right now he wasn't in the mood to discuss why she felt the need to go there in the first place. Instead he nipped playfully at her ear, making her giggle. "Besides, it sure was worth whatever it was you paid her."

She chuckled and swatted at his chest.

"Then you shouldn't have growled at me back then, you mean old boor."

He retaliated with a deep, possessive kiss that was supposed to tell her that he didn't mind the way things had turned out. Not in the slightest. For good measure, he shoved his hard cock against her as well, showing her that while he might be mean and boorish at times, he drew the line at being called old. After all, he was still sprightly enough to give it to her at least twice a night.

Sansa's legs remained closed, however, her hand in his hair still soft and gentle.

"I am sorry for... growling at you about it," he said, giving her a bit of space, not quite sure it was what she needed. "I should've known you would not take this without a fight, should've known that you'd try to do something, to change things." He chuckled lightly as a memory came to him. "I guess I've known that ever since the day you tried to throw Joffrey down the battlements."

Sansa's hand that was stroking through his hair slowed a bit and then drew him to her for a languid kiss.

"You saved me that day," she whispered against his lips and then kissed him again. "... and so many times after."

"Saved you...," he said and pulled back from her with a derisive snort. As always, his gut filled with bitter self-loathing when she said something like that, because it could not be farther from the truth. That she still believed it made things even worse. "I did no such thing," he continued, determined to disabuse her of this romanticized notion once and for all. "There was a time I fancied I could, true enough, but all I ended up doing was watching you being tortured, only barely preventing them raping or killing you and I'm not even sure the latter was a mercy."

She scooted closer again and drew breath, probably to argue, but he was faster.

"Had I saved you," he said, louder than before, "you'd be with your family now, or someone who could've taken care of you the way you deserve." Bitterness dripped from his every word like venom and he couldn't keep himself from adding, "you'd not have ended up a dog's bitch."

He waited for another attempt at a protest and his heart painfully drew back in itself when none came.
Her hand kept caressing him, her breath was still close to his skin, but he felt a rift growing between them and he knew that there was another bit of truth she still didn't know, that would turn it into a chasm with no bridges to find back to her.

"I meant to take you away during the Blackwater," he said through a sudden tightness in his throat, as if his body wanted to prevent him speaking what would turn her fondness to disgust. Which would make a repetition of the experience they had just shared an impossibility.

His words had her sit up straight.

"You did? When? How? What..."

He pulled her back against his chest, to savour her closeness for what might very well be the last time while he tried to find the courage to go on.

"I turned craven during the battle, couldn't handle the fire, fighting burning men, smell of smoke and scorched flesh everywhere. I had tried to drown myself in wine but it all came back up again and finally I just turned and ran. Ran to your room, first thing, sat there in the dark, trying to think what to tell you to convince you to go with me, try to think what I'd do with you once you'd said yes."

He trailed off, the memories of this night swamping him with all the dreadful things that had churned inside him then. The painful desperation, the rage, that sudden spurt of chivalrous courage.

"Thought about what I'd do to you...," he went on, opting for brutal honesty. Maybe it was time she knew. "If you'd come into that room at that moment, you wouldn't have left it still a maiden."

Sansa didn't draw back from him as he had expected, but instead turned her head a bit and kissed his chest.

"You wouldn't have hurt me," she said, such an amount of honest, unwavering conviction in her voice, it struck him as comical. Especially considering that once given the chance, he HAD hurt her.

"You've more trust in me than I had in myself...," he said, snorting. "Because I had none. The longer I thought about all of it; where we'd go, how we'd manage, what might happen... when all that went through my mind, I turned coward the second time that night."

He fell silent then, waiting for her reaction, her verdict over his failure to do the one thing that might have truly meant her safety. Maybe they would have even reached her brother in time to caution him against trusting the Freys. Sandor had been deep enough in the Lannisters' council to know which way the ravens flew from King's Landing.

"I am sorry," he said as he once again contemplated what his cowardice had cost her.

"I wouldn't have come with you," she said after a long time.

The statement was so entirely unexpected, he forgot to breathe for a moment, then gasped as he remembered.

"What? Why?"

Not for a second had he ever thought that she would have declined his offer, he had been sure she would have gladly taken the opportunity to go, to leave that cursed place. He had hated himself for months for not giving her that chance.

"Back then... I still believed Dontos Hollard would help me get away," she explained. "And I am
sure from what you said before... he would have seemed the safer option at the time."

Pieces of a riddle that had confounded him for a long time rapidly fell into place.

"He would have taken you away," he said. "And it certainly would have been safe... in a way."

Sansa's hand was gone from where she was still caressing him to stifle a sob he could still hear even through the hand she had probably used to press to her mouth. He could not really relate to how she must feel at being told she might have been away from all of this for months.

"He would have delivered you straight into Littlefinger's hands."

She stilled next to him, quiet for a moment.

"Gods... he was... he was working for Baelish?" she asked.

"That's what he told me when I had my dagger at his throat."

When she sat up this time, he didn't pull her back. Again he waited for her to decide what to do with the information he'd given her.

"If he worked for Littlefinger," she said after a long silence, "if he reported back to him, Baelish must have known the Tyrells meant to have me marry Willas."

Sandor nodded at her conclusion, only belatedly remembering she couldn't see him.

"Yes."

"He told the Lannisters about it!" she said, and suddenly her hands were on him again, both of them on his chest, with her hovering somewhere above him. Tentatively, he put his hands on her waist, stroking her belly with his thumbs, the need to assure himself she was still there one that couldn't be denied. "I always wondered how they knew."

"You have the right of it," he confirmed. "That's the gist of what I got from Hollard."

Sansa sank against him then, resting the side of her face against somewhere over his heart.

"So it was you who... told the Tyrells of Tywin's plan to give me to Tyrion?"

That was something he felt foolish to admit to. Not because it had been the first time he had coldly and systematically betrayed the confidence of those he owed allegiance to, but because he hadn't done it so much to help her than he'd done it for himself. The thought of having her wed to the Imp, of that twisted little man having a right to touch and bed her... it would have driven him insane.

"Didn't I tell you?"

She chuckled.

"You said it was a fool who didn't know what was good for him."

"See," he said, "I faintly remember you telling me I was a fool mere hours ago."

"I was wrong," she said softly. "You're no fool, you're my guardian. My saviour."

"Sansa..."
She lifted her head again.

"You are," she said decisively, "and you won't convince me otherwise. You saved me from becoming a Lannister by marriage, you were the only thing standing between me and Joffrey's cruelty, risking your life and your position every time you did. You lied to them, betrayed them, flaunted their orders and all for me. Don't you dare belittling what meant so much to me."

He nodded into the darkness again, this time unable to squeeze even so much as a yes from out of his clogged throat as she rested her head on his chest again.

Instead of a verbal answer he couldn't give, he wrapped his arms fully around her, his hands flat on her back, trying to communicate that while he couldn't really save her, he would do all he could to protect her.

"And..." she continued more quietly, "I'd rather be a dog's bitch than a king's toy."

He knew he should leave it at that, despite how it rankled that the only thing she had just told him was that she preferred being fucked by him to being beaten by Joffrey. He shouldn't try to make her see just how low she had sunk, that her current situation wasn't an improvement, but Joffrey succeeding in destroying her in a way that could never be undone.

But he couldn't leave it. Not in his current mood and maybe not in general. The words pushed against his lips and clamoured to be said.

"Next you'll try and tell me you prefer being a mistress to being a wife," he said, trying and failing to make it sound like a joke.

Maybe this was a tad unfair. After all, she had already rejected a chance she had had to rectify the situation and become respectable once again. She'd chosen this, even if marrying Lancel Lannister had not been that great of a prospect either.

"I prefer being your mistress to being someone else's wife."

Convulsively, his arms tightened around her as her statement hit, as the full meaning of her admission registered. Had she really just told him that he wasn't the lesser of two evils, but the choice she would make even if she had better options?

"What happened after you left my room that night?" she asked, her voice soft voice distracting him from his current musings. "I've never heard the whole story."

The whole story, the thought with an inward sigh of defeat. The whole ugly fucking mess he'd gotten himself into after he'd stumbled out of her chamber would surely serve to have her turn from him in disgust.

"Ran into Joff and the remnants of the Kingsguard on my way back, encircled by Stannis' men as they were," he told her. "There was no fire in the vicinity and I was... I think I was so... mad at everything, I just didn't care anymore if I died. So I somehow... lost it, went berserk I guess, every second expecting the blow that would end me, but it never came. When I came to, I stood amidst a mound of corpses, most of them not identifiable as human beings anymore, covered head to toe in blood and gore."

She nodded against his chest, not drawing back. Not saying anything either.

"You're in bed with the worst butcher the world has ever seen," he said. "The Butcher of the Blackwater as they came to call me. Couldn't blame you if it made you sick. It makes me sick to
think of it."

She kissed his chest again, a gesture he started to recognize as one she used when she meant to soothe him, to show him she cared.

"I am glad you are what you are," she said in her no-nonsense voice that compelled him to believe her despite the inconceivability of the statement. "They were all terrified of you after that, Joffrey more than anyone else. You could not have done anything for me, he would never have let you stop him, if not for what he saw that night."

"Always thought it was because I saved his worthless hide."

She shook her head.

"He would have expected that as a matter of course and would think the matter dealt with by giving you a reward. But that he never spoke up against you, that was because he feared you, even with the rest of the Kingsguard at his side. He knew that if sufficiently provoked, no one could stop you."

"Makes sense, I guess," he admitted. "Although it makes one wonder why he never thought of putting down the rabid dog I've become."

On top of him, Sansa turned cold all of a sudden. Motionless and frozen, almost like a corpse.

"He thought of it," she said, her voice having the same hollow, soulless sound as if Joffrey was standing right next to her. "He tried once."

He was so astounded by what she told him, he only remembered to wrap her closer into the covers, when she started to shiver violently.

"Sansa, what happened?"

"You...," she began and was interrupted by the chattering of her teeth, "you killed your executioner."

_Ah, that._

He should've know right when she froze up that it could only be Gregor's death she was referring to.

For reasons he did not understand, that whole episode was anathema to her, not to be spoken about, not even to be alluded to. If he didn't know for a fact that Gregor never had had a chance to lay a hand on her, he might have suspected the worst, but he knew that this could not be the reason.

Something had happened with her at some point between him leaving her safely in her chambers the evening before the fight and drinking himself into a stupor after he'd walked away from his brother's bloody corpse, that had broken a part of her soul and he had no idea what.

That she had told him as much as she had was a bit of a wonder in itself.

At least now he finally knew what had been at the core of Joffrey's weird decision back then, to have Tyrion's trial by combat be fought between him and his brother. He should've known. It made him grin darkly to himself to contemplate just how many plans and expectations he had foiled by slaying his own blood. Cersei's for not seeing the death of her father avenged as she'd hoped and ridding her of her own hated brother. Ser Kevan's for losing the one bannerman who could always be relied on to do the Lannisters' dirty work, and Joffrey's for not getting rid of a dog he didn't trust not to bite him.
He chuckled, but stopped again when he noticed that Sansa was still in her paralyzed state.

For a moment, he contemplated asking her why all this disturbed her so greatly, what had happened that had been so much worse than everything she had endured before and after. But with her shivering in his arms, he decided to leave those questions for another time.

So he turned them both to the side and did the only thing he knew to bring her back from wherever her mind had wandered to. He kissed her, caressed her, coaxed warmth back into her limbs and later into her body. Got her to respond in kind, giving back as good as she got until she sweetly opened herself to him and bade him to take her, which he did.

He was careful with her this time, slow and thorough and mindful of what made her rise with him to completion. They plunged into ecstasy nearly at the same time, both of them loudly expressing their pleasure and for once his climax didn't make him want to weep in her arms.

It made him want shout with laughter, to laugh in the face of the Stranger himself, because right in this moment, it felt so bloody fucking sweet to be alive.
Chapter Notes

This is an interlude before the plot moves on into more serious territory again, a Sunday morning type of chapter. :)
Please enjoy.

Chapter 16: Undressing

Tonight, Sansa had determined, Sandor wouldn't get out of showing himself to her. The decision had been made after waking up this morning, only to find Sandor already dressed and ready to go. As always.

Even now, with so many ugly truths revealed, with both of them having said things that stripped them to their souls, he still hid his body from her eyes and she was done just putting up with it.

Over the last two weeks, she had thought about confronting him about this every now and again and sometimes a few good ideas what to say to convince him had come to her, but she'd always shied away from taking that step, afraid of destroying all that had grown between them. It wouldn't do to make him feel as if things weren't pleasing to her as they were right now, as if she was dissatisfied or unhappy. She merely wanted to show him that there still could be so much more.

Then again, it often appeared to her as if he expected her to be dissatisfied and unhappy, almost as if he wanted her to be. Not on account of himself, but because he was unshakably convinced that this wasn't a situation she should be feeling comfortable with. Every so often, he reminded her in subtle and not so subtle ways of how lowering it was for her to be his mistress. Be it with blunt words as he had used a few nights ago, be it with the heartbreakingly sweet gift he'd given her.

Walking over to the little sideboard where she kept her valuables, she took the little wooden box he'd given her and gently ran her fingers across its delicate surface. The box alone was a superior piece of craftsmanship, dark wood inlaid with lighter pieces, forming an intricate pattern. Opening it, the little silver direwolf glowered at her with ruby-red eyes.

Be what you were born to be, the little wolf seemed to growl, be a wolf, a Stark.

She shut the box again, sighing.

If she'd been a common girl, her situation would be envied. Being the kept woman of a lord, being pampered and gifted with costly jewellery, having her own servant and house and a man who would fulfil all her wishes. He even insisted on her having and wearing dresses of the quality she would have worn would she still live at the keep.

And their nights… their nights were something worthy of a queen. She was sure Margery did have nothing even close to the joy they could give each other in bed.

Sometimes she thought about how it would be to live this life forever, bearing him children who people would call bastards, but who would be loved and cared for nonetheless and have bright
futures as septons, maesters, merchants or – if they had girls – respectable wives of middle class citizens. He would not leave or discard her if she was pregnant, that much she knew. He was not that kind of man.

Still, as much as such daydreams appealed sometimes, she could not forget herself and if she did, he was there to remind her.

So she did what Sibyl had taught her. Fished the little sponge out of its jar every night, carefully soaked it in vinegar and placed it deeply inside herself. Drank moon-tea shortly before her moonblood was to be upon her to prevent his seed from taking root in her.

Reminded of this, she got out of bed, padded over to the wash-stand and began with her morning ritual of cleaning herself – inside and out – and preparing herself for another day of what was now her life – for the time being, if Sandor was to be believed.

Sandor, she thought with a smile, who tonight would learn that her being more than just his mistress would mean he’d have to contend with a Stark’s stubbornness.

…

As requested, Betsy had bought two dozen lightly scented candles, which Sansa planned on lighting in the bedroom and she had built a low fire in the hearth which she intended to keep burning until he arrived.

She would wait the whole night if she had to.

To that end, she had taken her needlework up with her and while working on the trimmings of a new dress Betsy had ordered for her on Sandor’s behest, she prepared what she would say to him to convince him that she not just wanted, but needed to see him.

He arrived the minute the last vestiges of daylight had vanished beneath the horizon, as if he had just waited for it to be finally dark. She suspected that this might actually be the truth of it.

Coming to a halt inside the door, he took a slow look around, assessing the situation he had stumbled into. His eyes narrowed as she sauntered toward him and the suspicious look in them told her he would not give in to her without a fight. Best not to join the battle too early then.

"Let me help you with this," she offered after having kissed him in welcome.

Somewhat reluctantly, he let her squire for him and help him with his armour, but then gave her a forbidding scowl when she made to remove his shirt.

"Need to wash first," he grumbled and vanished behind the wooden screen.

She used the time to fold back the covers from the bed and light a few more candles, inhaling their sweet scent of honey and vanilla. Betsy had chosen well; they were worth the little fortune she had to pay for them.

Notsurprisingly, Sandor came back still dressed in shirt and breeches, eyeing first the hearth and then the candles with open hostility.

"Do we need all that fire around here?" he asked and she had to bite her lip at the sulky tone in his voice. He meant to make her feel guilty, counted on her being too mindful of his fears to insist on having burning candles and a burning hearth fire in the room while he was in it.
Only that she knew that he liked warmth and light just fine, just as everyone else, never objected to the cozy fire in the sitting room or the candelabra on the table when they were eating their dinner.

"Yes, we do," she said decisively and took his hand to draw him to the bed. Unlike all the nights before, she actually had to pull at his hand.

"Sit down," she commanded. "I want to show you something."

Sandor sat down obediently and while clearly still morose, seemed to warm a bit to the situation when she slowly unlaced the front of her dress.

For what she had in mind, she wore one of her old, too tight dresses, only halfway laced and only her sleeping shift beneath. His eyes were fixed on the lazy movements of her hands as she undid her laces one by one and then removed the dress without her usual haste.

Usually, he would help her with undressing, or at least try to while being much more interested in touching her bare skin, but now he remained motionless, only his eyes betraying that her show didn't leave him as unfazed as he appeared to be.

Sibyl had told her about this, about how men could be astoundingly patient and passive while watching a woman undress, how they loved to have their anticipation and want stoked to a fever pitch just by letting their gazes roam where their hands or mouths usually would.

Sansa had counted on that, hoped it worked for him as well, so she could make her point.

Obviously, in this, Sandor wasn't different from other men. He looked at her as if ready to devour her whole and once she stood in front of him naked, lifted both his hands to draw her to him.

She nimbly danced out of his reach.

"Do you like what you see?" she asked, deploying a coy and sultry tone that was very unlike her, but served her purpose. He should know she played a game, he shouldn't feel safe.

He minutely lifted his good eyebrow, then pointedly looked down at his crotch, then back up again, the corner of his mouth kicking upwards a bit while his eyes held a challenge.

"What do you think?" he asked.

She smiled broadly. Looking down where he had directed her attention, the answer was a clear yes. The way he so carefully entered into her little game told her she was still making headway and that for now he was content to have her lead him.

She lifted her left leg and put her foot next to his thigh, placing a hand next to her knee. As she had suspected and counted on, his gaze immediately went to what she had exposed to him, lingering on the place between her legs with a heated intensity that felt like a caress, sowing some doubts whether she would have the fortitude to go through with this without losing out to desire before she was done.

"Do you see that?" she asked.

His answer came with a bit of a delay. "What am I supposed to see?"

"That white patch of skin there?" she said, pointing again to her knee.

Slowly, clearly unwilling, he dragged his gaze away from her woman's place to dutifully look at her
"Aye," he said then looked up at her eyes.

She took her foot down from the bed again, to the sound of a dissatisfied growl from him.

"Reminds me of my sister every time I see it," she said lightly. "She stole one of my favourite dolls, the one my septa had just helped me sew a pretty new dress for and she ran around the courtyard with it, threatening to throw it into the mud. I ran after her to get it back, and then fell and scraped my knee on the flagstones. She wouldn't stop laughing after that, so delighted that instead of the doll, I myself had ended up dirty, bedraggled and in tears besides."

He nodded.

"She was quite the little she-wolf, your sister," he said.

For a second, Sansa had to fight the tears welling up in her eyes. One of these days, she would like to tell him about all of them, about her wild little sister and her brave older brother. About her parents, stern and loving both. About the two little brothers she'd lost. She'd tell him and he would listen, quiet and sympathetic and she would bathe him in her tears and let him hold her through her sobs, but it would not be today. Today was about something else.

Sitting down on his lap, she pointed at a place below her right shoulder, where four parallel scratch marks, white with age, showed on her skin.

"See these?"

Again he nodded. "Looks like scratches... a cat?"

He got a little kiss for his correct answer.

"A cat. I was maybe six or seven and just wanted to cuddle with her. Turned out cats don't like to be held like babes. At least that one didn't."

He chuckled and carefully wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling into her neck. Since this was threatening to make her lose her focus, she got up again. Seeing his confusion that threatened to turn to impatience, she directed him to scoot farther up the bed and rest his back against the headrest, his legs stretched out in front of him.

Slowly, she then crawled towards him to settle astride over his thighs.

His breath came as a hiss when she was where she wanted to be.

"Sansa," he said and there was a dark threat in his voice as well as in his eyes. "I'm not made of stone."

Knowing the danger well enough, she smiled.

"I know," she whispered, leaning forward to give a light kiss to his burned cheek. "That's what I am counting on."

Then she pulled back, and showed him the backside of her left upper arm, where a long pink line about a hand long could be seen.

"This....," she started but was interrupted.
"I know this one...," he growled. "Joffrey's riding crop. He was bloody fast with it, left me no time to react. Drew blood on the first hit."

She nodded confirmation.

"And this...," she skimmed her hand over her belly, over the scar he often gave so much special attention to.

"Trant."

"This one..."

"A dagger, Joffrey. Wanted to carve his initials on your breast above your heart. Glad you fainted, didn't have a hard time to convince him it was a bad idea after that."

His eyes were still dark, but the darkness had shifted, changed. Where before it had been desire, the velvety, heated blackness of want, it was a lightless pit of anguish now, of remembered pain and helplessness.

She'd foreseen that, too. As painful as it was, as it would continue to be for now, she had planned on this.

"I should've fainted more often," she said, almost carelessly.

"You should have," he gave back, not at all careless.

"My arm...," she continued, pointing.

"Blount, the idiot," he said. "Drew his sword to intimidate you on Joff's orders and managed to cut you while doing so. I would've laughed at the expression on his face if not worried he'd taken your arm right off."

"Those on the back of my thighs..."

"Trant again...," he said. "First time I tried to stop Joff and made a mess of it. Not about to be grateful to the buggering Imp, but it was good he came when he did back then."

She nodded, remembering. It was an odd discovery that this recollection wasn't a hurtful one for her for many reasons. Instead of the pain, the humiliation, she remembered the raspy "Enough!" from his throat, sounding as if dragged up from a gravelly pit. The first of many. Remembered the feel of scratchy wool on her naked skin, still warm and smelling of him. It might have been the first time, that she had noticed his scent.

"Then there are those on my back...," she said and turned a bit to the side.

He closed his eyes, grimacing.

She knew he didn't need to look. He knew those scars, had seen them when they were fresh wounds, bleeding and stinging so badly the insides of her cheeks had been bitten bloody in her desperate attempt to hold in the sobs and tears.

When he opened his eyes again, his lips had turned bloodless, the darkness in his eyes terrifying.

He lifted his hand once again, ghosted gentle fingertips over the silvery-pink lines.

"Those are my fault," he said as softly as his gravelly voice allowed.
Sansa snorted and shook her head.

"How could they, you weren't even there," she said lightly, trying not to let the terrible memory get to her. He hadn't been there and somehow that had made it so much worse. Because she couldn't rely on him to stop Joffrey, who had swung the whip himself that time. She had no idea if she would be left crawling bleeding back to her own rooms, with no strong arm to lean on, no one to care if her wounds were seen to. "Or at least, not in the beginning."

Sandor had barged in later, visibly the worse for drink, shouting his displeasure at Joffrey and glaring death and destruction at anyone else.

Joffrey had let go off the whip at once, blaming her for what happened. Said that if only she would not always act as if she felt no pain, things wouldn't have gone so far.

Sandor's hands had trembled when he had reached for her, with the aftereffects of drink, she supposed.

Not knowing how to touch her when he couldn't just take her into his arms and carry her when her back was a bleeding mess, he threw her over his shoulder like a sack of grain and staggered out of Joffrey's chamber, swaying and cursing.

"That is why they're my fault," he said, pulling her from her memory. "Because I wasn't there."

He shook his head, then sighed.

"Joffrey had gone hawking with Margery that day and Tyrell and Blount had been on duty to ride with them," he explained what in part she already knew. "Usually, Margery would spend the evening and night with Joffrey. So I thought I would have a day off, that he'd be leaving you alone. I went and..."

He trailed off and the words not said were as loud as spoken ones. Went and got himself some female company, went and got drunk afterwards.

"They must have fought or something, I never found out. He'd been angry and naturally it was you he sent for."

"Why did you come back at all?" she asked.

"Didn't want to pass out in the filth of some back alley, so I went back to sleep it off. Only meant to check up on you quickly when I found your chambers empty."

A weird, almost painful feeling curled around her heart at the thought that despite being drunk and exhausted, he'd gone to her chambers to check on her instead of just going to the White Sword Tower.

"I was so glad you came for me," she said, stroking his linen-clad chest.

Back then, she had barely kept herself from sobbing out his name when she saw him.

He shook his head, anger a living thing in his eyes.

"Too late," he said through gritted teeth. "If I'd been there..."

His fingers feathered over the scars once again.

"Never left the keep again after that," he said. "Stopped drinking, too."
She gaped at him in open-mouthed surprise. That incident had been more than five months ago. Had he truly not been... out of the keep for that long?

"Didn't you miss..."

