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The House of Green & Black

by [smaragaide](#)

Summary

Lady Sansa Stark is the orphaned last offspring of the late Duke and Duchess of Winterfell. Her family executed for inciting a revolution against the new, young King, she was allowed to live when she recanted but failed to convince her family to follow suit. Sent to live with her aunt, the Duchess of the Vale, she fell into despair for now she was a social pariah. Stripped of title, inheritance, lands and considered unmarriageable as the daughter of a traitor. Dancing with a dark stranger at a ball for the Duchess's son, she was cast out to live with her drunken and gambling uncle in Riverrun.

One night, her uncle in a desperate attempt to win back his estate from gambling, bets and loses his niece to two unsavory men of the local gentry. That is, until an unlikely savior appears in the form of the new (and very wealthy) Marquess of Harrenhal, notorious for his swift rise into the aristocracy by means of smuggling, gambling and becoming the top financial advisor to the Royal Family.

Fantasy/Romance AU using the 18th Century Georgian/Regency period. Suspense/Fantasy with Celtic/Gaelic folklore and supernatural elements.

Overture

So, this little plot bunny popped into my head a few days ago and what I thought might be just a little drabble is now starting to form into a full fledged story. I don't have the story completely mapped out like Underworld and not entirely sure where it's going to go or how it will end... but I said that too with Return to Winterfell and that one didn't turn out too bad **shrugs**

I've never written anything that is Regency/Georgian before and I'm going to be fairly liberal with the time period. This is still going to be fantasy in Westeros and NOT Great Britain, even though it will have the historical backdrop for the lifestyle, fashion, etiquette, etc. I'm trying to interject a little Celtic/Gaelic love in here since I'm Irish. LOL

For those of you looking for more of an angst love story, I think this will be right up your alley. It will not have the heavy dark undertones of my last fic but it certainly isn't going to be rainbows and sunshine either. I'm going to try and keep it as close in context as I can but I'm not an expert on the period so don't kill me if I mess up here and there. As always, feedback is welcome and highly appreciated. This is new territory for me once again and I'm a bit nervous writing more historical periods.

I should have the first chapter up shortly.

A Winning Hand

Chapter Notes

Okay... here's the start of it all.... we'll see where it goes.

Lightning and thunder boomed as loud as the fire from rifles and shook the young girl from troubled sleep. The thunderstorm had kept her awake most of the night as it roared and rumbled across the county. Sansa never cared for The Riverlands, as the locals called it. She longed for home or even that of The Eyrie. Her aunt, the Duchess of the Vale, was a cold and fearsome woman but at least there were fine suppers, balls, gardens and the city where one could bide their time. Here, in the house of her Uncle Edmure, Earl of Riverrun, there was only housework to welcome her every day. Fitting, after a year of solitude here, she thought bitterly. The King allowed her to retain the address of Lady and nothing more. For here, in the Riverlands, in the home of the last family that was willing to take in the daughter of a traitor, did she feel nothing like a lady of a once great house. Sansa was no longer a Marchioness, daughter of the late Duke of Winterfell but now a glorified housekeeper to her drunken, gambling uncle. She was only Lady Sansa in name but treated as the lowest of the peerage as far as the ton was concerned. A lady with no title, lands or prospects, she was considered even at the age of two and twenty, to be permanently *on the shelf*.

A sharp clap of thunder and bright lightning lit up her cold room. This old manor was drafty and in need of repair. Her uncle forbade her in his study but she knew he was in debt from the gaming hells he frequented. As months passed by slowly, she found less and less money was available to pay for the simple things. Farms were not as prosperous, he said grimly. The rivers were overflowing their beds this season from the heavy rains that never seemed to give much time to the sun. Some of the household had left a few months back and Sansa began picking up more duties as if she were the lady of the house and the housekeeper in one.