"The wine?", he supplemented what she hadn't intended to ask. "Dreadfully. Was sick like a dog for days. But I am glad now I went through with it, it's a filthy habit anyway."

She gave him a meaningful look. "I meant..."

"I know," he cut her off, the corner of his mouth curling slightly. "That's a bit of a filthy habit, too and wouldn't have worked for me without the wine anyway."

For her. Nearly half a year ago, he had quit wine and whores and he'd done it for her. The realization brought the painful squeezing back around her heart and robbed her breath for a moment. When she could breathe again, she bent forward to kiss him. Wildly, possessively and passionately as if her intention was to make up for all the months he had lost out on sexual satisfaction due to having to watch over her.

He was the one who started gentling the kiss, when Sansa would have given in to her need and forgotten about her plan. It was him who pulled back, who held her at arm's length to look at her.

From her face down to her breasts, her belly and finally to where she was wet and wanting, to where dampness probably had already seeped through his breeches.

He made no move, just looked at her, his eyes on her face again after a while. His hands came to rest on her thighs and something worked behind his eyes, as if he fought an internal battle of which she could not influence the outcome.

"I know...," he started, then swallowed, his larynx slowly and visibly working in his throat. "I understand what you are trying to tell me."

She waited, only just barely resisting the temptation to hold her breath.

"You are beautiful, Sansa. Most beautiful woman in existence, if you ask me."

Despite herself, Sansa felt her eyes moisten at the unexpected compliment.

"I don't mind your scars, they're part of you and while I will forever regret not having prevented some of them... hells, all of them had I been able to... they don't make me not want to look at you."

Slowly, gently, he let his hands wander where his gaze had been before, threatening to have her lose the fight against her tears with his heart-breaking gentleness. This was what she'd wanted - needed - to see. This fearsome, indomitable warrior touching her as if she was made of eggshells. Strong hands, calloused from holding swords and shields, gliding over her skin feather-like and with the utmost care.

Sandor Clegane being both her gentle lover from the darkness and the man who people called the Butcher of the Blackwater, the Kinslayer, the Hound.

She had needed to see that they were one and the same man.

"And I cannot even tell you what it does to me to see you, to watch you. The joy of having you in front of my eyes... like this."
At this, his fingers found their way between her legs. He drew them along her cleft then thrust them inside, making her cry out with an onslaught of pleasure she had been unprepared for. Quite surprisingly, watching had stoked her own desire just as much as it had his.

*He understands,* her mind rejoiced with the last coherent thought it had. He understands I wouldn't mind his scars for the same reason he doesn't mind mine. He understands how much more bliss we could discover if allowed to use all our senses.

She was about to sink against him, let pleasure take its heated course through her, when he withdrew his fingers, held her by her shoulders and let his gaze penetrate her, insistent, earnest.

"It's not vanity, Sansa."

"I hope it's not propriety, either," she said, only half-joking and not a little impatient.

His lips quirked at that, his eyes sparkling with mirth, but he turned serious again only a moment later.

"I've been hacked and slashed and sewn back up again," he said insistently. "Scratched, bitten and burned. Punctured by arrows and mangled by crossbow bolts. Flogged, too, a time or two."

She nodded, weakly, suddenly tired of fighting, of thinking of another point to make. She had made all of them. She knew his scars by touch, had traced them and tried to think what might have caused them. None of them would come as a surprise.

With her body weak and melting from withheld release, she considered just giving in, just keeping things as they had been. Surely it could be enough. It was so much more than most women had.

"I cannot think it will give you any joy to look at what's left," he concluded.

"Let me be the judge of that," she whispered. "Please."

He closed his eyes for a moment, sighed, the lifted his arms over his head, grabbed the back of his shirt and drew it off, then chucked it to the side.

After laying back down, he closed his eyes, his mouth a grim, bloodless line. A defendant awaiting a verdict and not expecting it to be in his favour.

He had been right in assuming that the sight would nearly be more than she could take, but wrong in how it would affect her.

His skin was indeed a landscape of violence and pain. Should they take the time to enumerate his scars - as she planned on doing at some point - to have a story for each, it should take hours if not days to do so. It physically hurt to imagine all the things he had endured for them to leave such deep and visible testimony.

But his skin spanned a body so solid, healthy and strong, she had never before seen its equal. Not even the statues of the Warrior decorating the septs she'd seen, exaggeratedly impressive as they seemed, had a chance to compete with was before her eyes.

His scars did not detract from the impression, they reinforced it. Physical pain had forged him, touched the surface, but only ever honed and strengthened what was beneath. He'd come out of everything on top, as the victor and stronger than before. He'd triumphed over his enemies' cruelty.

She let her hands glide over him, the tactile sensation so familiar, when the sight was so enticingly
"You're breath-taking," she whispered in awe and indeed very much out of breath.

What his clothes concealed with a pretension to conformity and civil appearance, was something so unequivocally male and savage, something that spoke so clearly of pure physical strength, of being indomitable and invincible, the feelings surging up inside her at the sight were equally savage. As if her most ancient female instincts recognized a worthy male, she was drawn to him, compelled beyond being able to resist by the urge to be conquered and possessed.

Not even caring if he protested, she got off him long enough to make short work of his breeches and climbed back on top of him.

Though she would have liked to explore his skin in more detail, look at every scar, trace the contours of every bulging muscle and the path of every vein that lay as a thick, blueish rope across his mighty arms, her body had other demands right now and looking at him, he felt the same even though he was still curiously passive.

His pupils were huge and dark when he opened his eyes, just as she lifted herself a little, to position him at her entrance.

"Gods…Sansa…," he croaked when she impaled herself on him and they both had to close their eyes at the intensity of the sensation this unfamiliar angle of penetration brought.

She hadn't gone to all this trouble to enjoy this in the darkness behind her eyelids, however, so she opened her eyes to find him looking at her with the same black hunger from when she had undressed for him. He ran his hands up her thighs and around her hips, spanned her waist and then ran his hands up her ribcage to cup her breasts, stroke them until she thought she'd go up in flames from the sensations shooting from her nipples right into her womb.

Clumsily moving atop him, the task of being the active one in this a bit more complicated than she had thought, she tried to take the edge of her need.

A slow, very male smile spread over his face and then his hands wandered downward again to take a disconcertingly firm hold of her bottom, repositioning her a little and aiding her movements in a way that soon made her forget herself entirely, lost in a maelstrom of desire.

In this position, he stroked places inside her that brought pleasure so wildly exciting she was soon panting, her movements becoming even more erratic and laboured. She fell forward and rested her hands flat on his chest, only to find that like this, her sweet spot rubbed against him with every downward stroke which brought her even closer to completion, while Sandor looked as if he could go on for quite a while longer.

"I can't…," she panted.

To have him like this, riding him, as Sibyl had called it, had been one of the things she had always been curious about, even though Sibyl had warned that taking the active part would not be as easy as it seemed in theory.

Her release beckoned, almost in reach, but the more she wanted, needed it, the less she was able to move.

"I can," he said and then - finally, thankfully - took over completely. Surged into her with all the power his virile body was capable of and in no time hurled her into a climax that had her throw back her head and howl as ecstasy crashed through her.
He joined her in bliss only moments later, her name a strangled cry on his lips as his seed spurted hotly into her; too soon for her to have her eyes opened in time to watch him.

Only opening her eyes as his face was relaxed again, his eyes on her soft and content, a smile lingering on his lips that was both very proudly male and very sweet at the same time, she smiled back. Happy and not a little proud herself.

"It sure was worth it," he drawled, his smile growing wicked.

And just like that, he earned himself another long, sweet kiss.

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Chapter 17: Remembering (Part 1)

Guard duty to his grace - the biggest asshole in the whole of Westeros - used to be an unbelievably mind-numbing job to Sandor.

Over the last couple of weeks, it had turned from mind-numbing to exhaustingly irritating.

For one thing because Joffrey requested his presence not only for standing guard outside his door, where he at least would be left alone with pleasant daydreams and recollections to keep him company, but more often than not wanted him at his side. Mostly to endlessly rant to him about all his grievances. He told him over and over how much trouble they all were, how no one just went and accepted his kingly decisions, how they blamed him for the Tyrells' march on King's Landing, for the hunger in the city, now that the Tyrells had withdrawn their support.

Since Joff seemed to expect answers to all his questions, Sandor one day gave it.

"You're right, you're the king," he said. "Act like one."

"How?" Joffrey all but wailed.

"Act," Sandor clarified. "Don't sit around and wait. Grab your wife and your men and ride out of the city and greet your grandmother in law. Don't let them advance on the city like an enemy host. They claim this to be a family visit. Greet them as you would family."

"What if they make a fuss about Margery?"

"It's like you said," Sandor said, shrugging. "She's your wife, you can punish her for misbehaviour as you see fit. They cannot fault you for that."

Joffrey chewed on his thumbnail.

"What about Loras?"

Sandor made a dismissive gesture.

"Loras is a Kingsguard who attacked his king," he said. "He did it in defence of the queen, but his
first duty is to you. Tell them he got off lightly with only a few weeks in the black cells, Aerys would have roasted him alive. Make him renew his Kingsguard vow and leave it at that."

Joffrey nodded and sprang up from his seat, a glint in his eyes.

"I knew it!" he crowed. "I do not need to grovel and apologize. They just have to accept this. I am the king!"

Sandor inwardly rolled his eyes and nodded.

"I will give the orders at once to ride out of King's Landing in three days' time," Joffrey decided, rubbing his hands.

Experience told him that now, with Joffrey being elated, it might be the right time to ask for a boon.

"Might I ask to be relieved of my duties for those three days?" Sandor ventured.

Joffrey turned to him, a jovial grin on his face.

"Still not through with her?" he asked.

The boy could be disturbingly perceptive at the most inconvenient of times.

"Making the most out of my king's reward," Sandor gave back, trying to keep his face blank. Then, when noticing Joffrey expected some more of him, he grinned. "It's a juicy enough bone for a dog to chew on for a while."

In turn, Joffrey's expression faltered and turned wistful, his eyes growing vacant.

"I miss her sometimes," he said slowly, clearly lost in memories.

Bile rose in Sandor's throat at the thought exactly why Joffrey would be missing her.

"It used to anger me that she never begged, never cried," Joff went on, still in an almost trance-like state, "but now it bores me when others do. Of all those I had, she was the strongest, the one most worthy of me."

Sandor knew he had to interfere or Joffrey would take it in his sick head he needed Sansa back with him.

"She bawls all the time with me," he said, "might be you finally broke her when you gave her to me."

It was only half a lie, incidentally. Sansa did cry at times when with him. Sometimes with what he hoped was happiness. A few times at things he told her in the privacy of their bed, sometimes at the memories of her family she told him about. He slowly learned to not grow alarmed every time her eyes watered, learned to see the difference between pain and emotions that just expressed themselves in a damp fashion.

Joffrey's posture changed, green eyes focused on him, the fog of remembered delight vanishing from them. He waved dismissively.

"Spilled milk," he scoffed and then leered at him.

"Give her my regards when you fuck her next time. And now off with you."
Another, even more irritating thing about guard-duty was that it took him away from his home and his woman. Sometimes days at a time. That expedition he had advised Joffrey to undertake would cost him at least a week, so he had to make the most of the three days leave Joffrey had granted him. Not that he ever felt that any minute of time with Sansa was somehow wasted. On the contrary. Every moment with her seemed to bring a new discovery, a new insight.

Eating, for instance, had turned from something simply done to give his body nourishment into a variance of activities of which one was more enjoyable than the other.

Sitting down for a formal meal would turn into conversation, into shared stories and laughter, sometimes into discussions about how they envisioned Westeros’ future, how they thought things would turn out in those turbulent times. To be quite honest, the advice given to Joffrey about how to handle the tricky situation with the Tyrells had been conceived entirely during one of those conversations.

Eating, as he had found out, could also mean her bringing a bowl of fruit and cheese with her into their bedchamber, making an utterly delightful game of feeding the treats to him with her fingers or her lips. He had found himself growing surprisingly inventive with this particular game, when he accidentally "lost" one of the offered grapes and had to eat it off her from the place it had rolled to.

He grinned to himself at the memory, the inside of his armour growing uncomfortably warm as he strode to the stable to leave the keep as soon as he could.

Another thing he could barely wrap his mind around was how things had changed between them once again ever since he had allowed her to look at all of him. If he'd known, he thought sometimes, he would have shown himself to her in all his naked ugliness the moment he had her for himself.

It wasn't just about the added sexual pleasure of being able to see and be seen, even if he wasn't about to belittle that one. He would be dead before he would stop enjoying the sight of her moaning and writhing in ecstasy beneath him. Or on top of him. Or in front. Or pressed against the wall. Would never tire of seeing her nipples harden under his mouth, her skin flushed as arousal took her, his cock gliding in and out of her delightfully moist pink folds.

But aside from this somewhat predictable outcome, there was another dimension to this that had been a revelation.

She'd started to ask about each and every one of his scars.

At first he had been reluctant to talk about them, unwilling to drag up memories that were painful at best and horrifyingly brutal most of the time. He thought it best for both of them to keep them buried.

Her insistence had won out, however, and one night he had started to talk. Just about that one ragged scar along his shoulder, where a crossbow-bolt had shredded his armour. The ragged pieces of metal had torn into his flesh and once he'd removed it, he had made the wound even worse. It had healed badly and looked the part, even now, five years later.

Along with that he remembered, too, how he had brought the mangled piece of metal to the blacksmith for repair and how they had joked about that crossbows should be outlawed, seeing what a mess they made of perfectly fine plates of steel.

It was a surprise of sorts to have that bit of lightness come with the painful recollection.
He tried that again when she asked about the gash on his chest that had almost taken off his left nipple.

A training yard incident, that indeed brought back quite an astounding collection of stories to tell from all those endless hours spent on this particular part of various keeps and castles he'd been at over the years.

She listened with rapt attention, hung on his lips as if he was the land's most talented bard. The stories of violence, blood and rather crude practical jokes and incidents that more often than not involved manure, vomit and other less than savoury substances, not to mention that none of them was fit for a lady's ears, seemed and endless well of entertainment to her. She laughed, cried, censored at times and did not even keep herself from admonishing him for misdeeds if he told her of them. She was with him so closely when he went back to his memories, it felt as if he lived those times again with her at this side.

What a difference it would have made if he had! If there had been someone to advise him, to soothe, to praise, to reprimand or to simply hold him.

In retrospect, it seemed as if his life had not been an endless string of darkness, pain and blood as he had always believed. It surely had been quite a lot less sheltered than hers, definitely much more bloody and painful, but obviously a lot less boring, too.

The insight dulled the ragged edges of the painful thing he'd carried around inside of him for most of his life, had him dream about other things than blood and fire sometimes, made him find solace and peace even at times when they were not making love.

It made him enjoy his time with her not just as an escape, as a stolen treat to which he had no right, but as something he cherished and would fight for if he had to.

…

Sansa had both been delighted about having three full days with him and depressed she would be left alone for longer than that afterwards.

He consoled her as best as he knew how, which predictably ended up with them in bed, depleted, satisfied and in each other's arms.

They must have dozed off for quite a while, because it was dark when he woke, the fire in the hearth burned down to softly glowing embers. Sansa seemed awake, her hand stroking him, probably searching for another heretofore undiscovered story.

"Those little crosses on your arms and legs, are these from arrows?"

"Aye," he said, voice scratchy from sleep. "Doesn't seem much, but I've been lucky with them. Usually archers dip their arrowheads into anything vile and dirty they can find. I've seen men die of gangrene, who came out of a battle with nothing more than one arrow in their arm."

"Seems like the gods were watching over you, then," she said with a smile in her voice.

He didn't rise to the bait as he had a few times before. For one thing because he knew she was teasing him, for another because with all the stories he'd told her, it had actually made an impression on him how often he had escaped the Stranger's clutches. Sometimes just by a hair's breadth and never without a new set of scars to wear, but still strong enough to fight. Still alive.

"Maybe they didn't do it for me," he mused, following a thought he had had once before, the night
before he killed his brother.

Which reminded him of the one scar she hadn't asked about and probably never would.

The one scar he desperately needed to talk about, because what had happened back then stood between them like an invisible wall, a line he wasn't allowed to cross.

He wasn't particularly keen on going back to those days either.

Killing Gregor had been nothing like he had always thought it would be. There had been no elation, no sudden peace of mind, not even satisfaction. There had been relief, but it was for her, not for him.

For him, there was only a Gregor-shaped hole suddenly gaping in his life where before had been a purpose and a driving force. The shadow he'd lived under ever since his childhood was gone, leaving him exposed, blinded and disoriented.

He suddenly had a lordship and lands, people were bowing and scraping and even Joffrey remembered to address him with a bit more respect every now and then. But he'd not only inherited the good, but the bad, too. There were certain types of men who suddenly sought his favour, the ones trying to impress him with boasting of atrocities they'd committed. There was the terror he inspired, both on account of his own deeds and amplified by those of his brother that rested as a bloody inheritance on his shoulders.

Since Gregor's death, people seemed even more unable - or unwilling - to acknowledge that they had been two different men.

They brought him Gregor's armour and shield and had been shocked when he gave orders to melt it down and burn the rest. He kept the fist from the helmet for a while, but one day went down to the Street of Steel, gave a few coppers to a blacksmith and forced himself to watch for long minutes as the piece of steel melted and fizzled into nothingness in the blaze of the forge.

Fire was less of a foe after that.

Only one thing hadn't changed.

Her.

She had acted somewhat differently after the fight, seemed more aware of herself, more controlled and often more remote. But the way she looked at him, unafraid, sometimes even trusting and the feel of ice she gave off when Joffrey tormented her, that hadn't changed at all. Neither had her quiet suffering and the bouts of weakness only he was privy to when he brought her back.

She had filled the emptiness, filled more than had been missing, he realized only now when she laid curled against him with nothing but naked skin between them.

She had become his purpose since then, his anchor.

Not once had he thought to talk to her about what had happened, his own emotions too raw and unnamed to voice, glad it was behind him. Maybe he should have, before whatever it was that had happened to her had festered into something that turned her into a different woman whenever it was touched upon.

Almost hating himself for what he was about to do, he took her hand in a firm grip, placing it over a recent scar on his bicep, the gash still purple.
"You haven't asked about that one yet," he said, trying to keep his voice even, despite her desperate attempt to draw her hand away from out of his, despite her wide-eyed panic.

"No, no, no," she chanted when he didn't let go, a sound as high-pitched and panicked as if he had taken her hand and held it to a flame, causing a ripping, breaking feeling inside him that robbed his breath and made him release his hold on her.

She drew away, hands pressed over her mouth, shaking her head from side to side.

He sat up and gingerly touched her cold cheek.

"He's dead, Sansa," he said, wishing not for the first time he could crawl inside her head and find out what had her so troubled without having to torment her like this. "It's over."

She shook her head again, her hands still pressed over her mouth as if physically holding back the words he so desperately needed to hear.

"Talk to me," he pleaded. He knew he would beg if he had to.

Carefully, slowly as not to scare her more than he already had, he drew her into his lap, held her like he would a small child, like he sometimes had after her mistreatments, and folded her tight against himself.

"You have to tell me, Sansa," he rasped into her ear. "I cannot stand what this does to you, it kills me to think something terrible might have happened that I know nothing about."

Nothing changed for a few seconds, but then she stopped shaking, at least. Curled into herself even more and nestled closer to him.

"It's a long story," she said slowly, as if every word was a mighty effort. "One that will hurt to tell."

"I have three days," he whispered into her hair, stroking her. "And it cannot be worse than keeping it inside. Trust the word of someone who has just learned this a couple of nights ago."

Warm wetness ran down his chest as she fought with herself and he realized that her story would most likely involve himself at some point. Therefore, it might be equally terrifying for her to tell him of it as it had been for him to confess to his misdeeds at the night of the Blackwater.

"The past can't hurt us, Sansa," he whispered, not quite convinced himself, but needing to reassure her, "neither you nor me."

She sighed deeply and when she finally spoke, her voice was small and childlike, no trace left of the playful, sensual woman she had been mere moments ago. Again she was the tortured girl she'd been, scared and defenceless, a little bird in a cage, relentlessly stalked by a mob of hungry cats.

"The morning after Tyrion's trial, Joffrey sent Trant to me," she began. "He didn't talk to me, Trant never does, just dragged me into Joffrey's solar. Gregor waited there for me."

Sandor fought to stay calm and quiet. He'd been there that day, a bit later. The memory of seeing her only a couple of steps away from the monster that was his brother still maddened him. Back then, it had almost brought on the murderous rage that had made him slay dozens of men during the Blackwater battle.

"I hadn't seen him up close before, only once at the Hand's tourney, but he'd been wearing armour then and was much farther away."
"Not a pretty sight, that one, wasn't he?" he said, trying to keep his tone light. "Runs in the family, I guess."

She seemed unaware of what he'd said, otherwise she would have protested his self-deprecating remark. It seemed as if she had sunken completely into the past.

"He was the most terrifying sight I've ever seen."
Chapter 18: Remembering (Part 2 – The Past)

seven months earlier - the day before Tyrion's trial by combat

As Sansa assessed the situation, trying to see what she might be in for this time, for which reason she had been fetched by someone else than the Hound, her heart came to a standstill with sheer terror.

Joffrey stood at the window, facing her, while dwarfed to the appearance of being no more than a toddler by the man standing next to him.

Gregor Clegane.

She'd seen him once during the tourney in honour of her father, but never without his helmet and never close up.

Where his brother appeared tall and strong, the older Clegane appeared hulking and huge, his face looking as if roughly hewn from granite by a stonemason not too concerned with the quality of his work. His eyes, though grey like his brother's, were dull; the whites yellowed and bloodshot, too small in his brutish face, giving it even more of an inhuman quality.

"Please, Lady Sansa, say your greetings to Lord Clegane," Joffrey said, putting a curious emphasis on the title which Sansa didn't know Clegane merited, but knew better than to second guess.

"My greetings, my lord," she said dutifully, curtseying as she did. "I hope you will find your stay here pleasant."

"I am sure he will," Joffrey confirmed, grinning. "He is to be the champion of the Faith in the upcoming trial by combat my stupid uncle chose to prove he is innocent of trying to poison me and killing my grandfather instead."

Sansa concentrated on not moving a single muscle.

Apparently, this trial was to be just as unfair as the one Tyrion already had had to endure.

She barely knew Tyrion Lannister, only remembered him from the two times he had seemed concerned about her welfare and from the barely averted disaster of being named his bride.
Still, her heart had hurt for him at all the lies, all the malice being poured over him at his trial. She had silently applauded him when he made his speech about how the only sin he really was accused and guilty of was being born a dwarf.

There was a certain kinship between them, she had realized, because the only crime she had ever been accused of was being born a Stark. None of them could help what they were.

Looking at the older Clegane, there was no question how this second trial would turn out. Tyrion Lannister might as well put his head on the block right now and spare the life of the one who would be named his champion.

"To commend him for his exceptional duty for the king and kingdom," Joffrey droned on, sounding drunk on his own importance, "I gave Gregor Clegane a lordship and promised him a highborn wife."

Her body turned to ice when she realized where this was going.

No, it couldn't be. She had some worth still. They had intended her for the likes of Tyrion Lannister and Willas Tyrell, surely they would not suddenly throw her at a jumped-up knight, a kennelmaster's grandson.

Joffrey smiled. "The small council won't shut up about finding you a husband to produce that heir for Winterfell we apparently need so very desperately. I found one."

"No," she said through bloodless lips, not caring about the dangers of talking back to him. This couldn't happen. She would rather be dead than married to that man.

Clegane frowned, displeased, apparently.

"I didn't ask your opinion, Lady Sansa," Joffrey said, still smiling.

Desperation and the sense of being done for anyway made her open her mouth again.

"He's been married trice, none of his wives lived out a year of their marriage and none ever was pregnant," she said. "He is not able to give you what you want."

Clegane roared and took a step toward her, death glaring at her from his eyes and she knew at once what their colour reminded her of. It was the dull grey of a weathered tombstone. And this one had her name on it.

Joffrey held up a restraining hand and curiously, Clegane stopped his advance. Then Joffrey stepped towards her, drew back his hand and delivered a stinging slap to her face.

"Shut your mouth, bitch," Joffrey hissed. "You'll marry him and I'll be outside your door when he makes you his wife in truth, mark my words."

There was curious liberation in feeling as if you had nothing left to lose, Sansa found.

She smiled at Joffrey.

"He will not let you, you know," she said. "The Hound will not let you, he won't stand for this."

A flicker of dread went up in Joffrey's eyes and she had counted on that. She knew not exactly why, but she knew that ever since the battle, people were even more terrified of the Hound than they had been before and no one more so than Joffrey.
"That stupid whelp?" Clegane hollered. "I'll kill him, if that's what it takes."

Sansa's spark of bravery turned to ashes as she saw the change in Joffrey at Clegane's words. His eyes brightened with cruel intent and the smile that curled his mouth gave her that familiar feeling of being strangled to death by a fist around her lungs.

"You might," Joffrey drawled, not taking his eyes off her. "And quite honourably, too."

She shook her head, desperation muting her. Her skin and fingers turned cold, as if all her blood was seeping out of her, vanishing into the cracks between the flagstones, leaving her a cold and empty shell.

"A very excellent idea, Clegane," Joffrey said, his smile growing wider with ever second. "People won't call foul on this trial if you had a worthy opponent. And who but your brother could be more worthy?"

Gregor looked vaguely concerned.

"The whelp won't want to fight for the Imp."

"He will not have a choice," Joffrey said imperiously. "He will do as his king commands him to, just as you do."

The big man gave a slow nod.

Meanwhile, Sansa had found her voice again, shaking and small as it was and wet with tears besides.

"Please, Joffrey, don't do this," she begged, sobbing. At this point, it didn't matter if she gave him her tears and her pleas. They weren't for herself. "Please don't."

Joffrey observed her with cold eyes.

"So concerned about my dog?"

Another inexcusable mistake, she realized with a sickening jolt. Another nail she herself was about to hammer into Sandor Clegane's coffin.

"No," she lied. "I just could not live with myself knowing I brought this upon him."

"You brought nothing upon him, you stupid cow," Joffrey sneered. "It was my idea, and a brilliant one at that. We'll have us a true dog-fight tomorrow."

She sank to her knees, folding her hands in front of her.

"Please," she sobbed. "I'll do everything, I'll marry Lord Clegane, if that's what you wish… just, please don't!"

The door to the room flew open at the last of her tremulous, high pitched cries, revealing the object of the discussion.

"What is going on here?" the Hound demanded and then clenched his jaw when beholding his brother. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing… yet," Gregor said, a grin spreading over his face.

Joffrey cleared his throat, bringing both men's attention to him.
"To make my uncle's trial a fair one," Joffrey said, wasting no time in bringing his plan to fruition, "I decided to have you, Sandor Clegane, champion my uncle in the fight against Lord Clegane."

Sansa could only barely see what was going on through the haze of her tears, could only discern the two tall men facing off, both as still as statues.

"As you wish, your Grace," the Hound said, his voice flat.

Then, as if not just having heard his own death sentence, he turned to her.

"If that's all, your Grace," he said, offering her a hand up from her kneeling position, "I'll escort the Lady back to her chambers."

Joffrey, slightly baffled and visibly disappointed, nodded.

…

The heels of her shoes sounded loudly through the naked corridors of the keep as she walked back to her chambers with the Hound next to her, the only other sound her occasional sniffles and quiet sobs.

She couldn't judge his mood. He radiated black anger in a way that told her she'd be well advised not to talk to him, but there was a certain energy to his steps, a coiled readiness as if he was already mentally preparing for his upcoming battle.

The door to her chamber was already in sight, when behind them a deep voice boomed.

"Little brother," the man behind them said.

The Hound spun around in a fluid movement, while Sansa barely dared to turn at all.

A wolfish grin on his face, Gregor Clegane came towards them. It appeared almost as if the ground was shaking with every step he took.

"What a pretty little thing," the Mountain drawled and reached a huge paw towards her face. "This future wife of mine."

Quick as a striking snake, the Hound grabbed his brother's thick wrist before his hand could reach her.

"Touch her and I won't wait until tomorrow to kill you."

The Mountain bellowed a loud laugh.

"Kill me? You?"

They stared at each other for long moments which Sansa used to grab one of the torches that flickered on the wall. When the Mountain turned to her again, clearly about to ignore his brother's warning, she thrust the torch in his face, making him jump back a bit.

"You better listen to your brother," she hissed with way more bravery than she felt.

Gregor grinned impudently, but lifted his hands in mock surrender.

"I'll get you soon enough, vixen," he sneered. "I'll celebrate my victory with my cock in your cunt and my brother's corpse next to me."
With that he turned and strode away.

She put the torch back in its fixture with trembling hands before she even noticed that the Hound had gone eerily quiet. Her insides were heaving, her throat closed tight at the gruesome picture Gregor had painted for her. She would not be part of it, she decided right then. He would not get her alive.

"I'll kill him," the Hound pressed through gritted teeth. "Tomorrow he'll finally die."

Her hands started shaking anew when the guilt about what she had wrought hit her again.

"I am sorry he commanded you to fight him," she whispered, almost choking on the half-truth. *I am sorry I did this; sorry I was so stupid.*

"I am glad he did," he said, resuming to walk her the few steps left to her chamber. "Hadn't dared to hope to get a chance like this."

She couldn't reply to this, barely listened over the buzzing in her ears, couldn't think past anything other than the thought that it was her who'd brought this down on him, who had given Joffrey the idea of pitting brother against brother, of ridding himself of the man he feared.

Violent shivers chased down her body as her thoughts ran in circles. She'd brought it on him. He would fight his brother tomorrow and she would lose the one man in all the world who protected her, the one thing that stood between her and Joffrey's cruel madness. The only human being to whom she mattered.

The only ally she had.

He was about to close the door, leaving her alone, when she managed to break free of her stupor.

"Wait," she called and ran towards the door, panicked all of the sudden that this was the last time she'd ever see him and she wouldn't even have bidden him a proper farewell. Wouldn't have wished him luck.

A frown on his face, he stood in the doorway, waiting as she had bid him.

Frantically, she looked around herself, searching for something, anything she could gift him with. Despite knowing he scorned the trappings of knighthood, the tokens from ladies, the frilly laces wound around a sword, she nonetheless wanted to give him something that would remind him that at least one person cared whether or not he came out of that fight alive.

Her gaze fell on a torn dress from a couple of weeks ago. Parts of it were still smeared with blood, but Sansa had thought to salvage some of the fabric for a new dress. With shaking fingers, she ripped through what had already been ripped before and finally held a strip of lace in her fingers, unfortunately one with a few drops of her blood still on it.

"Take this," she said while shoving the piece of fabric into his hand. "Wear it tomorrow as a token of my… regard. Please."

He looked down to where the strip of cloth lay curled in his big palm, then carefully closed his fingers around it.

Encouraged that he would accept her gift without disdain, she stepped toward him and lightly put a hand on his arm.

"Please come back alive," she said while tears seared her throat and threatened to spill from her eyes.
She fought against them with the last of her waning strength. He needed her to show him she trusted in his ability to win this fight, not cry tears over him as if he was already dead.

"Kill him," she said with a steady voice and then took the fist in which he held her token, his sword-hand, into both her hands and pressed a fervent kiss on his knuckles. "Please kill him."

His throat moved when he swallowed and he nodded mutely.

She let go of his hand, but instead of just turning away to go, he gingerly ran the same knuckles she had just kissed over her cheek in a short, fleeting caress.

"Aye," he said.

…

She had barely slept the night before the fight, spending hours on end on her knees praying to every god she knew, despite the fact that they never seemed to listen to her, never helped her with anything she asked of them. But she did not know what else to do and just sitting there waiting for the hours to crawl by was its own torment.

Despite her show of bravery in front of the Hound the evening before, despite her resolve not to endure the fate awaiting her after his death, she was sick with fear, frozen with unimaginable terror. She was torn between wanting to hide in a dark corner until everything was over, and appearing as one of the first spectators to not miss how this battle would turn out that decided not just Tyrion's, but her own fate.

In the end, Joffrey made this decision for her, as always.

Ser Meryn turned up at her door with the order to escort her to the spectacle.

The outer ward had been chosen for the combat. It looked as if a thousand had already assembled to watch. They lined the castle walkways and elbowed one another on the steps of the keeps and towers.

A platform had been erected next to the Tower of the Hand where Joffrey sat between his wife and mother. Unobtrusively, Sansa chose a spot at the outer edge of the platform that still afforded a good view. She could even see where Tyrion Lannister stood amidst guards to watch the fight that would decide if he lived to see another day.

The Mountain stood on one end of the yard, making Kevan Lannister next to him look like a boy. He wore a long yellow surcoat bearing the three black dogs of Clegane over a heavy plate, dull grey steel dented and charred in countless battles.

A flat-topped greathelm was bolted to his gorget with breaths around his mouth and nose and a narrow slit for vision. The crest atop it was a steel fist.

His greatsword was planted before him, six feet of scarred metal.

How could any man, no matter how strong or brave, how skilled or determined, fight that… kill that?

The thought made her turn her head, looking for the one who had been chosen to try to achieve that inconceivable feat.

She grasped the wooden railing for support, suddenly feeling faint.
The Hound stood on the opposite end of the yard.

Sansa had expected him to wear his splendid Kingsguard armour, but he wore the dented, plain dark plate in which she'd first seen him all those years ago when he'd ridden into Winterfell.

On his head, his frightful snarling Hound's helmet completed the ensemble. He wore no surcoat and no other adornment that signified his house or allegiance. Only the bloody strip of cloth she had given him yesterday in her desperate haste was wound around his sword arm.

Her vision blurred and she hastily swiped at the tears that ran down her cheeks, lest anyone would see her cry.

After the High Septon had said his prayer that the Father Above might help them in their judgement; Ser Osmund Kettleblack brought the Mountain's shield, the Clegane dogs painted over with the seven-pointed star.

The Hound was armed with a light one-handed sword, its glinting edges looking wickedly sharp, but in comparison to the mighty weapon his brother wielded, it looked no more dangerous than an eating knife. On his shield arm, he carried a convex disk of polished steel that sparkled silvery in the emerging sun. Where his brother's shield was of massive oak rimmed in black iron, the silver disk seemed as much a toy as the Hound's sword did.

*He must know what he's doing,* Sansa thought, suddenly seeing hope where people around them apparently thought it a given that the Mountain would win. Last minute bets were made hastily, the rates for the Hound's victory going down with every passing second.

When the two men advanced on each other, both in no apparent haste, Sandor hit his own shield with the pommel of his sword. A nasty metallic sound rang over the yard.

**CLANG!**

The Mountain's approach faltered for a second but then he regained his steps, lifting his sword.

His younger brother hit his shield again before ducking under the swing of the Mountain's greatsword.

**CLANG!**

"Stop that, idiot," the older Clegane bellowed.

**CLANG!**

The Mountain made a convulsive move as if the sound had physically hit him.

Sansa remembered the tales she heard about his headaches, how he had once killed a man just for snoring too loudly.

**CLANG!**

This time, the sound was answered with a terrifying roar from the Mountain's throat just before he charged his brother again, sword wildly swinging.

The Hound sidestepped the attack easily, spinning and facing him again, but not attacking.

"He's doing what I would have," she heard Oberyn Martell's melodious Dornish accent. "Baiting him, tiring him out. He might win yet."
Her heart missed a beat at hearing this, the words a ray of hope. A part of her mind wondered about the Martell's choice of words, though. What he would have done? Had he considered fighting himself?

During her musings her eyes had never left the riveting scene before her, even though it was a repetition of things she'd seen. Mighty charges deflected and nimbly sidestepped, the never ceasing clanging of the Hound's shield.

But while the Mountain might be a dim man, he was a seasoned fighter as well. After a round of unsuccessful tries, he changed his strategy, moved around his brother in ever tightening circles, apparently trying to draw him into the reach of his gigantic sword.

The Hound didn't fall for the trick, but the gap between them had closed notably.

**CLANG!**

Without his usual roar, the Mountain charged again, then stopped just as the Hound was about to spin out of his swords reach again, changed his direction of attack quicker than Sansa would have thought possible for a colossus like him and when his sword came down in a mighty arc, his younger brother was right in its path.

He made an attempt to get back, but didn't spin fast enough.

The tip of the Mountain's sword ripped through armour and cloth, spraying blood as it came away from the Hound's shield arm.

Sansa had her hands over her mouth, holding in a scream of horror.

"Now stop making music and fight!" the older Clegane hollered.

**CLANG!**

They circled again and once again the Mountain attacked and tried the feint that had worked so well before. It seemed to work again.

Time froze just as the blood in Sansa's veins as the greatsword came down again, threatening to cut the Hound in half, when he lifted his shield just in time to avert the brunt of the blow.

Only he seemed to have anticipated the move this time and quickly spun out of the swords main trajectory so that the big sword didn't quite hit the shield straight-on, but was instead deflected sideways off it with a screeching sound so loud even the audience flinched and grimaced.

What this kind of racket must be doing to a man as reputedly sensitive to sound as the Mountain could only be guessed.

He froze for a moment and grabbed for his head while his brother waited at the ready.

Then Clegane charged heedlessly, his bumbling advance suddenly seeming no threat anymore.

Sansa was reminded of something she had once heard about a region in Dorne, where they had a curious public entertainment where a slight man with a thin sword baited a bull with a red flag, sticking him with lances and swords until the beast bled to death.

Maybe the Hound had heard of it, too.

While it had felt to Sansa to be a cruel death to inflict on a hapless beast, it seemed so much more
fitting for Gregor Clegane.

\textit{CLANG!}

Baited into a useless charge once again, Gregor Clegane ran at his brother, but this time Sandor didn't seem inclined to avoid the attack.

Instead, he ran toward him and it seemed as if the two tall men would collide in a spray of blood, when at the very last moment, the Hound turned and threw himself to his knees. The momentum of his run made him skid on his knees for a few yards, sliding beneath his brother's sword and around his legs, flicking his sword so quickly, the audience could only see a glint of sharp edges.

The Mountain stood and roared.

Then, while the Hound quickly sprang to his feet, his brother sank to his knees, still bellowing like a wounded beast.

"Cut his hamstrings, the smart bugger," Martell commented to his paramour. "Wouldn't have thought a bull like him could be so quick."

The crowd, meanwhile, had gone frantic when they, too, realized what the untrained eye hadn't been quick enough to see. Sympathies changed in a matter of heartbeats and it was Sandor's name that was suddenly chanted from a thousand throats.

\textit{CLANG!}

The Hound circled the kneeling form of his brother, weary of the long reach of the deadly weapon the Mountain still held in his hand.

One handed, the Mountain fumbled with his helm, then, with another of his inhuman roars, ripped it off his head.

"Come at me, coward!" he yelled, spittle flying from his mouth as he did.

\textit{CLANG!}

This time, Sansa realized, the sound was an answer to an insult.

Then, calmly, the Hound walked straight into the reach of his brother's sword.

Predictably, Gregor swung it, probably expecting his brother to parry it with his own weapon or shield, neither of which the Hound did. He ducked, then jumped and aimed a vicious kick at his brother's fist.

Unprepared for this, the Mountain lost hold of his sword and the heavy weapon clanged to the ground, only to be kicked again, out of the kneeling man's reach.

With measured steps, Sandor Clegane walked to where his brother's sword had come to rest, placed his own sword and shield next to it on the ground and took off his helmet.

His hair, Sansa could see, was matted with sweat, the lines of his face taut.

He placed the helm on top of his shield and finally took his brothers sword, then walked back just as unhurriedly.

The crowd demanded blood now, their frantic shouts of "kill him, kill him" drowning Joffrey's
enraged screeches, the "stop it, stop him", he tried to get across, when even his guards only had eyes for the drama unfolding before them.

Gregor Clegane kneeled in the dirt like a condemned man facing his executioner, black blood oozing thickly into the dirt under his legs, his eyes squinting against the sun's glare.

"Do it, whelp!"

The Hound stood in front of him like the very picture of the Stranger, dark and scarred; righteous and merciless, a frightful weapon in his hand that spelled a man's death.

He raised the huge sword to his side, having no more trouble with its weight than the Mountain.

"On it... brother," he said simply.

He swung the sword in a wide arc just when Gregor looked as if he was about to speak once more. A gaping hole, spurting blood, appeared where the Mountain's throat had been before.

Sansa almost fainted at the sight, but forced herself to stay upright.

Time itself seemed to hold its breath as Gregor's body sank slowly to the side, so slow that Sansa would never forget even the slightest detail of this moment.

The Hound stood still as if made of stone as the great body crashed to the ground, raising a cloud of dust. His brother's sword slipped out of Sandor's fingers, clattering as it fell.

... Right after, all the seven hells broke loose at once.

Onlookers bustled to get back to their various tasks, a few lucky ones loudly tried to collect the winnings of their bets and yelling mothers attempted to herd their children back from the spectacle without them getting trampled.

There was a commotion around where Tyrion stood and demanded to be freed; Joffrey was screeching about how this wasn't supposed to have happened and Oberyn Martell raced towards the fallen giant to claim his body to bring it back with him to Dorne.

The Hound stood forgotten at the side, ashen-faced and empty-handed, looking worn and defeated.

Without thinking, Sansa jumped off the platform and ran to him, dodging the throng of people pressing back towards the yard's entrance, driven by a madness she would later come to regret, but against which she was helpless at that very moment. She had no thought for what she would say to him, what she would do and that lack of foresight only caught up with her when she stood right in front of him.

"Come to congratulate me on my victory?" he asked. There was no anger in the way he spoke to her, just a sense of immeasurable tiredness. His eyes, though, were for once unguarded and something sparked and burned there as he saw her. Not anger, something more volatile, more urgent and much more dangerous.

"I came to thank you," she stammered, barely able to speak at all.

Her face felt sudden frozen when she heard herself say those words. Her stomach turned and a fist as hard and steely as the one on Gregor Clegane's helmet seemed to be around her throat.
She thanked him for saving her life, that was what she had done. She hadn't congratulated him on his success, not commended his bravery. Not applauded the sheer feat of besting the most terrifying, most feared monster Westeros had ever seen; not even expressed her gladness at seeing him still alive.

No, she had only had thoughts for her own skin, for her own worries and her own life, when it was her who was at fault for bringing him into this fight in the first place. She had turned into a monster herself.

Almost as an afterthought, she noticed that he was bleeding profoundly from a gash in his left upper arm, but he did not even look at it, just stared at her.

"I am sorry," she stammered as she noticed, taking a step toward him instead of away as she should, despite the fire in his eyes. "I am so sorry."

He closed the distance between them and roughly grabbed her arm, gauntlets painfully digging into her flesh, pulling her even closer.

"What by the bloody Stranger are you chirping about, daft little bird?" he growled at her and still she wasn't afraid, not of him, maybe for him, but more than everything she was scared of herself, of what she had become, of the enormity of what reared its head inside her, trying to claw its way out.

"I wanted you to win," she whispered as an explanation that she knew would make no sense to him. It barely made sense to her. She drowned in what she was feeling and his nearness made it so much worse. "I so badly wanted you to win."

His eyes searched her face, wide and glowing, penetrating deeply into her soul and she let him look. There was nothing she wanted to hide from him, nothing he might not already know.

"Run," he said then, with his face so close she only saw his eyes. She did not run. She couldn't have, not with his fist still tight around her arm, with her feet frozen to the ground and her gaze locked to his.

"You should know better than to come to a man whose blood is up from victory," he growled. "I'm this close to throw you down and fuck you right here with a thousand people looking on." He shook her, glaring, snarling, trying to scare her. "How'd that be for getting crowned the queen of love and beauty, huh?"

She laughed at his attempt at scaring her. After what she had been through just now, she felt like nothing could scare her anymore. The only thing his words woke in her was a painful, mad longing, the insanity in her head howling with delight.

_Do it_, she wanted to say. _Do it_, she nearly screamed, because you are the only man alive who'd do it because he wants me and not what I stand for. _Do it_, right here in the dirt, because we'll not get a better chance than this. _Do it_, because I would be your queen of love and beauty anytime if you want me to.

He swayed towards her, his face even closer than before, his hand closing even more painfully around her arm.

_Do it_, she thought and closed her eyes, smiling.

Another set of gauntleted fists closes around her arms then, yanking her backwards, her sleeve ripping where Sandor had his fist still around her arm.
"Are you insane?" a male voice hollered and made her open her eyes.

Boros Blount stood behind her, glaring at Sandor who took a step back, letting go of her arm. For a moment, he looked dazed, disoriented. Quickly though, he got a grip and glared back.

"Took you long enough, you bloody imbecile," he said. "Can you not even keep a little girl in your line of sight? I almost made her give me a nice little favour for my victory."

"A favour that would've cost you your head, stupid dog," Blount snorted.

"Would it?" Sandor asked and lifted his hand, pointedly looking at where it was still stained red from Gregor's blood.

Behind her, Blount shifted uneasily.

He's afraid of him, Sansa realized. Where before they had been afraid of the Butcher of the Blackwater, they were now facing the man who had bested the Mountain that rides, had slain his own kin without batting an eye. Not knowing what lay beneath the surface, everyone must now believe him the most ruthless, heartless and dangerous of men.

"And I believe for you it's Lord Clegane now, Ser Boros," Sandor said, grinning in that terrifying way he had. Then he jerked his head and turned his back to them.

"Get her out of my sight and back into her cage."

When she noticed how Blount only barely kept himself from bowing to Sandor's command as if he was his superior, when he marched her quickly across the yard to do what he had been bid, Sansa could not help herself. She started laughing. A hiccupping, sobbing sort of laughter that had tears stream down her face, but one she wouldn't have known how to stop.

Blount threw her on her bed, when they reached her chamber and locked her in.

She stayed there for days, not eating, not letting maids near her, just crying and laughing and sometimes passing out into an uneasy sleep where monsters lurked and everyone she loved died around her; over and over again.

In her dreams, instead of Gregor's, there were Sandor's eyes staring dull and lifeless into the sun while his life's blood seeped into the dirt from an opened throat.

... At one point, she was dragged in front of Joffrey, who looked disgusted and displeased and ordered her first taken care of and then beaten.

The sting of the willow switch across her naked thighs did not bring her back at once, but after another few of them, when the stinging turned to pain, she stopped weeping or laughing or whatever it had been she'd done. Madness receded and left the field to something much stronger. To something that tasted like steel and freshly fallen snow. Something that encased her in impenetrable ice, protecting her.

Pain went to the periphery of her awareness, and her eyes dried, her back straightened.

Nothing had changed and nothing ever would. She was amongst foes and to feel would be her undoing. She was a Stark. Her core was ice and her skin was steel. She could not bend and not break. Pain had no power over her and neither had insanity.
Those last days should be forgotten, never thought about again. Her weakness had almost cost her life and the Hound's right with it and she owed him more than that.

When the Hound stepped into the room just as she thought about him, she held his gaze, silently commanding him to let her punishment run its course. Joffrey would tire of it eventually.

Sandor Clegane could not be seen as her ally. He could not even be her ally.

Her allies always died.

...
Chapter Notes

Here it is, the third and final part of what was supposed to be one chapter, which will hopefully make a few things clearer regarding Sansa's state of mind.

Currently I am not so sure if there will be an update on Sunday, it depends on how much writing I will get done during the weekend.

Please enjoy.

Chapter 19: Remembering (Part 3)

*Present time*

Sandor had no idea how long he had been sitting there in the bed where they had made love what felt like years ago.

He felt poleaxed. Stunned into speechlessness by what she'd been telling him. Simultaneously, he understood so much more now and then nothing at all.

How could two people who had witnessed the same event remember it so very differently?

Though, truth be told, his recollections of the fight and its immediate aftermath were hazy at best, save for a few details that stood out so sharply in his mind, he'd likely never forget them for as long as he lived.

Once he'd seen Gregor, once he walked towards him to begin the fight of his life, the one fight he had dreamed and fantasized about for more than twenty years, reality had receded, every worry a distraction, every thought of something else than the fight a smudge on his crystal-clear focus, every sound a distraction tuned out to a faint buzzing.

Sansa had said that people had chanted his name, had loudly demanded Gregor's death, but he couldn't remember any of it. She'd told him about where she'd been standing, but he hadn't seen her, hadn't even thought to search for her face in the crowd of onlookers.

Thinking back, there was only Gregor.

He'd been focused on executing a plan that had been created, honed to perfection and meticulously gone over time and time again. Every night before going to sleep, he used to sharpen his sword and review his plan to kill Gregor. It had been his lifeline for as long as he could remember.

When Joffrey had told him of his decision, he'd been almost ecstatic that his fight with Gregor wouldn't be some chance encounter, some situation of self-defence or anything where he would be unprepared, unable to use the weapon forged for precisely this purpose, the shield he had thought up and commissioned years before.
For years, he had used every opportunity that had presented itself to watch his brother fight, to take note of his tactics, his weaknesses. One of Gregor's greatest weaknesses, even in the training yard, was sound. The high-pitched sound of children's laughter, of women calling out for someone, of crying and scolding nearly always made him lose his focus. Sandor knew Gregor stuffed his ears with little pieces of wool to drown the sounds of battle, if he had the chance. He'd hoped he wouldn't do so this time.

The other weakness was his immobility, the way he stood his ground, relying on the reach of his sword and the massiveness of his shield and armour to protect him. There would be no sense in trying to hammer through his armour, to waste strength running against his shield. But every armour had its weak points by design and Sandor had made it his life's mission to learn about each and every one of them, studying where he could do the most damage, talking to a maester once to assess the various damages he would be able to inflict.

His plan had become flawless over time and its execution had been almost disappointingly simple, if not for his screw-up of underestimating Gregor's ability to adapt and move rather more quickly than expected. Luckily, the damage done was barely more than a scratch, something he only really became aware of hours later.

When Gregor had been on his knees, Sandor had seen fear in his brother's eyes for the first time in forever. Not the fear of dying, Gregor had never been afraid of that, but the fear of being left like this. A cripple, never able to walk again, an easy target for all those who would love to take revenge for all he'd done.

It was an appealing thought to have him taste his own medicine, force him to spend the rest of his life damaged beyond repair, suffering people's disgust and pity, their vile contempt and their thoughtless cruelty.

Maybe, under different circumstances, he would have done exactly that. He could not have cared less about the Imp's fate, he could just have pretended mercy or an unwillingness to kill his own blood and walked away from the yard, the fight without a clear conclusion.

There had been no choice about that, though. He'd made her a promise and in addition wasn't about to run the risk of Joffrey deciding he would see Sansa married to Gregor despite him being crippled.

In a way, not having a choice had been a blessing of sorts. He'd fought Gregor because he had been commanded to do so, had bested him on grounds of his own abilities and cunning and finally killed him to save an innocent maiden from an unthinkable fate.

The Gods, if they truly existed, would probably know and judge him for all of this just being a lie to cover his thirst for revenge, but in the eyes of everyone else, no one truly could reproach him for slaying his own kin.

There had been surprise on Gregor's face the moment his own sword had ripped through his throat, as if he truly hadn't suspected him capable of this sort of mercy. Probably because it was a decision Gregor himself would have made differently. Even if Sandor could take no pride in what he'd done, no satisfaction and no peace of mind, he took with him the knowledge that until the end, of the two of them, he was the better man.

Even if only on account of her.

Her, who stood before him what had felt like mere moments after the end of the fight, breathless and with eyes reddened from too much crying, stammering and stuttering and utterly beside herself. There was no trace of her usual cool remoteness, her quiet dignity or her high-born bearing. She'd
been flushed and wild-eyed and he, still reeling at the thought that Gregor was gone, had had no idea how to deal with her.

In his head, only one thought had roared and drowned out all others.

She should be his. Joffrey had promised her to Gregor and now that he was dead, she should be his. He should be claiming her right here, right now.

It was an unwelcome surprise to learn that he had given voice to those thoughts, that – hadn't it been for Blount's interruption – he might have acted on them and they might well both be dead now.

He'd be very careful later on to clamp down on those urges, but back then, months of wanting her, months of forbidden fantasies only indulged in during moments of weakness, had been breaking free, devouring every sense of self-preservation he possessed, every scrap of common sense. Helped, no doubt by the way she had stepped towards him as if drawn, looked at him as if he was the answer to all her questions.

Maybe, he reasoned, all the emotional turmoil of the fight had left both of them unable to act rationally, had stripped them of their defences, if only for a moment. Had left them weak and vulnerable.

To force her to relive that day, to remember that weakness and to acknowledge the fatal consequences it could have had, was maybe the cruelest thing he'd ever done to her.

...

Sansa had moved out of his embrace at some point during the last part of her story, telling it from somewhere huddled against the bed's headboard, curled into herself, naked and shivering. She flinched violently when he touched her and he let his hand sink again.

Where to begin to bring her back? How to apologize?

Slowly, he got up and rummaged through his clothes behind the wooden screen.

Usually, she would follow his movements with her eyes, brazenly appreciating his naked body. At some point, after she'd done it a few times, he had started to believe she really liked seeing him like that.

Now, her gaze was directed at the embers in the hearth, staring unseeingy.

He got on his knees in front of the bed, blocking her line of sight.

"I still have it," he said.

Her eyes were bloodshot and she looked for all the world just as she had back then, when she had stood in front of him after his victory, stammering and making no sense, pleading for something with her eyes, out of her mind with something he didn't understand and was no closer to understanding even now.

After long moments, her eyes focused on him.

"What?"

He held his hand out to her. Curled in his palm, decidedly the worse for wear, dirty and bloody, was the strip of cloth she had given him before the fight.
"I kept it with me ever since then," he confessed, "because it was you who gave it to me."

Gingerly and slowly, she lifted her hand and picked the fabric out of his palm, looking at it oddly. He heaved a sigh, loath to tell her a part of that story she didn't know about.

"When that door closed between us after you gave this to me, I stood outside, wanting to barge back in and get myself a few memories even sweeter than a kiss on the hand. But... I think I realized that nothing taken by force could be as sweet as what had been given of your free will."

She rubbed the cloth between her fingers absentmindedly.

"You would never hurt me," she said in a dead voice. A mantra, or a prayer, maybe, which reminded him of something else.

"I slept in front of your door, fearing Gregor would be coming back. At the first morning light, I went to the Godswood to prepare for the fight and stayed there until it started."

"The Godswood?" she asked, surprise shortly flickering in her eyes.

He shrugged.

"No one bothers you there, it's a quiet place and..."

And one for prayer, too, he added silently, not sure it was something he ever ought to tell her.

Because he had prayed. Well, maybe not in the usual sense of the word and surely not for himself, but he had felt it necessary to remind the Old Gods that they owed something to the last remaining daughter of Winterfell.

That if he died today, they ought to find another means to keep her from harm and do it fast. Otherwise they bloody better see to it he came out of this alive.

"I had my way already mapped out," she broke into his thoughts with her detached voice. Her fingers still stroked the strip of fabric in her hand. "I had a clear path. I would've run past them; Blount would have taken too long to catch up. I would have run over the yard and up to the battlements. And then I would have jumped."

His throat closed and his stomach turned at the precise picture she'd drawn. He could see it all too clearly in his mind's eye, could see that it would have worked, that no one would have stopped her until she would have flown down in a cloud of billowing skirts and come to rest broken and bloody somewhere down on the outer bailey.

It hadn't happened that way, fortunately, but still he felt the irrational wish to talk her out of it, to tell her his defeat would not have been a reason to throw her life away.

"Just because I wouldn't have been there to protect you?" he asked, urgently. "Others might have; they would never have let you marry Gregor. It's like you said, they all know he doesn't exactly have a reputation for producing offspring. They might have..."

She looked at him, glared at him, to be more exact, fire sparking in her eyes, at last bringing some life back into her.

"No, no… NO! Don't you understand?" she yelled at him, scrambling back from where he tried to put his arms around her. "Don't you understand I wasn't worried about that? That I wasn't worried about not being protected, about losing my... my bloody shield?"
She wasn't?

She had been threatened to be married to Gregor and that had NOT been her main concern?

He reached for her again as she dissolved into tears, shaking with great, hiccupping sobs. But again she tore herself away from his searching hands, making him realize that he needed the comfort of touching her more than he longed to give comfort to her.

"I was terrified of losing YOU!", she sobbed and it sounded like an accusation. He just didn't know which of them was the accused here. "Do you understand? I couldn't stand the thought of losing YOU!"

Pain, deep and brutal, ripped through his gut and fisted around his lungs, having him gasp for breath like a landed fish while his throat closed in on itself as suddenly everything made sense.

Her pleading for his life, her guilt at thinking she'd brought destruction on him, her desperate wish for him to succeed and her mindless confusion once the nightmare was over.

She cared. Not for herself, because she had been beyond that even then, regardless how much she reviled herself for feeling grateful about Gregor's death. She cared for him. Had cared even all those months ago only to be taught in a brutal lesson that her feelings were a deadly threat, and her happiness something to be paid for with blood and pain.

His hands shook so badly, he couldn't even wipe away the wetness that dripped down his face as he sat there, feeling stripped of his skin, raw and defenceless and at her mercy. How could he expect her to unlearn that lesson, when even now they still lived under the very same threat should their happiness ever be discovered?

"For one glorious moment," she said, "for only the time it took to say one sentence, I felt strong, secure in my knowledge to have you at my side. When he took that away, showed me that he held your life in his hands just as he holds mine…," she trailed off, shaking her head.

"I went mad because I realized I couldn't live in a world without you in it and I knew… I KNEW that the second Joffrey learned of it, he would not have stopped at anything to get you killed. He couldn't learn of it, he couldn't know. And so I couldn't know it either, because sooner or later I would've betrayed myself again, betrayed you. Brought something on you even your strength couldn't have saved you from."

Her gaze fell on him then and it was as if she was seeing him for the first time that night, as if she only now noticed the state he was in, pathetic and pitiful as it was.

And she took pity on him.

Slowly, she scooted back to him, raised herself to her knees and wrapped her arms around him, holding his head against her breast. Grateful, he crushed her to him, his arms closing like a vise around her delicate body.

"I buried it," she whispered into his hair. "Everything I felt and didn't understand at the time. I cut it out and buried it and went on to live without a heart and without hope. I took the coward's way out."

He drew back.

"The coward's way?" he echoed, aghast. "You saved both our skins when I didn't even know what was at stake."
Shaking his head, he tried to put into words how he had wondered for weeks why she had turned into a stranger all of a sudden, why she had changed from the girl who had given him a kiss and a favour into someone he barely dared to offer his arm to when he escorted her.

"You never gave up," he said. "We're both still here because you found a way to go on living, because you gave me a chance to do what little I could to protect you."

She took a look around herself then, again with a wondering, wide-eyed gaze as if only now noticing where they were, still naked, still between rumpled sheets in a cosily warmed room, the vanilla scent of candles wafting through the air.

"What little you could," she said and then smiled at him. A sad, sweet smile. "It was you who brought us here," she whispered.

"There would have been nothing to bring here if it wasn't for you."

She shook her head in self-derision but he took her face in his hands.

"And don't you dare feel guilty for getting me in that fight. I owe you for giving me that chance, owe you for having it be more than just plain revenge."

"You could have died," she said, desolation in her voice as if he really had.

"No," he said with way more conviction than he had felt at the time. "I knew what I was doing, I knew he was going to die. He did not have a sliver of a chance."

She was quiet for a long moment, but then he heard a very low chuckle coming from her.

"Arrogance suits you," she said.

Still not quite sure it was what she wanted, he lay down with her in his arms and pulled the covers over them both, building a nest of warmth and closeness and hoping it would be enough for now.

She was quiet against him, her only movements the breaths she was taking and he couldn't shake the feeling that whatever had just changed between them could not be undone. Not by any amount of lovemaking and not by a thousand apologies. He'd dragged something into the light that had been kept hidden for a reason. Something as precious and as vulnerable as a new-born babe.

He had torn down the walls each of them had built around themselves and now there was no going back to pretending.

"Why did you insist on your title?" Sansa suddenly asked. "Why did you keep the lands?"

He'd been asked that a number of times and he had an answer for it that usually flowed easily from his tongue.

Having never taken a knight's vow, therefore he had no business being Kingsguard in the first place and since he wasn't really Kingsguard, the rules of the guard didn't apply to him. Since they didn't apply, he could jolly well keep the title and lands that were by rights his now, easy as that.

But it was a lie and he knew it. Only one of the bricks in his wall of self-defence, told others as well as himself to shield the truth. The truth he owed her, especially now.

"Could give you a lot of bullshit reasons," he said slowly. "But I guess I just wanted to be someone, to have something to offer…," he gulped, the words lodging painfully in his throat, "… to offer a
future wife."

She didn't move, as quiet as before and he knew it was good enough, not honest enough.

"To offer you," he whispered, burying his face into her hair to hide his embarrassment, his fear.

A gentle hand caressed him then and he found himself soothed with kisses like butterfly wings, soft and ever so delicate and he knew he had done right.

Pulling back from him, she sought his gaze and looked at him out of red eyes, her cheeks streaked with tears.

"Lord Clegane," she said, the tears on her face not evident in her surprisingly clear voice. "I want to congratulate you to your victory over your brother. I am delighted you won, proud of you for your bravery, your smartness and your strength and honoured that you chose to wear my token during this fight."

He nodded, unable to say anything.

"I am glad you are still alive," she went on, "because I need you." She bent down and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. "For this…," she said, then took one of his hand and placed it on her breast over her rapidly beating heart, "…and this," then she took the other and laced her fingers through his, "… and for this."

He understood at once. It was a catharsis of sorts for her, exorcising the demons of a past that haunted the present, a vision of what she thought should have happened if their world was not filled with deception and lies, if they could have acted naturally on the basis of their true feelings and not been forced to beat back every genuine emotion that had bubbled to the surface.

"I'd be happy," she whispered against his lips, "to be your queen of love and beauty."

Not trusting his voice, he did what likely he would have done had she said those words to him back then. He flipped her over and rolled on top of her, assaulting her mouth with kisses that meant to tell her what his failing voice and even more failing wit would not have sufficed to convey.

Maybe, he thought after she lay in his arms afterwards, already asleep, this wasn't so bad a thing in the end. Because yes, they could not go back to their intimacy from before, they had burned that bridge behind them once and for all, but maybe there was something to discover going forward. Something that terrified him probably as much as her, something that held dangers and most of all the risk of both their destruction. With the walls of self-deception gone, they had to rely on each other now for protection, for strength and for solace, but if his experiences in battles had taught him one thing, it was how much more foes you could take on with a trusted ally who had your back.
Content warning: Not much story progression.

I am truly starting to feel bad about this, but from the way I envisioned this story, I felt there were a few more things to go through first before things can move along. Unfortunately, since I do not write stuff sequentially, that might lead to some redundancy and a slow moving plot.

I do hope the sweetness makes up for it, though. It's Sunday, after all.

Chapter 20: Forgiving

Sansa’s eyes felt like someone had scrubbed them with sand as she opened them to grey early morning light. The air in the room was chilly, but their little nest was cosy and warm and nothing could have compelled her to leave it.

Sandor was sleeping soundly, one arm possessively thrown over her as always, looking relaxed and almost peaceful in his sleep.

Her fingers itched to touch him, to trace the bold lines of his face, to feel the satiny smoothness of his hair, to just indulge in the joy that touching him, feeling him alive and breathing next to her brought with it.

The grittiness in her eyes got worse as her emotions threatened to make her cry again. As if she hadn't cried enough already to last her a lifetime. She ought to be dried out from all the tears she'd shed, but somewhere inside of her seemed to be a well of never ceasing emotions that had their only outlet either in tears or in passionate lovemaking.

Last night, of course, she'd come so much closer to put her fingers on exactly what it was she felt and it had scared her just as much as she knew it would. If not for the fact that he had so unmistakably proven to her that he was at her side, felt something similar and was equally terrified at it, she would have shut all of it away again just as she had done before.

He'd almost broken her, had made her cry again when he'd told her that he had kept his titles and lands for her, to have something "to offer her".

The wealth of meaning behind those words was more than she could take at once, so she had shelved it away after a few minutes of senseless crying. Like a curious specimen wondered about by the maesters of the Citadel, those words would be taken out and examined later until maybe their full meaning would reveal itself. But she would only do that once she felt more like herself again.

Although she couldn't even say exactly who "herself" was.

If last night had opened her eyes to one truth, it was that while she had had a wonderful childhood, all the years she should have spent growing into adulthood had been twisted and overshadowed by
lies, deceit, cruelty, fear and pain. She had survived and Sandor had even managed to make her feel proud of it, but she had paid a price.

And she only slowly started to understand just how high a price it had been.

…

She must have fallen back asleep somewhere in the midst of her musings, because when next she woke the bed was empty. The splashing and spluttering behind the wooden screen alerted her at once as to where she would find her lover. Still not too keen on leaving the bed, she wriggled into a more upright position and awaited his re-emergence.

When he came out from behind the screen, gloriously naked, he seemed a bit startled to find her awake, but then a wide grin split his face.

"Morning, beautiful," he said, eyes flashing.

She was sure she didn't deserve the compliment, because she could just about imagine how she looked: her eyes still puffy and red, her cheeks blotchy and her hair a rat's nest.

"Good morning, gorgeous," she gave back, smiling at the tinge of red that coloured his cheekbones at her words.

She kicked the covers away from herself, not caring anymore about the chilly air that hit her skin. Looking at him, she knew she would be warm soon enough.

…

Although it had been tempting, they had not stayed in bed after their early morning love-making, mostly because Sandor's stomach had grumbled loud enough to disturb the neighbours as the smell of Betsy's cooking had reached their bedchamber.

There was no keeping him in bed after that.

Once properly dressed and done eating, they had sat down to a round of playing dice. Sansa would have loved to go outside, to stroll over the streets on Sandor's arm, taking a look around the market and buy a few things she thought the house still needed. It would have been wonderful, but with Littlefinger's men probably still searching for her, it had to stay a wishful dream. For now.

After the midday meal, Sandor suddenly had the idea of showing her a few tricks of how to defend herself, should the need arise and Eric or himself not be nearby. They went to the backyard of the house and practiced it bit, although most of the moves he bade her to try ended up with her locked in his embrace, being subjected to very thorough kisses. All in all, it might not have been all that instructive, but it sure had been pleasant.

The events of last night remained a topic not touched upon by unspoken agreement. They talked and laughed as if last night had not happened, the change between them only noticeable when his gaze sharpened on her when he thought himself unobserved, or in the way her own heart started hammering every time their eyes met.

In the late afternoon, Eric arrived with the intelligence that the keep was in an uproar, since Joffrey had decided not just to ride out with his wife and the Kingsguard, but with more or less the whole court. An expedition of that size required an amount of preparation nearly impossible to achieve in three days, so servants worked night and day, packing tents and provisions, clothes and implements. Goats, hens and pigs had to be herded ahead, a reconnaissance party had to be sent to find a suitable
spot for the little city of tents the king planned on having.

"At least I won't have to sleep in some barn," Sandor grumbled when Eric was done talking. "The Kingsguard tents aren't half bad, with a real bed and even a brazier to heat them through cold nights."

They talked about Eric's tidings for a while, until Betsy's announcing that she would retire for the night if no one had any more wishes, alerted them to the fact that it was in fact quite late already.

While revelling in the novelty of having Sandor for herself for a whole day, Sansa had completely forgotten to prepare the bedroom, light fresh candles and so on, but luckily Betsy had been attentive enough to build a nice fire in the bedroom hearth.

Sandor vanished behind the wooden screen to wash, while Sansa used the time to take care of the preventive measures that had to be taken. Afterwards she got out of her dress and – only in her shift – quickly went around the room to light at least a few candles.

When Sandor was done with his ablutions, he was still in shirt and breeches and stopped dead in his tracks when he saw her. His eyes flickered to the hearth and then back to her and something in them darkened, his features growing pensive.

Whatever went through his mind didn't seem to be something pleasant, so she did the one thing that came to mind and drew her shift over her head, presenting herself to him while holding out her hand, smiling invitingly.

His steps towards her were hesitant for a reason she couldn't discern, but luckily, his kisses were not. When he pulled back to look at her, some bleakness was still left in his eyes, but she could see the smouldering black heat of lust as well.

"Get on the bed," he said, a hoarse command, an echo from the past. And at this she knew exactly which past it was that haunted him.

She had shoved it away, the memory of that first night. Regarded as something that had went all wrong despite the fact none of them had intended it that way, long made up for. He'd never again mentioned it directly, but from all he'd told her in the meantime, she knew he still suffered from having hurt her back then.

"Only if you undress first," she said lightly, kissing the underside of his jaw. "I want to see all of you, it's only fair, don't you think?"

The corner of his mouth curled a little and his eyes sparkled in appreciation of her playing along.

"You won't like what you see," he rumbled, but nonetheless got out of his remaining clothes rather quickly.

Her sigh of appreciation as she saw him had nothing to do with playing a game. The visceral, immediate reaction she had to seeing him undressed had not diminished since he'd first bared himself to her and she had a suspicion it might be a long time before it would.

"You've no idea what it does to me to see you like this," she purred, pressing light kisses to his shoulder.

Spearing his fingers though her hair, he drew her to him for another scorching kiss that threatened to take her legs out from under her.
"The bed, Sansa," he whispered into her mouth. "Now."

Somewhat dizzy and on shaky legs, she was glad to be able to lie down and did so with the expectation of him joining her at once.

Which he didn't.

He stood at the side of the bed, visibly and violently aroused and stared down at her, his expression closed to her as it hadn't been for a long time.

"I told you to spread your legs that night, didn't I?"

She nodded, remembering the painful embarrassment at his request. They had been strangers in so many ways back then. Bound by buried feelings, drawn together by something even cruelty could not sever, but each living in a separate shell. To break through this with one brutal act of commanded intimacy had been a violation for both of them.

He sat down heavily on the side of the bed and as if to demonstrate how much things had changed since then, she opened her legs just as she had done back then. There was no trace of embarrassment left, only the wish to see the sadness and self-reproach vanish from his eyes.

At first, he didn't look at her, as if he had to prove to himself that he wasn't the man he had been before, he just lightly ran one hand over her thigh, the contact sending pleasant shivers of expectation through her.

"I should've done things differently."

Yes, he should have. Maybe even more than causing her pain, he regretted the one thing that still haunted her as well when thinking about that night. That they hadn't taken the time to really learn each other, to enjoy their unexpected closeness to the fullest instead of acting as if it was something to get over with as quickly as possible.

"Then do them differently now," she whispered.

There wasn't much talking for a while after that, because he first bend to lavish attention on her breasts and later went further down her body, making her tremble and moan and endlessly repeating the one word that her mind was still capable of supplying her with. His name.

Limp and utterly satisfied, it took her awhile to notice that he was still in the grip of the past, kneeling between her open legs, aroused and ready, but shackled by guilt and regret, seemingly unable to proceed without her help.

Getting up on her own knees, she came to him, straddled his lap and took him inside herself in one practiced move, moaning in bliss as she did.

As if the contact had drawn him from wherever he had been, he drew her closer, his hands guiding her movements over him while she held onto his shoulders, oblivious to all but the sensation of having him deep inside, triggering sensations that robbed her of sense and all her inhibitions.

"Gods, I love the feeling of having you inside me," she panted, beset by a sudden wish to let him know, although there was no way he could miss her excitement.

His movements abruptly ceased and a couple of heartbeats later, he drew her firmly against his chest, hindering the freedom of her own movement and rested his forehead against her shoulder.
"You didn't always," he said and most of her lust-drunkenness evaporated at the glumness of his voice.

Want and need almost drove her to tell him that it didn't matter anymore, that it was all in the past. But it was clear from the way he held on to her, that right at this moment, it mattered. She of all people knew enough of things that were in the past but never stayed there. If there was something… anything she could do to have that awful first night between them not taint what they had now, she would do it.

Secure in his embrace, with his cock still deliciously hard inside her, she once again forced herself to think back to that night. To this painful, impersonal coupling that they could not have made more horrible if they had tried.

She didn't remember the pain though, not now with how she felt with him inside. The pain had not been the worst of it, not at all.

The worst had been the sense of betrayal, the despair of witnessing a hope that had not even been fully formed back then smashed into a thousand cutting pieces. The soul-destroying conviction that he was just like all of them, just another man to torture and hurt her, only that he had been the one she had trusted.

"I am so fucking sorry," he whispered against the skin of her shoulder. She lifted her hands to bury them in his hair, turned her head so she could place a kiss on the burnt side of his face. "I didn't know...," he rambled on, "didn't understand..."

She knew that. Had learned of it over the past weeks and even now that she allowed herself to look back at that night, she found nothing she could blame on him. There had been no harmful intent, no pleasure in hurting her, no other crime than that of not knowing how to make it more bearable for her.

And aside from all of that, he might have saved both their lives with his decision to follow Joffrey's orders. If not for Margery's intervention that day in the throne room, their heads would have ended up on spikes that very day if Joffrey had found he had been duped.

"I forgive you," she said quietly and he held her a bit more tightly at that.

There was more to say than that, because looking back, she had her own regrets, but she knew now was not the time to say all that. This was about the remorse he felt, not about hers.

"And what I said to you… afterwards…"

He trailed off, shuddering in her arms at what she assumed was the memory of that night.

"I forgive you, Sandor," she repeated. "I've forgiven you a long time ago."

She rained small kisses on his face; light, soothing, loving. Kissed the mass of scars around his eye, his closed eyelids, his forehead.

"I forgive you."

She rolled her hips against him, thinking that maybe she should prove to him with actions what her words might be insufficient to convey.

"I forgive you," she whispered and moved again, getting a groan in reply. "Let me show you."
And so she showed him by undulating in his lap until they both found their completion. By kissing him and murmuring sweet nothings to him until they both fell asleep tightly wrapped in each other's arms.

Sandor came awake to a very peculiar sound that could have been called snoring if it hadn't been so adorable coming from Sansa.

He smiled and made a mental note to tease her about it come the morning and then carefully pulled her closer, wrapping his body around her as if he could protect her from the world's evil with his body alone.

His Sansa, this unbelievable, precious treasure fate had decided to drop into his lap.

A woman who had easily forgiven all his failings, all his transgressions, even the most horrible of them.

To this hour, he didn't know why the past had suddenly turned against him last night with such a viciousness, when before the memory of their first time – while being a constant, dull ache – had been at least bearable.

Maybe it was because they had let go of pretending the night before. Maybe it just had been time to stop pretending that night had not happened. Stop pretending he hadn't failed her in the worst possible way a man could fail the woman he cared for.

"I would ask for your forgiveness as well," she said, startling him. He hadn't noticed her coming awake.

She turned in his arms and looked at him. A lonely candle still burned on the nightstand, reflecting as an eerie point of light in her eyes, giving them an ethereal shine.

"There is nothing to forgive," he said with conviction.

"I have my regrets as well and I'd like you to listen to them."

Over the weeks spent with her, he'd learned that one of the worst insults done to Sansa over and over again had been to dismiss her worries, her pain and her feelings as something inconsequential and minor. He wouldn't make the mistake again of comparing his own pain to hers just to decide who of them had suffered more. He wouldn't belittle her guilt and her regrets only because he felt so very sorry for his own and he knew that this was exactly what she asked of him.

To take her seriously. To treat her as an equal in all things.

"I will," he said.

"One thing we had in common that night, you and I, was just not knowing how to make it better. I couldn't voice what I wanted and needed, because even that little, I didn't know back then. I hadn't known it could be good, so I didn't ask it of you. I just…offered you my body like a pound of flesh that was owed."

Her hands fluttered nervously over his chest and he felt her shiver against him.

"I did not even think to kiss you first before I undressed," she said, in a voice that alarmingly sounded like she was close to tears already. "I had some affection for you even back then, twisted
and buried as it was and I should have shown it to you. I longed to see you as naked as I was, but I
could not put my wish into words. I did nothing of all this. I did not even try to make it into more
than just what I had dreaded it would be. A bargain and a duty."

The perspective she had just offered him left him momentarily without a response. Even more so
than her forgiveness, her admission that she felt she, too, had a part in turning that night into a
nightmare, lifted a weight from his chest.

Not that he felt it diminished his own shortcomings, but it felt freeing to think that they had both
screwed up. Because, maybe, if she had done even one of the things she'd mentioned; kissed him or
asked him to undress or maybe just asked him to be gentle and make it good for her, things could
have been different. Just knowing that she herself had not wanted it to be a task to fulfil, a duty,
would have helped him in many ways.

Their silence had been their most grievous mistake, even though both their pasts had taught them to
be silent, to keep their wants and wishes to themselves and they therefore could not be fully blamed
for not being as open with one another as they should have been.

Still, there remained the one question, the one insecurity he had not been able to shake over all this
time and he felt that maybe now was the time to ask her about it.

"I forgive you, Sansa," he said, "I never thought there was something to forgive in the first place, but
please swear to me you do not feel like that anymore. Like it's something you owe, like it is your
duty."

He feathered kisses over her lips, her cheeks, her eyelids, then came back to her mouth again.

"It's not your duty," he repeated. Her lips searched and found his, seeking to deepen the kiss, but he
didn't let her. "Tell me you know that."

"I know that, Sandor," she said softly, "but how can I not feel beholden to you?"

Inside his chest, something broke and splintered, its shards leaving bleeding, painful gashes wherever
they went.

"Tell me to stop and I will," he forced himself to say, drawing away from her. "Tell me to leave and
I'll go. Just let me protect you, that's the only thing I ask."

Although I don't know what life would be like without this, without you. It probably would be a very
special sort of hell.

Her hand found its way into his hair, stroking, caressing, trembling lightly.

"How can you still think I'd want you to stop or to leave?" she whispered back as if they were
sharing a secret. "When you're the only reason I get up in the morning, when you're the only one
who makes me feel alive? When you're the only good thing in this world I have left? How can you
expect me not to try everything to make you happy, to have you stay with me?"

Not for the first time, he thought how much better she was at putting things into words than he could
ever hope to. What she'd said about feeling alive, about having found a reason to go on, to fight and
to live, he felt that same thing about her.

Maybe he couldn't imagine living without her anymore, because being without her would not be life.
It would be pointless drudgery, drawing breath, eating, sleeping, killing, fucking - all without aim
and sense. Without joy. Just like before, only worse.
To know she felt the same, feared being without him just as much as he feared being without her, cut him up inside once again.

"I will never leave you, Sansa," he said, his voice down to his whisper. "For as long as you'll have me."

She smothered a sob beneath him.

He lifted a hind to wipe at her tears, but she grabbed it and pressed her mouth to his knuckles, strangely reminiscent to the other time she had done this.

"By the Old Gods and the New, on the empty tombs of my family, I – Sansa of House Stark – swear to you, Sandor Clegane, that I will never willingly leave your side or your protection… for as long as I live."

Never in his life had he given two farts about the swearing of oaths. All those ritualized promises no one intended to keep were only glorified lies, meant to give importance and status. But coming from her, spoken to him in the intimacy of their embrace, the importance and the full glaring honesty of her words struck him as the truest, purest form of a vow he had ever heard.

Nothing, not even a wedding vow spoken before a septon, could hold more conviction, more upright intent.

Never in his life had he ever considered swearing an oath himself, but just in this moment, there was nothing he wanted more. To match her promise with his own, to assure her that she could count on him whatever the situation, that he’d be there for her to the last drop of his blood.

"On the blood of the brother I killed, I – Sandor Clegane – swear to you, Sansa Stark, that I will never leave you, that I will always protect you, for as long as I live."

*And I’ll make you my wife, Sansa, I promise you that, too. Whether Joffrey wills it or not, I'll find a way.*
Chapter 21: Yearning

They spent the last day and night in bed before Sandor had to leave, behaving as if it was possible to stock up on joy, to make love so often it would be enough to carry them over the coming days when they were apart. They slept, made love, slept again.

Betsy had taken to deposit platters of food outside their bedchamber, so they really only had to leave it once nature made its demands.

When Sansa came back from one such errand, had cleaned up and changed the little sponge inside her, she found Sandor on the verge of falling asleep again, even though they had just woken up. Admittedly, after a nap that couldn't have been longer than an hour, but time was precious and not to be wasted with sleep.

Therefore, she pressed herself against his side, kissed his upper body and let her hands wander to where she knew they would be very appreciated.

A low growl came from Sandor's throat, a sure sign for her to proceed. In her hands his flesh firmed and hardened, much to her joy.

"Don't, Sansa, I'm tired," he complained.

She pouted, an expression wasted on him because he had not even bothered to open his eyes.

"But I'm not," she said.

His chest rumbled with something that might have been a chuckle.

"Well, then suit yourself," he said and folded his hands over his stomach, the very picture of a man about to go to sleep. "You know where you can find everything."

In her hand, his fully erect manhood twitched as if to underscore his meaning. Sansa flopped down on her back, shaking with laughter.

"And you might want to stop laughing," he admonished, eyes still closed, but with that little curl to the corner of his mouth that betrayed his amusement. "It has a very harmful effect on a man's... firmness."

She rolled over once again, grinning widely as she stroked over his cock which quite readily twitched towards her hand again.

"There seems to be nothing wrong with your... firmness, my lord," she said, wrapping her hand around him.

He groaned.

"My body betrays me," he said dramatically. "I am to be taken against my will by an insatiable woman."

She kissed his chest again then trailed soft, teasing kisses – the kind she knew he liked – down his
belly and further to where her hand stroked him.

"Want me to stop?" she whispered against his skin in between kisses.

His answer came promptly.

"Don't you dare."

... 

He had to leave at dawn.

Knowing Joffrey, it would probably already be nearing midday before they truly got on their way, but naturally everyone else was expected to be there at the first morning light to await His Grace's pleasure.

Sansa was fast asleep when he was dressed and ready to be on his way and he considered just letting her sleep. He'd no idea how to say farewell to her when all he really wanted to do was crawl back into that bed and tell the world outside to go fuck itself.

He just wanted to feast himself on joy and pleasure and the pure delight of having the most wonderful woman in his arms the Gods had ever created. To leave her like that, alone, insufficiently protected and with him too far away to come home quickly should the need arise, was something he only was able to do at all because he knew what would happen if he didn't.

Joffrey was still his sovereign, the Lannisters still his lieges and if he intended to keep his life, his lands and his title, he'd better continue to be the dutiful dog he always had been.

In a perversion of Joffrey's true intent, the boy was also the one guarantee Sandor had of keeping Sansa for himself. He just had to find a clever way or the right moment to suggest to the Joff that it might be a brilliant idea to give Sansa to him as his wife.

Which made it one of his priorities to keep the little cunt alive, much as he wished it would be otherwise.

He ran gentle fingertips over Sansa's face, smoothing back strands of fiery silk and gritting his teeth at the thought how long he'd have to go without this particular sensation. Was it possible to miss her even before he had left?

"I've to go," he said softly.

She opened her eyes, giving him a bleary look before shooting upright.

"No… I… I'm not," she stammered, "I am not ready to let you. You should've woken me sooner."

He gave her a pained smile. Maybe he should've gone with his original plan and just sneak outside without any fuss, as he always did. Over the past weeks, he might have learned a lot of things. How to say a proper farewell to her wasn't among them.

Instead he cupped the back of her head in one hand and drew her to him for a kiss.

"I'll be back as soon as possible," he whispered against her lips.

"Promise," she whispered back.

"I promise."
There had been no question in his mind he would be missing her, although he hadn't quite expected to miss her so soon and so badly.

He'd barely been out of the door when everything inside him had clamoured to turn back around and it had only gotten worse since then.

With him irritable and short-tempered – more so than usual – the whole time, everyone gave him an even wider berth than usual and even Joffrey seemed to prefer the company of other guards over his own.

Sandor, meanwhile, took it upon himself to act as commander of the guard, a role no-one seemed too keen on wanting to fill, organizing security measures and scouting parties, ordering men-at-arms around and had an eye on Blount so the fat knight wouldn't slack off on his duty to taste the king's food before it reached his table.

Margery had apparently regained some of her usual liveliness at the prospect of being reunited with her family and while still careful to not incur Joffrey's wrath, kept Sandor on his toes with her constant ideas about visiting some hamlet or other that was on their way, picking berries in the woods or have an impromptu horse race or some contest or other.

All that, however, proved to be child's play by the time they met up with the Tyrells.

The two camps merged in a matter of hours as if this whole situation hadn't been a threat against the king to begin with and the Tyrell army and opposing force. People were forever running around everywhere with no one quite knowing who belonged where or if the people looking busy belonged to any of the two camps at all.

Despite the overall mood seeming pleasant and friendly, Sandor was well aware that the danger to Joffrey had not passed in the slightest and with order as chaotic as it were, it would be no problem at all for a potential assassin to sneak up on the king.

While Olenna Tyrell seemed to be all forgiving and unconcerned when Joffrey chatted with her, Sandor saw the glints of hatred in her eyes when she thought herself unobserved. In addition, Littlefinger spent entirely too much time in private conversation with her, a fact that alone gave reason for alarm.

Baelish, incidentally, acted as if Sandor didn't exist. When before he had asked about Sansa at times, he pretended to have lost all interest in the subject. It would have been a reason for joy, if it hadn't smelled so very profoundly of just a new tactic to get his slimy paws on her.

Joffrey had thrown a minor tantrum when confronted with the news that it was impossible to have the feast that he had envisioned while encamped in tents, that neither the amount of servants nor the amount of provisions would be sufficient.

Kevan Lannister could only just barely talk him out of beheading the quartermaster and it was Olenna Tyrell who saved the day by announcing that she would not be in the mood for a feast anyway, until she had seen with her own two eyes that her grandson – who was out of the black cells but still confined to his quarters – was well.

So, after over a week already on the road, they decided to make their laborious way back to King's Landing.

Sandor's mood turned from bad to worse when the weather started to turn against them. A few hours
of rain had turned the roads into muddy mires, hampering the wheel-houses and heavy cattle-drawn carts, slowing their pace to a crawl.

The sun came out again just as another broken wheel made a stop necessary. Margery, true to her rediscovered exuberance, suggested another of those buggering archery contests she was so fond of, probably because she excelled at it.

With nothing much else to do, Sandor kept an eye on Joffrey who mimed the proud husband with some credibility. For the past days, he'd acted as if it was his life's sole mission to fulfil his wife's every wish. The air was so thick with lies and deceit, it made Sandor sick.

Stewing in his own anger and misery, he had not noticed Cersei coming up to him.

"You miss her, don't you?"

It wasn't the first time she sought his company on this expedition, weirdly enough. Back when he had been her shield, she'd always seemed to disdain his presence. He was only useful to her to scare away people she wanted to have around even less. Her younger brother, for one.

He ignored Cersei's question as he had a few times before, not about to reveal the nature of his relationship to Sansa. Especially not to Joffrey's mother.

"Don't answer," she continued. "I could tell you I would not tell anyone, but you won't believe me, right?"

"Right," he'd said.

She looked at her son then, her smile tight and pained.

"They'll kill him, won't they?"

"They'll try," he answered, which made her flinch. "Wouldn't be the first time either."

To his surprise, Cersei didn't contradict him. If he had thought anyone still convinced of the Imp's guilt in Tywin Lannister's death, he would have thought it would be her. Short-sighted as that belief would probably prove to be.

"Will you protect him?" she asked quietly.

"I'll try, it's my duty," he answered flatly, more unnerved than he was ready to admit by this line of questioning. If he hadn't known better, he might have been tempted to think Cersei was looking for an ally she didn't know where else to find. An ally whose motives she tried to gauge, as if she thought herself surrounded by enemies.

"But you won't do it for him, am I right? You'll do it for her."

He turned to her then.

Cersei Lannister was still an exceptionally beautiful woman and for the sliver of a second he felt himself being uncomfortably reminded of youthful fancies and inappropriate dreams.

"What is it to you?" he asked, a bit more harshly than necessary. "What has you so interested in her all of a sudden?"

Her eyes didn't flinch from his stare; it wasn't her style. Never had been.
"I misjudged you," she said, smiling sadly. "You pulled wool over all our eyes with your little show. But I've seen the change she wrought, I've seen how you smile to yourself when you think no one is looking."

Sandor clenched his jaw, dread roiling in his belly. He could neither admit to her observation nor deny it. First he had to see what she meant to do with what she thought she knew.

"Don't worry," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I kept that secret, if only to spite Baelish and the Tyrells. Just… keep Joffrey safe, will you?"

"I told you I will," he said through gritted teeth.

She turned from him then, gazing at Joffrey again.

"How does she do it?" she said as if to herself.

"Margery?" Sandor asked, not quite getting what he was asked.

Cersei shook her head with a chuckle.

"No, not her," she said, shaking her head again. "I know exactly what she is doing and how. I meant your little dove. How does she inspire love and loyalty without even trying?"

The answer was out of his mouth before he could even deliberate if it was smart to answer that question.

"It's because she's not trying."

…

A week, he'd said. Maybe two, if the weather is holding and they decide to amuse themselves with a hunt.

The latter part of this information had for some reason not really made it into Sansa's consciousness and was only remembered after a week was over and there was still no sign of the king's party coming back to King's Landing.

As if a week had not been bad enough.

Being cooped inside the house had all been nice and comfy when Sandor had kept her company, was surely not half bad when she could spend her time with Betsy, chatting and sewing and helping her with some of the lighter work in the kitchen, but after two or three days, she started to feel caged and anxious.

While Sandor had not specifically told her to stay inside, she thought it too risky to stroll around outside, even dressed in common clothes and with Eric at her back. Should they be discovered by Littlefinger's men, there would be no Sandor to come to the rescue.

So she stayed at home, trying to keep as busy as possible. Eric brought her a few books at her request, but she found she lacked the peace of mind to be reading. Sewing, on the other hand, while occupying her fingers, left her mind free to roam and wonder – and fret.

A thousand scenarios came to mind what could go wrong on the king's expedition and for long moments she wished she was still a member of the court so she would have been taken along on the journey.
This way, at least, she could have been close to him, would know what was going on.

Her moonblood came and went during her wait, the cramps and pain it brought with it contributing further to her bleak mood.

Eric sometimes went up to the keep, exchanged gossip with bored guards and chatty kitchen maids, only to learn that no one at the keep knew much more than Sansa did.

At least, she comforted herself at times, if there had been trouble, if there was fighting with the Tyrells, they would know. Joffrey surely would have sent for reinforcements in this case.

So she kept waiting and worrying.

Every morning, she woke to an empty bed that to her regret did not even smell of him anymore, woke with the hope that today would be the day he'd come home, only to crawl back into bed at night scared, sad and disappointed.

Lying sleepless and alone in that big bed was even worse than the day's anxiety. Missing him was like an open wound that hurt and festered and got worse with every day instead of getting better.

She missed his warmth, the rumbling of his voice in her ears, his gentle hands on her skin. Missed his peculiar sort of humour and the way he could calm and comfort her with just a few words. Missed being surrounded by his smell and the weight of his body on top of her. Missed the way his kisses could rob her of coherent thought and the way he felt inside of her.

Without him, she realized, she felt as if missing a limb, or more than one.

Back when her septa had taught her how marriage would make her "one half of a sacred unit", she had always wondered how marriage could turn her into only half a thing, when before she had been whole.

Now she knew that it wasn't necessarily marriage that brought such a change, but something else. Because she truly felt incomplete without him, like only half a thing. As if she had given him something of herself that he had taken with him, something that she felt empty and joyless without.

Every night, she cried herself to sleep, wishing she could be stronger than that, but knowing that whatever she'd given him held her strength, too.

…

On the tenth night, things were different.

There was excitement in the air around them. On the streets, people ran to and fro, most of them in only the one direction.

"The king is coming back!" sounded across the street from a dozen throats.

It was one of the hardest things Sansa ever had to do to sit on her hands and not run outside, not gawk at the procession of the king and the queen, their whole entourage and half of Highgarden parading back into the city.

Not because she wanted to see any of them. The only one she wanted to see was the one who would ride behind the king and queen.

She started pacing, wringing her hands every few moments and rushing to the window right after,
only to find the street just as empty as before.

Later in the afternoon, after she had had a short and intense discussion with Betsy – which Betsy had won – regarding the necessity of eating even in troubling times, the door was opened and she was already halfway on her way to throw herself at the one who'd be stepping through the door, when she realized it was only Eric.

Hectic redness was on his face and he was stammering uncharacteristically when he told them that indeed the king had come back and Lord Clegane, naturally, with him.

"Have you seen him?" Sansa inquired breathlessly. "Is he alright? Does he look healthy? Or is he injured?"

Eric hesitated.

"Oh my God," she said, feeling faint. "He is, isn't he? How bad is it? Was he riding his horse or did they have to carry him? What happened?"

Eric looked over to where Betsy was standing, exchanging what seemed like significant glances.

"If you would let Eric speak, my lady," Betsy suggested mildly.

Sansa huffed an impatient breath and nearly had to bite her tongue not to pepper Eric with even more questions while the boy picked his way through the common language to string a sentence together. He usually wasn't that slow, was he?

"I saw His Lordship," Eric said and Sansa heroically resisted her impulse to shake him to make him speak faster. "He seems healthy enough, at least as far as I could tell."

Half of a breath of relief came from her lungs, but surely Eric's assessment couldn't be trusted, not in the way he had put it.

"I… uhm… spoke to him."

Again, he paused.

Sansa took a quick glance over to Betsy to see if she found Eric's behaviour as infuriating as she did, only to find her trusted maid curiously studying the tips of her shoes.

"He bade me to ask you… uhm… whether you'd prefer him to go to the keep first, to make himself presentable before he comes home."

Her jaw dropped for a moment before she remembered that this was no expression befitting a lady. Then she closed her mouth with a snap, again refraining only by a hair's breadth to shake the man who – on further thought – wasn't at fault for the foolishness that had just come from him.

"Tell His Lordship," she said in her best haughty imitation of her lady mother, "that I expect him to come home the second he is free to do so, no matter if he is covered head to toe in horseshit."

Behind Eric, the door creaked open.

"It's not as bad as all that, little bird."
Chapter 22: Loving

She flew at him the moment he walked through the door, not even giving him the time to wonder if she would be mad at him for the little prank he'd played her.

He had no idea if he had been breaking a rule with it that he hadn't been aware of, but it had felt deliciously decadent to prolong his yearning to see her again, touch her again, for just a few moments, to hear how much she'd worried about him, how badly she wanted him back.

Even it wasn't against any rules, it surely was selfish, but he had gloried in the feelings it brought for the few moments it lasted.

Her fiercely passionate welcome almost toppled him backwards as she wound her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, fusing her mouth to his in a kiss that left no question of whether or not she had missed him just as badly as he had missed her.

Thoughts of the whole bloody excursion fled his mind completely when Sansa continued kissing him with careless abandon, pressing herself against him with an urgency he understood well enough because he felt the same way.

He hoped that Betsy and Eric had thought to make themselves scarce, otherwise there was no guarantee they wouldn't see more of both Sansa and him than they wanted, because he wasn't sure they'd even make it to the bedroom.

His blood was pounding in his ears as he turned them and pressed her against the wall.

Despite his mindless haste to come home as soon as he wouldn't be missed in the hustle and bustle that surrounded the king's homecoming, he'd thought to get rid of his armour first, leaving it to his squire to deal with the heap of metal he'd left in the stables.

So, there was nothing more between them than her skirts that were already rucked up around her waist, her smallclothes which met an unfortunate end as scraps of torn fabric in his fist and the fall of his breeches which he fumbled open with shaking fingers.
She was moaning and writhing in his hold, her cunt dripping wet as he touched her and hot and welcoming as he rammed his cock inside her, too far gone and too impatient to take things slow.

If it hadn't been for her own apparent impatience, for the way she clawed and bit him as if wanting to devour him, he might have managed to be at least a little more careful, a little gentler, but it seemed as if neither of them needed or wanted gentleness at the moment.

There was only pure, unadulterated need between them, the desperate urge to re-confirm something that had been put to the test for all those days, to find back to one another, merge back into what they've been before without delay and without restraint.

In the back of his mind, he recognized the savagery with which he was thrusting into her, knew the reason why she felt a bit different than usual. With her legs thrown over his arms and him holding them as far apart as possible, he was deeper inside than he'd ever been before, deeper than he had taught himself to go on account of not wanting to hurt her.

He faltered in his movements when his cockhead rammed against the entrance to her womb, convinced he was causing her pain.

She moaned and scraped her fingernails over his scalp.

"More," she said on an exhale, her fingernails digging into his skin to reinforce the command.

Not able to resist her plea, he thrust into her again with all the force from before, expecting a sound of pain but getting a breathless cry instead. The last vestiges of control fled him then, his possession of her not hindered anymore by anxiety or reason. The barrier inside her moved and tilted, allowed him access to her body so complete he was buried to the hilt on every thrust, his full length encased in a tight wet hold that threatened to bring him to his knees.

Spots of white danced behind his closed eyelids as her inner walls clamped around him in the familiar rhythm of her release, her hoarse shout of completion drowning his own groan as his release struck him with the force of a charging warhorse.

His legs gave then and he had just enough strength left to cushion her fall with his body as they landed in a heap of limbs and fabric on the floor, still wrapped around each other, their desperate gulps for air the only sound in the room.

"Welcome home, Sandor," Sansa said after a long while, her voice still somewhat hoarse.

He couldn't help but chuckle at the belated greeting, and his chuckle was accompanied by a giggle from her, which soon enough erupted into breathless laughter. She showered his face with kisses while she was still laughing and crying too and he wasn't sure his eyes didn't water as well as they clumsily groped at each other, assured each other in half-sentences - frequently interrupted by kisses - of how much they'd missed each other, how happy they were to be together again.

They managed to get upstairs eventually; managed to get undressed and crawl into bed. Sansa even went down to the kitchen to fetch some food as his stomach made itself heard and patiently waited until he'd eaten his fill before pouncing on him again, not that he minded.

Afterwards, he asked her who of them would be more sore in the morning, but she'd already fallen asleep, curled against him.

He'd missed that at least as much as he'd missed fucking her. The way she fell asleep in his arms so
trustingly, the way she didn't seem to mind his bulk almost burying her, his arms nearly crushing her slim body.

But maybe he'd been wrong about that, too. If nothing else the last hour had proven that she was way tougher than he'd suspected, that he could give her all of himself, all his unrestrained passion without breaking her. That he could hold her as close as he needed her without her feeling smothered or caged.

With a familiar sweet pain in his chest, he at last followed her into sleep.

…

Sansa woke at dawn on her stomach, her hair in so much disarray around her, she had to swipe it back from her face to be able to see anything.

Sandor was sprawled on his stomach as well, scarred side of his face pressed into the pillow, the other one as relaxed, as she had never seen him before.

Her insides quivered with remembered pleasure as she thought back to the night before, to the mindlessness of how they had pounced on one another, the unrestrained fury of their lovemaking, the thrilling deepness of his possession.

Another shudder of delight sent a wave of warmth through her and she let her eyes lovingly wander over the exposed parts of his body. The bunching muscles in his arm, which he had shoved half under the pillow, the long, elegant lines of his broad back.

It might be a primitive impulse, but her whole being was thrilled at the thought of being woman to this man. That it was her of whom he wanted to be protector, lover and provider.

Warmth grew and spread through her, originating from a place halfway between her heart and her womb and she had to look away from him for a moment to deal with the wave of something that seemed too powerful for her to handle.

As she turned her gaze inwards, the wave of warmth fell into itself as she remembered that she had forgotten something in last night's frenzy. There had been no thought for using the little sponge.

With her breath held, she waited for fear to set in, or for panic. None came. There was only a quiet calm inside her, an acceptance of something that had been meant to be sooner or later. There would be no more sponges for her, nor moontea either.

She was woman to this man, in every possible way.

…

When nature clamoured for her to get out of bed and she went to pull on her shift for a quick visit to the privy, he started to stir, hand groping for her on the empty bedsheet.

"Don't go," he rasped sleepily, sounding and looking as if he was still mostly asleep.

"I'll be back," she assured him softly.

"Stay, I want to have you again."

She chuckled a little. What with one thing and another, they hadn't yet talked about what had transpired during the king's outing, but it was as clear as day that he was utterly exhausted, a state not
helped by the activities of last night. Despite his seemingly inexhaustible stamina, she was sure he needed way more rest than he'd gotten so far.

Bending over him, she feathered a soft kiss onto his cheek.

"Sleep, love," she murmured against his skin in a tone meant to be soothing, "I'll be there when you'll wake and need me."

"I'll always need you."

The wave of feeling from before thundered through her again and this time, no closing her eyes and steeling her resolve could make it go away, could make it less overwhelming. Tears shot hotly into her eyes as she realized quite suddenly that at some point between first laying her eyes on him and this moment, she had fallen in love with this man.

As if the last shackle of ice had melted from around her heart in the onslaught of warmth, it swelled in her chest, choking her with the magnitude of the feeling she'd discovered.

She loved him; had loved him for what felt like an eternity.

And despite everything being said about this particular emotion, it wasn't something either of them could afford to feel.

"Damn," she said quietly to herself, while tears ran unchecked down her cheeks.

Standing at the window of the sitting room, looking outside with unseeing, tear-clouded eyes, Sansa sobbed quietly into her shawl.

She could not love, not him. Not the last human being in this world left to her. Not the one whose touches and kisses were as vital to her as the next breath. Her love would doom him as surely as it had doomed everyone else and she could not lose him, too. She'd lost everyone she had ever loved, so no, she would not, could not love him. It was the only way to keep him safe. The only way to keep herself sane.

"Is something amiss, my lady?"

Unnoticed by her, Betsy had come up to her and looked at her with concern marring her lovely face. Sansa shook her head.

"No," she croaked, realizing how ridiculous that answer must be with her crying like this.

"Do you have family, Betsy?" she asked, suddenly anxious to share her fears with someone who might understand them.

"I'm an orphan, my lady," Betsy said. "Grew up in the King's Landing orphanage."

New tears came to Sansa's eyes at that. Here she was crying over her loss to a girl who'd grown up without any family at all. How utterly spoiled she must seem!

"It wasn't that bad," Betsy assured her, slightly touching her arm in an apparent misinterpretation of her tears. "Not bad at all, actually. The orphanage has a number of good-hearted, wealthy patrons. We were never wanting for food or clothes and were only beaten when we broke the rules. They even make sure every child gets into a respectable position when they leave, so as not to end up..."
thieves or whores."

Sansa gave a mute nod at the information, feeling embarrassed that over all the weeks she had spent with Betsy, she had not even thought to inquire about how she'd grown up.

"I've heard about your family," Betsy offered after a few moments. "Eric told me everything he knew. I never knew my parents, don't know if I have any siblings. I was left on the steps of the orphanage as a baby. I guess it must be that much harder losing those you loved than never knowing your family at all."

Maybe Betsy had the right of it. Maybe it would have been way easier to have no family at all, than to have loved and then lost them.

"I cannot lose him, too," she said, Betsy's talk of loss reminding her of the reason for her misery.

Betsy's eyes widened, as if it was news to her that Sandor could ever be in danger.

"I don't think that will happen, my lady," she said, once again putting an assuring hand on Sansa's arm. "Eric says the master is the strongest knight in the whole of Westeros and that everyone is afraid of him."

"He's no knight," Sansa said, a reflex as immediate as it was ridiculous.

A crooked smile appeared on Betsy's face, but vanished again as she peered up in Sansa's face, as if the answer to why she was so miserable was written there.

"Why are you suddenly afraid for him?"

Should she tell her? Would it make it more real – and therefore more dangerous to him – to let another person in on this deadly secret?

"I think I love him."

"You think?" Betsy inquired, an eyebrow raised in patent disbelief and then she chuckled as if Sansa had just made an incredibly lame jest. "I bet even the cobbler two houses down knows you love him. You certainly make no secret out of how much joy you give each other during the nights."

Red-hot heat shot into Sansa's cheek at Betsy's words. Had they truly been that loud? For some reason, their bedchamber always seemed to her a retreat, a protected shell of absolute privacy, when in truth it was just an ordinary room... with wooden walls.

And Betsy's chamber more or less right above theirs.

"That must have been... disturbing," she stammered, shame growing by the second.

Betsy waved her concern away.

"A bit of wool in my ears and I slept like a babe."

A barrage of unwelcome feelings shot through her, embarrassment and shame the most evident, but fear as well, anxiety at being so carelessly obvious when this could easily have given them away. There was some hope as well, that Betsy might just be exaggerating to tease her. Over the weeks of living so closely together almost every hour of every day, the lines between mistress and servant had become somewhat blurred.

"So, how is it bad thing, your love of him?" Betsy inquired.
"Everyone I ever loved has died," Sansa said.

The girl took her hand in hers, her skin warm and rough from all the times her hands were submerged in water.

"I do not envy your losses, my lady," she began, her voice clear and compassionate and her accent much more cultured than it had been at first, probably owing to her exposure to Sansa, "but I wish I had had a family like yours. Even the pain of losing them, I think, could not destroy the joy it must have been to be loved unconditionally and to love like that in return."

Was she right? Was it better to have loved and lost, than to have never loved at all?

Would she trade the burning, cutting pain of the loss of her family for not having known them at all? Would she have rather grown up an orphan like Betsy, for only the comfort of numbness?

And would she willingly trade the joy being with Sandor was giving her for the prospect of not feeling pain should he be taken from her?

Sansa looked down at her hand, resting in Betsy's.

"I never really valued it when I had it," she said. "Just took it as a given that I should be loved and protected."

"And now?"

She thought of the man sleeping upstairs, of his ferocity and his gentleness. Thought of how he had been at her side through the very worst, how he had endured ridicule and embarrassment, how he had risked his life and livelihood for her time and again. Remembered how they had found their way to one another, stumbling and fumbling, and how rewarding it had been. How the world shrunk and disappeared when they made love. She thought about how he knew all her secrets, even the darkest ones, just as she knew his. How she could truly only ever be happy when he was with her.

"Now," she said slowly, "I think I've been given more than any one person has a right to have."

Betsy shook her head and smiled at her.

"Fear doesn't suit you, my lady," she said. "You cannot let it rule your life."

Sansa nodded. She knew that. Of course she did. She was a Stark and she ought to conquer her fears, not bow down to them.

But as so many other things, this was easier said than done.

…

Sansa had peeked into the bedroom every so often during the day, only to find the man she loved still asleep, lightly snoring at times.

She'd asked Eric to go up to the keep to speak to Sandor's squire and see if he was being missed. Eric reported back that things were still pretty chaotic at the keep, the dust from the king's arrival not having settled yet while preparations for the feast – scheduled to the day after tomorrow – were already underway.

To Sansa's surprise, Eric brought back a missive that had been delivered to Sandor's chambers at the White Tower, but was addressed to her.
My dear Lady Sansa,

since I am finding myself back in King's Landing, I would love to once again share your refreshing company.

Seeing as it is very hard to contact you directly these days, I do hope this missive reaches you and you'd give an old woman the joy of meeting you at the splendid feast our merciful monarch has planned.

For some reason, he seems disinclined to invite you himself and the Queen Mother, may the Seven protect her, is equally hesitant.

I wouldn't be averse to you appearing in the company of a certain Kingsguard, if you should be worried on this account. You'll be shown the respect your birth and station demands.

Olenna Tyrell

Sansa let the letter fall out of her fingers as if it was poisoned.

Lies, she thought. Intrigues on top of deceit and subterfuge. Not a shred of honesty, only a maze of untruths and half-lies through which she had to navigate. A game with no rules and no mercy, where you could trust no one.

At that thought, sudden, incandescent happiness washed over her, making her laugh aloud with joy.

Not no one.

There was the one she trusted even more than she trusted herself. She wasn't alone on an island in a sea of lies, surrounded by bloodthirsty creatures.

She loved the one honest, upright and brave man this land had left.

She was NOT alone.

…

Sandor was still sleeping when she tiptoed into the bedroom late in the afternoon, undressed as quietly as she could manage and slipped under the covers.

As if on instinct, he immediately turned to her and pulled her into his arms, half-crushing her with his weight as he sometimes did, which oftentimes reminded her of the saying of 'hiding under a rock'. She smilingly thought how it was far safer to hide underneath of one Sandor Clegane.

I love you, sounded through her head as she deeply breathed in his scent and let his body's warmth wash over her. The thought still wasn't all joyful, despite her earlier elation. Maybe it would always be this way, that her joy would be interwoven with worry, her happiness darkened by thoughts of loss.

But maybe even those who had not been through her experiences felt that way and the real challenge of loving and being happy wasn't to forget the dangers that lurked, but to be brave and undaunted despite knowing the risks.

"Stay where you are," a sleep-roughened voice rumbled into her ear. "I'll be right back."

"Aye," she said, imitating his tone which earned her a playful pinch to her backside.
He was back as quickly as he had said, making her squeak with indignation when cold droplets of water splashed on her naked breast from his hair, but she soon forgot about her discomfort when he pulled her to him.

…

He made love to her thoroughly and deeply. When afterwards he rested his head on her breast, she ran her fingers though his sweat matted hair, wondering if he had a right to know what she felt, if he needed to hear it.

She tested the words silently on her lips and the longer she contemplated saying them, the more momentous the admission seemed to be.

"I love you," she finally said before she could think herself out of it.

He stilled, stopped every movement. Even stopped breathing as if her words had been an evil spell that had turned him to stone.

But then his arms tightened around her, almost crushing her.

She still didn't know if he had a right to know she loved him, but she was sure now that he had needed to hear it.

…

They had decided to behave like civilized people for at least the few hours it would take to go down to have a regular dinner. If nothing else, they felt it was Betsy's due to have her services appreciated.

Sandor tried to get through the inevitable retelling of all that had happened during the last ten days as swiftly as possible, but with Sansa asking about every possible detail, it wasn't to be. The amount of information she demanded to be given was staggering and to her apparent exasperation, his memory was not completely up to the task.

"Men," she muttered under her breath not for the first time when he failed to remember the cuts and colours of the dresses Margery had worn throughout the expedition.

The task of remembering was especially difficult, because he found his mind preoccupied with something entirely different.

*Love.*

She'd said she loved him. He knew enough about the concept to acknowledge that this was a momentous admission. Something not said lightly and without reason, especially when it came to her.

When she'd said it, he'd reacted instinctively, or rather, his body had. With a rapidly beating heart, a tightening in his throat and an impulse to crush her to him so closely, she'd melt into him, never to be torn from him again.

Now, thinking about it, he wondered if anything had changed. If there was something different now from how it had been before. It surely hadn't changed how he felt about her, not a whit.

*Love.*

He turned the word around in his head and even after the thousandth time he did not get more sense
out of it than the first time.

Was this what he felt for her?

Was this the iron fist around his heart when he feared for her? Was this what felt like his gut torn open when she was in pain?

Was this why he was close to weeping every time he was inside her, every time she touched him and smiled at him and acted as if he was the only fucking man in the whole world worthy of her notice?

Was love the reason he trusted her with every fibre of his being, would make every sacrifice to keep her with him, would give her everything he had to give?

This bloody, visceral, painful thing that could at times bring so much happiness it was almost too much to bear; was this love?

If so, then yes, he loved her. Had loved her from the moment she'd put her hand on him and told him that his brother was no true knight.
Chapter 23: Poisoning

After a whole day of rest, Sandor had felt it prudent to go up to the keep to give at least the impression he cared about his duties, only to find he wasn't missed at all.

Loras seemed to be back in Joff's good graces, shadowing him wherever the boy went, just as Sandor had before and thus Sandor was once again left to his own devices. Which suited him rather well.

Making sure not to cross Cersei's path, who surely would not too happy about him shirking his duties, he took Stranger from the stables on the pretence of exercising the truly rather restless horse and made his roundabout way back home.

As usual, his route led him to an inn not far from the harbour, where he stabled Stranger and went in for a quick ale, then out the back door and via a maze of crowded alleys to where he wanted to be.

At stepping foot inside his home, he found himself disappointed at Sansa's absence, but the fact was almost made up for by the mouth-watering aroma coming from the kitchen.

On quiet feet, he snuck up on Betsy who was busy over pots and pans.

"Mhmm, Betsy, what's that I am smelling?"

Betsy, not in the least disconcerted at his sudden appearance, lightly slapped at his hand as it reached for the pot that emanated the heavenly smell.

"You'll have to wait to see, my lord," she said, her manner a bit lacking in respect.

Despite being thus thwarted, he grinned a little to himself at the girl's audacity.

"That's right, just let me starve to death in my own house," he grumbled and Betsy rolled her eyes.

"Lady Sansa is awaiting you upstairs, she needs your opinion."

Sandor gave a put upon sigh. While he liked the way Sansa had turned the house into a true home, he felt in no particular mood to be asked his opinion on yet another piece of decoration.

He trudged up the stairs and opened the door to the bedroom, only to be rewarded with a stunning sight.

Sansa stood in front of the mirror, looking like a vision from the heavens, breath-taking and splendid.

Clad in a dress of sky-blue silk, perfectly matching the colour of her eyes, the edges trimmed with silver borders, embroidered with tiny pearls and silver thread, even the queen couldn't have rivalled her in elegance and beauty. The necklace he'd given her was resplendently displayed on her slightly too deeply cut cleavage, the rubies in the wolf's eyes sparkling as if the tiny beast had come alive on her skin.
Her hair had at first appeared just to be loose, but at closer inspection, he could see it was carefully styled to highlight its natural beauty while still displaying jewels and adornments and speaking of the services of a maid who knew what she was doing.

"What do you think?" Sansa asked, turning to him skirts swishing and a beatific smile on her face.

At the moment, thinking was nearly impossible, as he was pretty sure his jaw had dropped to the floor.

"You look…you look beautiful," he managed. "You look like a queen."

Sansa smiled even more brightly.

"Good, that's what I was going for."

He took a tentative step closer and reached out carefully to gently run his fingers over the soft material that flowed so enticingly over her body, suddenly unsure if he was still allowed to touch the ethereal beauty in front of him.

"What's the occasion?"

"The letter Eric brought me yesterday was an invitation from the Lady Olenna," Sansa explained. "She expresses her wish to see me tomorrow at the feast and as she put it 'would not be averse to you appearing in the company of a certain Kingsguard.'"

"Thought you'd never want to be at court again after last time?"

"I thought about it, but I decided that I gave everyone very much the wrong impression last time and I mean to rectify that."

She stepped to him and ghosted a light kiss over his lips.

"I mean to show Joffrey how happy his decision has made me. I mean to show everyone that they have it all wrong."

She lifted her arms then and he thought she meant to twirl for him in her dress like little girls were wont to do, but as her long sleeves that almost reached the floor unfolded, he noticed that the trim of her sleeves didn't quite match the rest of the dress. The border was woven from yellow-golden thread and embroidered with tiny black dogs.

Sansa Stark was about to wear the Clegane sigil to court. He had not yet managed to give her his cloak, but she had found a way to carry his colours anyway.

"Don't you think that might be a trifle dangerous?" he asked around the lump in his throat.

"I am done pretending, Sandor," she said, eyes sparkeling with a bravery so mighty he found himself craving a piece of it. "I am done suffering for the delight of others. I am done living in fear of what might or might not happen. If I am to go down, I will do so as a Stark should, with my head held high and a smile on my lips.

"Besides" she continued, stroking his cheek as if to placate him, "with Olenna Tyrell as guest of honour, Joffrey cannot do anything. He's the one on trial here for what he did to the queen, he has to be on his very best behaviour."

He let his eyes roam over her again, took in her upright posture, the raised chin, her victorious smile,
her radiance that came from self-confidence and determination and her heart-rending, breath-stopping beauty.

It was humbling to think that this woman was his, that it was at his arm she would be walking into the throne room tomorrow, that it was him everyone would see having a claim to this creature next to whom every other woman paled in comparison.

His heart filled with something that squeezed the air out of his lungs as it clamoured to be set free, to be acknowledged, spoken. To be declared as the one fundamental truth that had been between them for so long he could not even remember it ever being otherwise.

"I love you."

Her eyes filled and tears clung to her lashes like morning dew. With one step, she closed the space between them and put both her hands on his chest.

"And I love you," she said, favouring him with a courageous smile.

She kissed him then and soon enough they carefully peeled her out of her dress and him out of his armour and only much later remembered that Betsy was probably waiting for them to come down to dinner.

…

At the day of the feast, Sansa found herself once again on her way to the Red Keep, somewhat jittery with nerves but determined not to hide behind her armour of coldness anymore.

Sandor had insisted on some downright ridiculous cloak-and-dagger scenario to get her into the keep; face blackened with soot and her dress and jewellery carefully wrapped and carried by Eric and Betsy who accompanied her.

She was to get dressed and ready for the feast in Sandor's chambers, where a gigantic bathtub filled with scented, hot water waited for her. But instead of sharing it with Sandor as she quietly suggested to him, she found herself being unceremoniously undressed and shoved into the tub by an impatient and nervous Betsy while Sandor went God's knew where with Eric.

Betsy proceeded to scrub her raw and then pamper her with sweet-smelling concoctions and oils Sansa wasn't even aware she had in her possession. She would not have put it past both Sandor and Betsy to have secretly conspired to buy all those things.

The styling of her hair took a small eternity and Betsy only stopped fussing over her dress after Sansa had told her to, but all that effort was rewarded when Sandor came back.

He appeared just as awestruck at her sight as he had been the first time, his speechlessness a much more valuable compliment than all the empty words she would no doubt hear aplenty before this day was over.

"I'll never know what I did to deserve you," he murmured into her ear after he reverently kissed her cheek and had taken a whiff of the perfume on her neck.

"Remind me to explain that to you in great detail... tonight," she whispered back, well aware of Betsy watching them like a hawk lest they would accidentally ruin the careful arrangement of Sansa's hair.

He drew himself up to his full, impressive height and then offered her his arm with a perfect courtly
Sansa smiled.

"You look rather breath-taking yourself, my lord," she said when she took his arm.

His armour was polished to a shine, his hair washed and oiled and meticulously combed, his face freshly shaven. His cloak billowed behind him snowy white; quite a dramatic contrast to the deep blue of her dress. She was glad to be at least tall enough not to look like a midget next to him and convinced they were being quite a sight.

Silvery grey glittered and sparked at her words and the corner of his mouth curled with quiet amusement and something like pride.

"Quit your chirping, little bird," he said, but there was no irritation in his tone and a smile in his eyes and she was suddenly struck with the realization how much had changed in only a couple of weeks.

...

As she had foreseen, they turned quite a few heads when they walked towards the queen's ballroom where the feast was being held but the gawking of men-at-arms and smallfolk were nothing compared to the moment when they made their entrance into the ballroom.

Most of the guests were already assembled, some already seated, others milling around and talking in small groups. Servants flitted this way and that for last minute preparations.

Joffrey sat next to Margery at the high table, greeting the arriving guests.

A hush fell over the assembled crowd after people noticed them and soon enough it was so quiet, one could've heard a needle falling as one after the other, all heads turned into their direction.

Sansa could feel every individual pair of eyes on her, as she made her way across the room on Sandor's arm, could almost hear the questions, the accusations. Could see them in the looks she received at which she smiled more brightly.

*My suffering earned nothing but your pity*, she thought, feeling not trace of shame at flaunting what people thought an illicit relationship, *my happiness earns me your scorn and contempt. I'll take the latter, thank you very much.*

A quick look at Sandor informed her that he'd donned his mask of unperturbed calm, although the tightness around his lips told her how much he detested to be under so much public scrutiny.

By the time they came to a halt in front of Joffrey, the king's usually fat, wormy lips had been pressed into a thin, bloodless line, the corners of his mouth white with rage, his eyes shooting bolts of hatred.

Sansa curtsied deeply, making sure to display her somewhat risqué cleavage to the best effect. As a "fallen woman" she didn't have to cling too closely to the dictates of propriety.

"Lady Sansa," Queen Margery said with a smile that was as bloodless as her husband's lips. "How nice to see you again. I hope you're well?"

"Very much so, your Grace," Sansa answered with a bright smile, inclining her head and folding her arms in a way that showed her sleeves and their trimming. "Lord Clegane has been a most... attentive host, who did not leave any of my wishes... unsatisfied."
A unison gasp could be heard and then a buzzing of enraged whispers, but Sansa paid it no mind, because at that moment, Sandor turned to her fully, the mask vanished and gave her smile that was as broad as it was wicked and she felt herself swaying a bit towards him with the sudden wish to kiss that smile, to follow up on the delightful promise in his eyes.

She caught herself just in time and turned to Margery again.

"I will be eternally grateful to his Grace for his wise and generous decision."

Joffrey looked as if in the process of grinding his back teeth to dust, while Sansa expressed her thanks with another deep curtsey.

The master of ceremonies stiffly gestured for them to follow his lead to where she was to be seated. It would be a place below the salt, of course, but Sansa could not care less. The expression on Joffrey's face, the looks she received from all around her made her feel as if she had just won not only a battle, but the whole war.

Quickly, she scanned the high table for the other members of the royal family and the council.

Cersei looked at her as if seeing her for the first time and Sansa could've sworn she'd seen a mix of surprise and envy on her face. Lady Olenna gave her an encouraging smile and Lord Baelish looked as if he had just eaten a particular sour piece of fruit.

Sandor was just about to help her take her seat, when Loras came up to them.

He didn't spare her a glance or offered her as much as a greeting, but addressed Sandor immediately.

"Lord Clegane," he said urgently. "There is an incident on the training yard that requires your attention."

_He's lying_, Sansa thought with alarm. This was clearly a ploy to get Sandor away from her side for whatever purpose and it made her feel increasingly uneasy. Sandor, too, seemed to be aware of the nature of Loras' request and hesitated.

"Do I need to clear this with the king?" Loras asked.

Sandor looked at her. She knew he could not get out of this without causing a fuss and while she had had provocation in mind when she appeared here, this was about the whole extend of it.

She nodded her consent to the question in his eyes.

"Don't let me keep you," she said out loud. "I am sure I'll be perfectly fine until your return."

…

Despite her anxiety, the feast progressed without any more disturbances. As Sansa had expected, one dish followed the other in rapid succession, each more wildly imaginative than the other. Ser Boros, red-faced but determined, took a bite from every dish put in front of the king, regardless whether Joff was actually eating it or not and took a swig from every new bottle of wine that was brought.

In between courses, bards were called upon for entertainment, fools were supposed to make the guests laugh and a few acrobats from Essos showed off their ability to distort their bodies in alarming ways. The latter made Sansa silently amuse herself with the thought which other uses one could get out of such agility.
Sandor, to her ever growing alarm, did not come back.

As Joffrey rose for a speech, he still wasn't there, even though Loras had come back some time ago.

"I will not keep you from enjoyment of this feast for long," Joff began, rousing grateful applause, "but I want to take the opportunity to express my happiness at being blessed with such a beautiful, graceful woman as a wife and my thanks to her family for their continued and unfailing support."

The Tyrells smiled benevolently and only Margery looked as if it was an effort.

"My queen, may I ask you to share this goblet of wine with me as a symbol of our love and the holiness of our marriage?"

Margery stood, took the goblet from Joffrey and drank from it.

"Oh my!" Lady Olenna exclaimed, drawing all attention to her. "I think this is too much for my poor old heart, can someone please escort me to take some fresh air?"

Scowling, Mace Tyrell rose from his seat and offered his arm to his mother, but in the end had to half carry the old woman outside.

It seemed curious to Sansa, why a woman who seemed sprightly enough and had just braved and arduous journey without any complaints - according to Sandor's account - should suddenly feel faint at hearing some rehearsed and trivial niceties.

Joffrey's smile had turned noticeably more artificial at the interruption, but he nonetheless took the goblet from Margery and took a long swallow himself.

He smacked his lips when he was done and raised the goblet, obviously to say something, but no words came from his throat. Even before anyone else even knew what was going on, Cersei shot from her seat with a high-pitched wail.

"Joffrey!"

The king's face turned red as he turned his head to his mother and his eyes bulged with panic as he, too, realized what closed his throat.

Wine spilled on the floor as the goblet fell from Joff's hands which he used to clutch at his throat, fighting for breath, while Cersei screamed for help at the top of her lungs.

Joffrey fought for his life for endless, agonizing minutes, his face turning from red to purple and the whites of his eyes blood-red. Cersei's wail rent the air and cut like a knife through Sansa's heart as Joffrey finally stopped struggling and went limp in his mother's grip.

Around her, people who had stared and gawked before, suddenly were dispersing in all directions, everyone apparently suddenly remembering that they had to be elsewhere. Soon, the room was empty save for the royal family, a few members of the council, stunned looking kingsguards and her.

She slowly walked to the high table, unsure of what she should do.

Cersei had calmed, it seemed. She cradled Joffrey in her arms like a babe, rocking him back and forth with a smile on her face that was serene and almost happy.

"My boy," she whispered in endless repetition. "My beautiful, darling boy."

Sansa might have had no love for Joffrey; no, she hated him and thought she'd be happy if he died,
but seeing Cersei's tearless, mindless pain still brought tears to her eyes and compelled her to step closer, to offer comfort even though it surely would not be wanted.

As she stood in front of them and was about to crouch down, Cersei's eyes went up to hers, sad and clear and full of something Sansa thought was regret until it quickly transformed into a weird urgency.

"Fly, little dove," Cersei said, something wild and panicked in her eyes. "You have to flee!"

Instinct taking over before her mind had even started processing what had been said, Sansa turned and did as she had been advised.

Pulling her skirts up in her fists, she turned and shoved her way through the onlookers, tearing through the room and out of the doors, frantically looking for Sandor in the midst of her aimless flight.

Strong hands suddenly clamped around her arms, stopping her and for the shortest of instances her heart soared, hoping it was him, only to be dreadfully disappointed when she was faced with two men she didn't know.

"Lady Sansa," one of them said. "We've been ordered to escort you to the small council."

…

As last time, she was offered a seat and refreshments after her captors had delivered her to her destination.

Unlike last time, she declined both.

While she was indeed in the small council's chambers, only Lord Baelish, Lady Olenna and Mace Tyrell were in attendance, which furthered her sense of impending doom. Not surprisingly, Lady Olenna looked far from the brittle old lady she had mimed just a few minute ago.

"I have to protest the manner in which I was brought here against my expressed wishes," she said haughtily.

Lord Baelish smiled amiably.

"Even a lady as highborn as you are can be summoned by the small council," he said softly. "Don't you agree?"

Far from being inclined to agree, Sansa grit her teeth.

"What is it the small council wants from me?" she asked instead.

"The small council," Baelish began, folding his hands in front of him with a cloyingly sweet smile, "has come to an agreement regarding your future."

"I believe the king has made his wishes regarding my future very clear," Sansa retorted, sickeningly aware of the fact that the king lay dead in his mother's arms.

Baelish smiled in a way that made her stomach turn.

"The king," he said slowly, clearly relishing what he was about to say, "is dead."

So it was you, she thought and then her gaze fell to the Lady Olenna, who did not look in the least
bothered by Baelish's clear enjoyment of this particular announcement. All of you.

On the heel of that thought came another, far more disturbing one as Littlefinger started to circle her as if she was a trapped deer and he the predator about to tear into her.

_I am the price they paid to save Margery. He helped them kill Joffrey and was promised me as reward._

She wanted to weep, to explain and beg. She wanted to throw herself at their feet and ask for mercy, for understanding.

She knew she would get none. Not from those cold-eyed people whose only concern was to save their own blood, and not from him who wanted to own her out of an obsession that was as disgusting as it was dangerous and out of a hunger for power that knew no bounds.

So she just raised her chin and declared, "You will regret this, all of you. A king's blood is on your hands and this crime will not go unpunished."

"A bastard's blood," Lady Olenna said superciliously. "And don't you tell me you grieve for Joffrey."

"I do not," she said. "He killed my whole family, he had me tortured and humiliated and intended even worse. To know him dead is a relief. But I would have preferred to have him be judged and found guilty instead of murdered in an act of greed and cowardice."

Lady Olenna snorted.

"You Northerners will not learn, will you?" she said, lifting her head. "You father was killed by this foolish sense of honour and so was your brother. If you want to follow in their steps, go right ahead, it's no longer any concern of mine, you are Lord Baelish's charge now."

"I do not go with him of my free will, just so you know," she said, desperately trying to mask her rising panic. "Should anything happen to me, there is the one who will hound you for it to the depths of the Seven Hells. All of you."

Mace Tyrell looked vaguely alarmed, but Lady Olenna just gave her a smile heavily laced with contempt.

"Letting a dog sleep in your bed makes him lose his bite. Didn't you know that?" Then she turned to her son, lifting her nose. "Come on, I've no intention of catching fleas."

With that, both Tyrells turned and walked out of the door, leaving her in the sole company of Littlefinger.

"Don't listen to the old biddy," Baelish said, stroking her cheek. "She just speaks from envy."

Sansa turned her face away and stepped back from him.

"Let me go."

"No," he said, eyes glinting, as he stepped closer once again. "Your hound once dared me to take you away from him and I did. I will not give you up, Cat, I just won't."

He leaned in, raising himself on tiptoes to reach her.

Remembering something Sandor had once told her, she grabbed his head with both hands, drew her
head back to get some momentum and rammed it forward again so her forehead collided heavily with Littlefinger's nose.

Her head rang a bit afterwards, but she was rewarded with a satisfying crunch as Baelish's nasal bone broke and she took a hasty step back to save her dress when blood spurted copiously out of his nose.

Only shortly observing her success, she turned on her heel and ran to the door, opened it and barrelled out, only to be stopped again by the two men from before who had guarded the door.

"SANDOR!" she screamed, while trying to wind herself out of the men's grip, kicking at their shins to get them to release her. "SANDOR!"

"He will not come," Baelish said darkly if a bit nasally, while ineffectively dabbing at his still bleeding nose. "I made sure of it."

She refused to give up that easily.

They dragged her away, still kicking and screaming, until at some point a blinding pain short through her from the back of her head and a dark curtain fell over her world.
The tussle on the training yard Sandor had to sort out had not been worth even Loras' attention, let alone his own. Some idiot had thought it smart to practice with real swords instead of the training equipment. Subsequently, some blood had been spilt, but the damage caused was nothing a halfway competent maester couldn't mend with his eyes closed.

Sandor had known this was a ploy to keep him away from the feast all along, but when Loras suggested some big discussion with every men-at-arms how such accidents could be prevented in the future, Sandor lost the last of his patience and made to go back.

"You cannot go, Ser," Loras insisted. "The king…"

"The king needs to be protected," Sandor bellowed at the boy, who shrunk from him. "And that's what we're here for your and I, or have you forgotten?"

It was probably his own satisfaction at seeing the whelp shake with fear that kept him from realizing sooner that men were advancing towards him from behind, which was only really brought to his attention when a blade was pressed to his throat.

"If you value the life of Sansa Stark," Kettleblack's voice hissed in his ear, "You'll come with us nice and quiet."

He closed his eyes for a moment as the certainty of what was about to happen seeped into him like filthy black oil, making him sick with fear.

They'd kept him away from Joffrey and Sansa, to kill the former and abduct the latter and here he was with a blade to his throat, because he had been too bloody distracted, unable to help her.

"Baelish has her, am I right?" he asked, maybe just to stall for time, but also because he needed the
confirmation. "He won't hurt her," he added to assure himself.

Behind him, he could feel how Kettleblack shrugged.

"Probably not," he said while prodding him in the back to get him to move. "Surely wants to fuck her first."

Sandor lurched forward, his instincts overriding every consideration for his own safety, but he was brutally stopped as he felt a blade cutting viciously into his skin.

This wouldn't do. He was no help to Sansa if he was dead.

"Careful, dog," Kettleblack said dispassionately. "I have you on a leash here."

Sandor swallowed and nodded carefully, trying to signal his cooperation. While he walked, he let his eyes roam over the yard. He had a pretty good idea where Kettleblack meant to stow him away, somewhere in the now depleted storage cellars beneath the keep.

He'd be found eventually, but by that time Sansa would be long gone.

As he tried the think of how to get out of this, he caught sight of a familiar figure trying to keep to the shadows, watching them. Petite and full-figured.

Betsy.

He lowered his head and tried to keep a sigh of relief to himself.

Docile as a lamb, he let Kettleblack lead him to – as he had suspected – an empty cellar that stank of spoiled turnips and didn't even protest as he trussed him up like a Sevenmas goose.

Kettleblack smirked down at him when he was done, apparently admiring his handiwork.

"As for your little redhead," he said, delivering a vicious kick to Sandor's ribs, "she wouldn't be the first whore Baelish has killed."

For a moment, both the kick and the mental image the words had provoked left him without breath.

He'd never told Sansa, but he had seen Sibyl's broken body when he'd gone looking for her and it was a sight that was not easily stomached even for him. To think that…

No, he mentally admonished himself. He couldn't think like that. That was exactly what they wanted.

"As for you," Sandor said, when he had his breath back, "I'll make sure you'll die screaming, just as Baelish will."

Kettleblack snorted and then turned to leave.

…

When Sansa woke, the first sensation she became aware of was a headache so painful she was sure she would not even be able to open her eyes.

The second, even more alarming realization was that of her hand and feet being immovable, because they were bound. She was lying on something soft and comfortable, a bed, probably. Unfortunately, she was shivering all over, because she had not a stitch of clothing on her.
Pushing the pain in her head aside as she had learned to do, she forced her eyes open, momentarily blinded at the light flooding in from a number of high glass windows, the colourful lead-glass decorations on them making the room seem like a sept.

A townhouse, she concluded, somewhere in the better parts of the city, near the keep.

Sorting through the events she could remember from before she was clouted over the head, she arrived at the somewhat reassuring realization that Littlefinger was so sure of his plan, he had not bothered to spirit her away from King's Landing, but meant to keep her in his own house until he had figured out what to do with her or whom to marry her off to.

"Ah, you're awake, my sweetling," came from somewhere to her left, but turning her head yielded no result, because her head was too deeply sunk into the pillow it rested on.

Baelish's smiling face appeared in her vision moments later, however.

He had changed into a silken dressing gown, richly embroidered with gold thread and was slowly sipping from an ostentatiously decorated goblet.

Bile rose in her throat as he let his eyes roam over her exposed body.

"Such perfection," he said, sighed and then let his fingertips trail over her exposed breast down to her stomach. "And to think all that was wasted on a dog."

"Well," Sansa said, after having recovered from her shiver of revulsion, "since I am thus ruined, you can let me go, I am of no use to you anymore."

Baelish took another sip of wine and then smiled again.

"Oh Cat," he said with a dramatic sigh, "you underestimate the deepness of my love for you. Wolf or dog, I do not care whose leavings I get, as long as you will be mine."

Her pounding headaches made thinking difficult, so she went with the first reply that came to mind immediately.

"I will never be yours."

"Oh, you will, sweetling," he cooed, opening his dressing gown and presenting her with a clue as to what he intended to do with her.

The last shred of bravery she had felt, even in her helpless state, fled her as she the realization of what was about to happen crept like cold acid through her veins, paralyzing her.

Tears stung in her eyes, but she blinked them away. He would not see her cry; she had been through worse.

Although right now, she couldn't remember anything worse than what was about to happen.

She'd happily endure any of Joffrey's beatings instead of this and she began to shake so badly, only gritting her teeth kept them from rattling.

For days after it had happened, she had felt violated by what had transpired between her and Sandor on their first night together. Although she had refrained from calling it rape even in her thoughts, she had sometimes wondered what it should have been called. It was forgotten and forgiven, but only now, helpless and panicked, she realized how different that night had been from truly being forced
by a man against her will. Back with Sandor, she had known from the start that had she said no, had she asked him to stop, he would have. There had been not even a trace of uncertainty in her mind about that, not then and not now.

She had suffered and – as she had later learned – so had he, but if nothing else, there had been a mutual understanding that it had to be done.

This… this was something entirely different. This was calculated destruction of her soul and her will; this was something as brutal and as beyond her control as every bit of torture inflicted on her by Joffrey.

Baelish smiled as he saw her reaction and sipped at his wine again.

"While you were out, I had a maester examine you," he told her as if it was the weather they were conversing about, not her dignity. "It's unfortunately true that nothing can be done about your maidenhead, but he assured me you are not pregnant. Now you might argue I should wait until our wedding before I put my seed into you, but seeing as you have not been particular about this before, I figured we can dispense with such formalities now."

She took desperate gulps of breaths and tried to breathe through her panic as the full implication of his words sunk in. Had she been so careful not to get pregnant with Sandor's child before they were wed, only to be soiled with Baelish's seed against her will? The thought was even more abhorrent than the prospect of having to endure his possession, or the even more remote threat of him forcing her to become his wife.

A scream of horror built inside of her and the force it took to keep it in almost broke her.

Baelish got rid of his dressing gown and put the goblet on a nearby table, then sauntered over to the bed again to look down on her with a strange mixture of desire and disgust.

In his face, his nose stood out like a beacon, red and puffy, nostrils stuffed with white wool to staunch the bleeding.

Somehow, seeing this, made her horror recede a bit and enabled her to think rationally.

She had fought back before, she just had to find another way now. Time was what she needed, what Sandor needed. Surely he was on his way already, trying to figure out how to free her. They had dreaded just such a scenario for weeks, she was certain he had been prepared for this all along.

Unwilling to give up just yet, she closed her eyes and recalled his face, the way he had smiled at her just an hour ago, so happy, so proud and with a promise in his eyes.

Her yes flew open again when she felt Baelish's hand at her inner thigh, painfully pinching the soft flesh.

"And let me assure you, I will not endeavour to make it nice for you," he said, viciously pinching her again. "I have a broken nose thanks to you, so you will repay me every drop of blood you spilled."

She looked away from him, striving not to let him see how his words scared her and incidentally, her eyes fell on the remnants of her beautiful dress that was thrown over the back of a chair. Someone – not too difficult to guess who – had ripped the trimmings from the sleeves, but it was otherwise intact.

Closing her eyes again, she concentrated on trying to find out if she still wore her necklace, which seemed to be important to her right now and found that yes, the small weight rested in the hollow at
her throat.

Weirdly reassured at both the thought of Sandor and her family whose sigil she wore around her neck, she looked straight into Baelish's eyes.

"He'll kill you for that, of that you can be sure," she said.

Baelish smiled, his hand roaming over her leg.

"Do you think he'd risk his life for you?" he asked and then chuckled as if he'd made a particularly funny joke. "Why should he? Do you really misjudge a man like him so badly that you think him capable of this sort of loyalty?"

He laughed derisively, something apparently meant to destroy her confidence.

"You were a juicy bone the king had thrown him, no more no less. He told me so himself."

Sansa felt her jaw going slack for a moment at the sudden insight she'd just gained, and then she laughed. Loud and long and somewhat hysterically, even to her own ears.

Littlefinger seemed a bit taken aback at her hilarity.

"You really do not believe in it, do you?" she wheezed, after having managed to get enough air into her lungs. "You manipulate people like a master, play on their emotions, but you do not really believe in them. You do not believe in loyalty and you don't believe love truly exists."

It truly was a staggering discovery. She'd always believed him to act out of some twisted sort of love and was driven by ideals that exceeded anyone's understanding. But there was nothing more to any of what he did than greed. He wanted to own. Everything.

Having felt unfairly treated by what his birth had given him in wealth and station, his only motive had been to own and possess everything and everyone he wanted.

Including her mother. Including herself.

Baelish made a disgusted face and seemed rather put out about her laughter.

"I believe what you think is love is nothing but a clever mix of sexual desire, possessiveness and sentiment coloured by unrealistic expectations," he said, almost sniffing with disdain, could he have done that with his stuffed nose. "I do not need to believe in it to manipulate those who do."

Sansa let a slow smile spread over her lips.

"See, therein lies your problem," she said in the lecturing tone of a particularly strict septa, as if she was not a terrified girl lying bound and naked before her would-be rapist. "You think you can possess me by raping me, but you won't. I will belong to Sandor Clegane for as long as I live and nothing you can do will change that. Because I've given him more than just my body, I've given him my heart and my soul."

Baelish's face twisted into an ugly sneer and he clambered atop her, erection bobbing against her stomach.

"I'll prove to you how I can possess you, you bitch."

Again, she smiled, even though it was with much more effort this time, because she had no idea how to prevent what would be happening in a couple of seconds.
"You can do with me as you can with every one of your whores, but you'll not possess me," she spat at him, not bothering to hide her disgust. "You never will. Just like you could never have my mother." A twitch went over his features as if she had slapped him and she thought it smart to keep to this particular topic. "Not because her father deemed you unworthy of her, but because she... didn't... love you!"

She grinned at him and while looking down, saw his erection flagging a little. Remembering how Sandor had told her not to laugh at an aroused man, she started giggling, pointedly looking down.

"Besides, if you intend to poke me with this," she gave another derisive chuckle, "I might not even notice. I'm accustomed to be treated to something significantly more sizeable."

As she had hoped, her words had a very detrimental effect on aforementioned appendage.

Trained by months of abuse, however, she saw the glint in his eyes, the one that would be immediately followed by another form of violence, so it wasn't much of a surprise when he backhanded her hard across her face, causing her bottom lip to bleed lightly.

"You bloody whore."

She smiled again, licking provocatively at her lip. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement behind Baelish, a dark shadow, moving with the grace and deliberation of a large cat.

Relief, almost blinding in its intensity rolled through her in a wave, almost forcing a cry of victory to her lips, the sound of his name, and a great sigh of relief.

She fought to do neither, to keep Littlefinger's focus on her.

"You will regret that," she said, smiling.

Littlefinger was in the midst of giving a retort to that statement, when cold steel – liberally coated with dark blood – was pressed against his throat.

"Where do you want me to start cutting, my love?" Sandor asked with exaggerated politeness while half kneeling behind the naked man. "Fingers, balls, cock?"

"Well, to be quite honest, the ropes at my wrists and feet would be excellent," she replied, equally polite. "I mean to enjoy my revenge dressed and upright."

Sandor nodded and with a quick knock of his closed fist against the back of Baelish's head, rendered the little man unconscious.

As soon as Baelish dropped to the floor like so much dead meat, Sandor started to cut her ropes, his efforts hindered by a notable shaking of his fingers.

"I'm unharmed," Sansa felt the need to reassure him. "You were here so quickly; he didn't have the chance to do anything."

He nodded jerkily and continue to saw through her bindings as swiftly as his trembling hands allowed and once she was free, she found herself being crushed against him, armour and all, feeling that it wasn't only his hands that trembled.

"I am sorry," he murmured into her hair, over and over again. "I am so sorry. I should've been there, I knew something was up, but..."
She stroked her hands through his hair, kissed his face, and pressed herself closer, despite his armour being cold and uncomfortable against her naked skin. There was no price too high for his closeness, his arms around her.

"It's alright, you came, you saved me," she whispered back, not much more eloquent than he was.

He drew back a little, wiped the thumb of his gauntleted hand across her lips.

"I'll kill him, he won't come after you again."

She nodded and then leaned in for him to kiss her. It wasn't much of a kiss, just a desperate meeting of mouths, hard and brutal and just what both of them needed.

"And I'll get you out of here," he murmured against her lips in between kisses that slowly lost their urgency in favour of some more gentleness. "Out of this house and this twice damned city. We'll marry somewhere on the way, in a small sept and travel on to Clegane Keep. We'll take Betsy and Eric and all we want from the house and we'll make a new life there. I'll kill whoever stands in our way. I promise."

He drew back and his face grew alarmed as he saw the tears that had unbidden come to her eyes.

"If that is what you wish, of course," he said, his voice breaking.

Sniffling, she put a hand on the marred side of his face.

"Nothing would make me happier," she said.

... While she got dressed, Sandor had used the time to tie Littelfinger to the bed just the way Sansa had been before and, once satisfied with the result, threw a pitcher of water in his face.

Baelish came away spluttering and then proceeded to scream for help.

Sandor folded his arms across his chest.

"It's useless," he said. "Your men are all dead."

They both waited patiently while Littlefinger saw fit to test Sandor's statement until his voice broke.

"Why don't just kill me and get it over with?" he demanded, while uselessly tugging at his bindings.

"Just needed to talk to you first," Sansa said. "If for no other reason than to say 'I told you so'."

Baelish sneered.

"You are throwing yourself away on a dog, that's what you do. You could have Winterfell and be the Queen of the North. I would have made you Queen of Westeros, too. I would have given you the world. And you throw that away for what? For love? He doesn't love you. He does believe no more in it than I do. He wants you because you're a good fuck and beautiful besides and you are making the worst mistake of your life."

Sansa stood and looked at herself in a mirror hanging at the wall. She looked a bit the worse for wear after her 'adventure', but still well enough in her beautiful dress.

"A queen, hmm?" she said casually as she walked back. "With you as my king, I presume?"
Baelish opened his mouth to answer her rhetorical question.

"Thanks, but no thanks," she said. "I long for Winterfell, you guessed that correctly, but I would not dishonour my family by getting it back by selling myself to you."

"I would have made you my wife," Baelish spat. "You're Clegane's whore, in case you have forgotten. Your father would turn in his grave if he knew."

"My father," she said tartly, "the man you helped killing, incidentally, promised me a man brave, gentle and strong. I am fortunate to have the love of just such a man."

"You're nothing but his whore, no matter which pretty words you find for it."

Quick as lightning, Sandor was suddenly at the side of the bed, half kneeling on Baelish's chest. Sansa was sure she heard a rib or two cracking as he pressed the tip of a knife against the screaming man's throat.

"Call her whore one more time," he said, low and quiet but so threatening, a shiver ran down Sansa's spine, "and I'll carve you up just the way you did Sibyl."

"Sibyl?" Baelish croaked as Sandor moved away again.

"The wh...," Sandor started but then cleared his throat. "The brothel owner you tortured to death."

Baelish turned his attention to Sansa, bleeding from a cut to his neck, breathing in a shallow way that confirmed Sansa's suspicions about the state of his ribs.

"She sure was loyal," he said, "didn't give up a single thing."

Tears shot to Sansa's eyes and she had to turn away to hide them.

"Because she didn't know," Sandor said menacingly behind her and the next thing she heard was a blood-curling yell from Baelish.

"And while we are conversing so openly right now," Sandor continued as Baelish had stopped screaming, "let me tell you something about love, Littlefinger."

Sansa turned back to find Sandor sitting at Baelish side, tracing the point of his knife over the man's quivering belly. A deep, bright red gash went all the way down Baelish's right arm, blood seeping into the white linen beneath him.

"Not that I am much of an expert at it... love, I mean," Sandor went on. "But when I saw you kneeling between my woman's legs just now, whatever it is I am feeling for her made me want to rip off your cock and shove it down your throat and then disembowel you and have you watch your own guts flop to the floor."

Baelish swallowed visibly, his eyes bulging and for once without a smart comeback.

"You might call it possessiveness and maybe that's part of it, but in the end, I will not do it although I could and I want to - and Gods do I fucking want to - because what I feel for her tells me that the revenge for what you did belongs to her and I will be only the sword that does her bidding."

After a few failed attempts at speaking, Littlefinger at last found his voice again.

"Well, then maybe I was wrong," he said, while unsuccessfully trying to appear bravely contemptuous. "Insanity quite probably is part of the mix as well."
Sandor laughed at that, almost joyfully and without spite.

"You might have a point here; it certainly sometimes feels like it."

Baelish clearly took Sandor's laughter as some sort of peace offering, and eagerly snatched at what he thought might be a chance to talk himself out of his predicament.

Forgetting about her revenge for a moment, Sansa watched the drama unfolding with all the curiosity of an uninvolved spectator.

"Think about what we could achieve together, Baelish wheedled. "We could become a force everyone would fear, with you at my side, no one would stand against us."

Sandor used the tip of his knife to clear some invisible dirt from his gauntlet, looking for all the world as if he was contemplating Baelish's offer.

"What about Sansa?" he asked conversationally.

Gray-green eyes darted nervously from Sansa to Sandor and Baelish slowly licked dry lips.

"We could share her, or maybe you could have her, I do not care."

"You do not care?" Sandor asked, lifting his good eyebrow. "Sounded to me before as if you care very much."

"Probably not even close to as much as you do, now that I think of it," Littlefinger said, trying to chuckle but wincing with pain as he did.

"Hmm, I think I care at least so much that I owe it to her not to accept your offer."

"You are not married to her, you owe her nothing."

Sandor looked at Littlefinger for a moment completely stunned.

Then he turned to her, grinning.

"You are right; he just doesn't even remotely understand."

Sansa almost smiled and then gravely gave a nod, signalling for Sandor to end this. She was eager to be on her way and they had wasted enough time as it was.

Sandor turned back to Baelish and leaned forward.

"Wrong again, Littlefinger," he growled into his face, slowly shoving the point of his dagger into the man's gut. "I owe her everything."

...
Walking Away

Chapter Notes

So, this is it, the end of this story.
A few of you mentioned you will be sad to see it go and truly, so am I. I can barely describe what I am feeling right now.
Most of all, I am incredibly nervous (as always) about posting this, because so many expectation will have to be met and this chapter hasn't undergone my usual editing process where I read things over what feels like a million times, since this was sort of a last minute addition. If anything is wrong, illogical or badly explained, please let me know, I am more than willing to edit this if necessary.

I merged last chapter and epilogue into one, I hope it isn't too jarring at the end.

I cannot adequately express what all your support and enthusiasm for this story has meant to me. It wouldn't be what it was for all the love shown it, for some of the more critical reviews, the questions and the incredible insights. This community has given so much back, it has been more than a pleasure to contribute a little to the content.

I'd be delighted if you'd take the time to share with me what you thought about this story.

Please enjoy.

Chapter 25: Walking Away

Sansa had imagined a headless flight from the city, but as always, things didn't turn out as she imagined.

"I could carry you," Sandor offered as he was opening the door leading out of the room that had been her prison. "So you could close your eyes."

He steadily held her gaze while he was asking, but she saw the hint of fear in his eyes.

"No," she said, shaking her head and preceding him out of the room, steeling herself for whatever she would find outside. He'd killed for her, the least she could do was see with open eyes the carnage he had wrought in his desperate attempt to get to her in time.

"It's not quite as bad as back at the Blackwater," he said, sounding almost apologetic as Sansa fought to remain standing at the sight of all the blood and gore she found downstairs. There had to be at least ten men, staring sightlessly at the chaos around them, one of them even from a severed head.

"Why didn't I hear any of this?" she asked, trying to have her voice sound steadier than she felt.

Sandor shrugged.

"It's the ground floor and you were two stairs up, besides, it didn't take all that long."
After the door shut behind them and they were back on the street, Sansa found herself accosted by Betsy, who was completely dissolved into tears.

"Oh my lady, thank the Seven you are in one piece, we were so very worried about you!"

Sansa returned Betsy's fierce embrace and afterwards nodded to Eric who stood next to her, turning his cap nervously around in his hands.

"We owe your rescue to those two," Sandor said, surprising her. "Betsy kept an eye on me and freed me from where Kettleblack had me tucked away, and Eric tracked Baelish and you to this house."

Sansa's eyes widened.

"How did you... why…," she stuttered, not quite clear what she truly wanted to ask.

"After all we knew, Eric and I," Betsy began, giving Eric a smile that made the boy blush, "was that you were literally walking into the lion's den, you and His Lordship."

Eric nodded gravely.

"We figured it best if we kept our eyes peeled for anything unusual going on and sure enough, lots of strange things happened."

"Eric, I...," Sansa began but the boy just waved away what she had been trying to say.

"Don't underestimate your own part in it, my lady," he said. "You made such a fuss when they took you, it wasn't at all hard to find you."

Again Sansa opened her mouth to thank those two, when both Eric's and Betsy's eyes widened and the clatter of many hooves could be heard behind them.

Sandor and her both turned to meet the sight of a whole group of Gold Cloaks, at least twenty men, armed to the teeth, led – surprisingly – by Loras Tyrell.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sansa saw how Eric unobtrusively took Betsy's hand and they both sort of melted into the background.

Next to her, Sandor tried to shove her behind himself, his body tensing into what she thought was battle readiness.

"Lord Clegane, Lady Sansa," Loras said, nodding politely, "we're here to arrest the man responsible for the murder of King Joffrey."

Then why are you still free? Sansa wondered sardonically.

"We've reason to believe Petyr Baelish planned and executed this foul deed. Have you by any chance seen him?"

Sansa thought of the bleeding body lying in the upstairs bedroom, not without a certain grim satisfaction.

"In a manner of speaking," Sandor said before she could and she had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep herself from laughing as satisfaction suddenly turned to inappropriate hilarity.

"Meaning?" Loras asked, patience noticeably waning.
"He's dead."

Unsurprised, or at least striving to appear so, Loras nodded.

"In this case, I'd like for both you and Lady Sansa to accompany me to Maegor's holdfast, the small council wishes to speak with you."

Although spoken like a request, Sansa knew there was no option to politely decline what Loras was asking.

The corner of Sandor's mouth twitched as he contemplated his answer for a moment.

"Aye," he finally said. "We'll come with you."

...

Sandor wondered for a short moment if Sansa would at one point start to complain about the death grip he had on her hand while they were making their way from the stables to Maegor's. He had not even started to get over the blood-freezing terror of knowing Sansa in Baelish's clutches and his stomach had not yet settled from the sight of Baelish kneeling between her legs, ready to stick his prick into her.

After the Blackwater, he had fervently hoped to never again fall prey to the rage that had made him mindlessly butcher all those men, but when it came over him as he had frantically looked for her, he had welcomed it, revelled in the power of cutting his way through to his woman, no matter who stood in his path.

But in spite of how powerful it had made him feel, even now when the rage had ebbed, he was not physically able to let go of her hand, let alone let her out of his sight. It was doubtful he ever would be.

She had been snatched from under his nose this one time, it would never happen again, no matter who did the trying.

Another thought that still whipped him, now even more intensely as they were on their way to whatever it was that awaited them, was that he had been an idiot for staying with Sansa in King's Landing. He should've taken her and gone somewhere out of the Lannister's reach. Fuck his money, his title and his lands, none of this was worth her life.

He thought of protesting when two Tyrell men insisted on having him hand over his sword before he entered the small council's chamber, but decided against it. Any threat in there was probably a battle fought with words and lies rather than steel.

As they stepped through the door and looked around, the only council members in attendance were a dazed looking Pycelle and Mace Tyrell, but the room was full nonetheless.

To the side, perching on a high chair like a shrivelled old crow, sat Olenna Tyrell, smiling benevolently at them as Loras walked towards her, kissed her cheek and positioned himself next to his grandmother.

On a chair by the window, biting her lip and folding the material of her dress nervously in her hands, sat the Queen, looking out of the window as if completely bored by the proceedings. Behind her, Lady Alerie stood like a protective mother hen. Ser Garlan and his wife Leonette quietly conversed in one remote corner of the room.
The only one missing was Willas to have the whole family complete.

"Lady Sansa," Olenna Tyrell said with enthusiasm as she saw Sansa, "so good to see you in one piece, we were rather worried about you."

"Where's Cersei and Kevan Lannister?" Sandor asked rudely, interrupting the old woman's false concerns, before Sansa could even come up with an answer.

"The King's mother," Lady Olenna said, turning to him with a look of displeasure, "has withdrawn to her chambers, overcome with grief."

Sandor almost snorted. Yes, of course. Overcome with grief. That just about sounded like the Cersei he knew.

"And Ser Kevan rests in his chambers, recuperating from an unfortunate injury he sustained during the search for King Joffrey's killer."

In the windows seat, Margery twitched slightly.

"My grandson has given me to understand that we have you to thank for ridding the kingdom of the dangerous and unscrupulous killer who is responsible for the murder of our beloved king."

A shudder went through Sandor as he understood in a flash what they had stumbled into.

Crafty and cunning, the Tyrells had outsmarted even Littlefinger and staged a coup d'etat against the Lannisters that effectively gave them control over the Gold Cloaks, the city and the king – a young boy now effectively without family. They had sequestered the both remaining adults away under somewhat credible pretexts and Sandor would take a bet that Jaime Lannister would have a hard time returning to King's Landing should he try, what with the whole Highgarden army stationed beyond the city's walls.

While having hatched that plan with Baelish's help, they had found an even smarter way to rid themselves of their erstwhile ally – who they probably assumed rightly would have become a nuisance later on – without breaking their word to Baelish and with a minimum amount of spilled blood.

And most of the spilling had been done by him.

If it wasn't so vexing to realize how he had been used, he'd laugh out loud.

'Growing Strong', indeed.

"So you knew Sandor would go after me, whatever it took?" Sansa asked, apparently having come to the same conclusion and non-too happy about it either.

"Cersei had given some vague clues when in her cups and we had counted on the fact that no dog lets go of its bone without a fight," Lady Olenna said. Her self-satisfied smile turned warmer when she added. "Your appearance at court today only cemented our belief in that regard."

Sandor was sure he could hear how Sansa ground her teeth.

Of course he'd known they were taking a risk to appear in public like that. Hells, surely even Sansa had known. But there had been this thrill, this giddy desire to show everyone, to shout their happiness from the rooftops. The almost childish wish to stick their tongues out at everyone and prove to them they were not pawns to play with but made their own decisions. Only to become
pawns once again.

If he would learn one thing from all this, it was that people like Sansa and him weren't meant to meddle in the dealings of those hungry for power. They might be able to see the lies around them, but they could not lie themselves. It wasn't their game and it wasn't their purpose. He had of yet no clear idea what it would be, but he was sure whatever it was, it wouldn't be here in this city.

Despite seeing their own failings in this affair, he was as livid as Sansa was, not only about being used this way, not only about the demeaning way he was addressed – something he'd been impervious to before – but about the reckless risk they had taken with Sansa's life and health by using her as bait.

"How was that supposed to work out with me tied up by Kettleblack, under your grandson's watchful eye?" he asked, for now trying to not let his fury show.

"I was about to free you when I noticed that you had already gone," Loras explained, "I am rather curious how you managed. I imagine Kettleblack would have been more thorough in binding you."

Another shudder went through Sandor at the thought that it would have been way too late by the time Loras would have deigned to come set him free. Surely they had waited until Joffrey was well and truly dead before thinking of releasing him. His sword hand started to itch and the compulsion to just express his ire verbally was almost too much to resist.

Not about to give away Betsy's part in all this, Sandor sneered.

"Never a good idea to underestimate me," he growled.

Loras averted his eyes under his baleful stare.

"I know," the whelp said, "I...," he gulped and turned a rather sickly shade of green, "I saw".

Lady Olenna impatiently waved her hand.

"Enough of that," she said. "We've more important things to discuss."

As if exactly that had been his clue, Willas Tyrell stepped through a side door.

Sansa's hand turned cold in his grip, while his rage slowly simmered up to the boiling point, his vision growing red around the edges. If they meant to take Sansa away from him, they'd learn to their regret how much damage he could do, even without a sword.

He barely noticed the gentle squeeze Sansa gave his hand, but turned to her when finally he realized she was seeking his attention.

In her deadly white face, her eyes shone like glittering sapphires, determined and brave. He gave her a small nod, signalling her he would let her fight this particular battle.

For now.

"You intimated the possibility of being pregnant before, as my son reported to me," Lady Olenna continued. "You should be sure now, so, Lady Sansa, are you pregnant?"

Not taking his eyes off her, Sandor saw a secretive smile play around Sansa's lips. A smile so telling the bottom fell out of his stomach.

"It is too soon to tell, my lady," Sansa said.
Her hand suddenly became his anchor, the only thing keeping him from having his knees give way under the sudden wave of emotional upheaval. Now of all times, he suddenly understood why it had felt different when he had taken her after his absence. He knew she had used something to prevent getting pregnant before, had felt the spongy thing that barred the way to her womb. She had not used it after he came back. It's only been three days since then, but as he looked at her, at the unearthly radiance surrounding her, he knew without a doubt.

The red haze inside him vanished, replaced by a fierce determination, a protectiveness that knew no obstacles and no fear, because right now, the stakes had been raised even more. If he had wondered about a purpose before, he had found it now.

"Using the same tried and true trick as before, Lady Sansa?" the old woman asked, the corners of her mouth twitching.

"It's not a trick, it's the truth, which may be a complicated concept for you," Sansa gave back, raising her chin a little. "And I can further assure you, my lady, that I will not meekly accept any other man as my husband than the one standing next to me. I will not be forced into a marriage against my inclination, whether I am already pregnant or not."

Lady Olenna opened her mouth, but was cut off when her eldest grandson spoke, softly and with a sad smile on his face.

"I'll not be the one forcing you, my lady," he said. "I might be a cripple, but I have my pride, too. I won't take a lady to wife whose heart so clearly lies elsewhere."

Ignoring the sour look shot at him from his grandmother, Willas bowed to Sansa and left, the uneven thumping of his cane and his laborious gait for a while the only sound in the room.

"Lord Clegane," Mace Tyrell addressed himself to Sandor after he was done gaping at the door through which his heir had made his exit, "Are you aware of the fact that marriage to Sansa Stark will make you ruler of Winterfell through your son?"

Again, Sandor took a look over at Sansa, who smiled at him encouragingly.

A battle fought with words, as he had thought and his woman trusted him to wield them just as efficiently as he did his sword. He could only hope he deserved her trust.

"Marriage to Sansa Stark," he began, striving to keep his voice calm and steady, "will first and foremost make me a very blessed and happy man."

Both Lady Alerie and Lady Olenna rolled their eyes, but Lady Leonette gave him a smile that was as delighted as it was genuine.

"And my son..." he trailed off and cleared his throat from whatever was suddenly blocking it. "My son will be loyal to his sovereign... as will be his father."

His announcement was greeted with a resounding silence. He stole a glance at Sansa who beamed at him, a smile so bright he couldn't help but smile back.

"I guess it's settled then," Ser Garland finally broke the silence. "Lord Clegane will not be member of the newly formed Kingsguard for King Tommen and is free to marry Lady Sansa and return to his holdings."

Mace Tyrell drew himself up straight, nodded and said, "Very well, you may leave."
His mother looked sourly as if there was much more she might have wanted to say, but Sandor didn’t need to be told twice.

He tugged at Sansa's hand, but Sansa stood her ground, her eyes on Margery, who finally turned her head as if she had felt Sansa’s gaze.

"I can understand wanting to take revenge for wrong done to you," Sansa said calmly and clearly and not without compassion. "But the healing of your soul cannot come from a dead man, but only ever from someone who is still living. Baelish's death did not free me and neither did Joffrey's," she continued and then put her hand over her heart, "in here, I already had been free when they died."

One thing Sandor would remember even long years after this had happened, were the tears that rolled down the young queen's cheeks when Sansa was done talking.

...

The sun was setting as they rode through the streets of King's Landing, not talking and not needing to, just quietly enjoying the fact that they didn't need to hide, that it didn't matter anymore who saw them together.

Sansa snuggled a bit closer into his warmth and smilingly remembered a similar situation when she had woken up like this, wondering where he would take her.

She knew her destination now and was almost giddy with joy at returning home with him, celebrating their newfound freedom and the vast future that lay open before them like a rolling landscape of sunshine, green hills and joyful laughter.

...

On returning home, to both their dismay, they found the house in chaos.

Betsy and Eric were both busy packing what looked like every moveable object in the house.

"We're almost done, my lady," Betsy reported proudly. "Eric hired a wagon with a team of two horses and one horse for you to ride. We can be on our way at first morning light, if that's your wish. I left a couple of things back here in case you have to come back to the city again sometime."

Sansa shuddered at the thought that this would be necessary sometime in the future, but gave Betsy an approving nod for her foresight, while still battling her disappointment that the evening would progress quite differently from how she had hoped it would.

Naturally, she couldn't fault Betsy. In hindsight, it had been a brilliant idea to already pack up to be ready to go. They had meant to be on their way tomorrow, but had both not paid any mind to how to move their household and what to take with them.

Betsy and Eric were a blessing for them in more ways than one.

"The bed?" she asked, praying Betsy hadn't gotten around to that yet.

Her maid gave her a wink and a saucy smile.

"I figured there'd be enough time to pack the good featherbed and mattresses tomorrow."

Sansa tried to sigh her relief not too loudly.

"However," Betsy went on, "I've ordered a few comfortable blankets and pelts for the bed so there
will be something to sleep on in case you come back. I talked to the woman who kept the house before, she agreed to do so again."

"Very well done," Sandor said next to her. "But I have another favour to ask of you two… in a minute."

Eric and Betsy looked at Sandor expectantly, just as Sansa did.

With all the grace of a mighty tree falling to the earth, Sandor sank down on one knee in front of her and hesitantly took her hand.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sansa saw Betsy stifle a gasp and putting her hand over her mouth.

"Sansa Stark," Sandor began. "Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife… right now? There is a sept not three streets from here. Betsy and Eric can be our witnesses. I do not want to risk giving the Tyrells time to change their minds. Besides…," he squeezed her hand and looked at her as if willing her to understand what he wasn't saying, "I can't imagine being without you, Sansa. Ever. Please, say yes."

She smiled at him, tears blurring her sight.

"Yes," she said, "Yes, of course. It cannot be soon enough."

He clambered to his feet at this and crushed her into a tight embrace, his mouth slanting over hers in a breath-taking kiss, right there in front of their soon-to-be witnesses.

Yes, her soul jubilated as she melted into his embrace. Yes to becoming his wife, yes to be the mother of his children. Yes to passionate lovemaking and spending as many waking – and sleeping – moments with each other as was possible. Yes to his possessiveness and his gentle way of treating her, yes to slate-grey eyes so full of emotions he would not always give words to, but which were apparent in all his actions. Yes to his strength and his fierceness. Yes to being lord and lady of Clegane Keep, to ruling the estate together as wisely and just as she had learned from her parents. Yes to face and overcome hardships and strife and yes to growing old together.

Yes to becoming Sansa Clegane.

…

The septon was a bit disgruntled at having to perform a wedding so late in the evening, but went about it mostly dignified if a bit hurriedly. Not that they had any objections.

The impatient clearing of his throat interrupted the kiss Sandor gave her after they had been declared husband and wife, and he all but tapped his foot when Betsy and Eric enthusiastically congratulated them on their nuptials.

They were about to leave, Sansa with a heavy cloak of yellow and black around her shoulder that Sandor had produced from somewhere much to her astonishment, when Eric spoke up.

"My lord, my lady," he said, kneading his cap in his hand as always when he was nervous, "If you do not mind, Betsy and I would like to… do as you just did."

Sansa was sure both her and Sandor wore identically expression of floored surprise, but it was Sandor who recovered first with a hearty laugh.

"Here we are, so occupied with ourselves, we didn't even notice!"
He gave Eric a hearty slap on the back, a wide smile to Betsy and a demanding stare to the septon who had been trying to slink away unnoticed.

"Looks like you'll have to do a second wedding tonight."

The septon sighed but wisely decided to resign himself to his fate.

To his credit, he held the ceremony just as he had done for Sansa and Sandor, not shortening it as was usual for lowborn folk.

Eric wrapped a cloak around Betsy's shoulders that looked as if it had been made for her in the first place, which seemed incredibly practical, seeing as the one Sandor had given her – while beautifully made – was way too long for Sansa to wear.

…

Sandor had insisted on them having a late dinner at some nice inn he knew and they dined together, making it a very unusual but nonetheless joyous wedding feast that didn't lack in laughter and good entertainment. A few travelling musicians unpacked their instruments around midnight and played some catchy tunes and after a few glasses of wine, even Sandor could be prevailed upon to take her to the dance floor.

When they agreed it was time to end the evening, seeing as they still planned on leaving early the next morning, Sandor approached Eric and put a heavy looking purse into his hand.

"We owe the two of you more than I can ever repay," he said earnestly. "I'll pay for a room upstairs for you for your wedding night and this is something you can use to start a new life together… if you wish. But Sansa and I… we would be more than glad to have both of you on our side for long years to come."

Tears stood in Betsy's eyes – just as they did in Sansa's – as they thanked them for their present, expressing in no uncertain terms that they would never have thought of parting company with them.

…

The house lay eerily dark and quiet as they stepped into it.

No clatter from pots and pans coming from the kitchen, no merrily crackling fire in the sitting room's hearth.

They did their best not to stumble over all the bundles and crates littering the sitting room, but came to a stop almost simultaneously at the bottom of the stairs.

"I'll like to wash first," Sansa said, hoping he would understand. "I need to get… a few things off my skin."

The day had been so eventful, in both good and bad ways, she couldn't believe it had been only one. Still, the thought of going to bed with Sandor the first time as a married couple while Baelish's touch still lingered on her skin was abhorrent to her.

She felt more than she saw how he nodded.

"So do I," he said, reminding her that he, too, might have done and experienced things today he'd rather wash off himself.
They lighted a fire in the kitchen and warmed a generous amount of water Sandor brought from the well.

Then, unhurriedly and with great care, they undressed each other, piece by piece peeling away blood-smeared pieces of armour, torn clothing and sweat soaked undergarments until they were both bare in the flickering orange light of the hearth's fire. They had lighted no candles and the half-darkness together with the quiet of the night around them gave the impression they were the only two people left in the world, cradled in a shell of warm intimacy, a timeless moment that belonged only to them.

Sandor gently took her arm and lifted her wrist to his mouth, kissing the marks Baelish's ropes had left on her skin and then took a cloth, dipped in in water and drew it over her arm, making a caress out of this mundane action.

She held his eyes as he washed her. They appeared completely lightless and dark in this light, only lighted now and again by the reflection of fire. But his gaze on her was as much as a caress as the movements of the cloth on her body and at least as cleansing.

He dipped the cloth again into the warmed water before he ran it around and over her breasts, the fabric of the soft cloth weirdly abrasive on her erect nipples, sending a shiver of pleasure down her spine.

Before he could move his ministrations below her waist, she took the cloth from him.

"Your turn," she said, her voice low with simmering desire.

At first, he stood unmoving as she ran the wet cloth over his hands, arms and the wide expanse of his shoulders and obediently turned as she bade him to. When she washed his chest, he dipped his head and put a hand over the small of her back, drawing her to him until her breasts touched his wet skin.

She couldn't help the quiet moan escaping her, momentarily forgetting her purpose entirely when he ghosted the most delicious of small kisses around the shell of her ear and down her neck.

Proof of his desire lay hot and hard against her belly, insistent and urgent, provoking in herself much the same urgency and readiness. But his kisses remained light and unhurried and he let her out of his arms without complaint as she turned to dip the cloth once more into the clear warm water.

He drew a hissing breath through clenched teeth when she ran the cloth over his cock and then his balls.

"Careful," he murmured breathlessly against her neck, "I've other plans for tonight."

She sank to her knees in front of him, ostensibly with the purpose of tending to his legs and feet, but couldn't resist placing a few open mouthed kisses on his erection.

"What plans?" she whispered, breathless with anticipation.

He groaned loudly and then knelt down, too, taking the cloth out of her hands and drawing her into a scorching kiss.

"I mean to make my wife enjoy her wedding night like no woman before her," he said between kisses, his words laced with both determination and a hint of insecurity. "I mean to give us both a memory we won't forget."

Then he ran the cloth of her thighs, first outside then along the sensitive skin on the inside. Then he
suddenly pressed it against the place between her legs, eliciting a loud moan at the sensation.

His mouth, open and hot on the skin on her neck, wandered to her ear where he gently took her earlobe between his teeth and then whispered in her ear.

"I mean to make you scream my name so loudly they'll hear it all the way up to Maegor's," he whispered and together with what his hand was doing down there, the words alone were almost her undoing.

…

As it happened, she did scream his name when he very thoroughly washed her woman's place and then again after he had chivalrously carried her upstairs and fell on her like a starving man on a plate of food.

She said his name an innumerable amount of times in the years to come. Moaned and screamed it in the throes of passion, said it with joyful happiness when she told him how much she loved him, a feeling only ever growing stronger over the years, and with glowing pride every time a new family member announced its arrival.

His name was said it with slight irritation when he vexed her with one thing or another. He kept teasing her about cursing his name when in incredible pain while giving birth to his children, but that she could never remember.

She said his name in awe as she pointed to the sky where dragons flew overhead, heralding a visit from their new queen who turned out surprisingly lenient with Sandor. They were only expected to swear allegiance to her and then allowed to continue living as they had, which was more than the Tyrells could say about themselves.

His name was a shout when she ran looking for him as she held a message in her hand that told her that her youngest brother had been found alive. A message that was followed by a year-long stay at Winterfell, where they helped Rickon to be established as the Stark in Winterfell, carefully watched over and advised by Tyrion Lannister of all people, who had returned from Essos with Queen Daenerys.

…

As the Stranger led him away from her, Sandor's name was a choked, tear-saturated whisper.

It was the last word on her lips as she followed him five years later, rasped in a voice brittle with old age, but full of hope. She smiled into the sunshine, content with a life well-lived, the laughter of her great-grandchildren playing in the yard the last sound she heard as she closed her eyes for the final time.

THE END

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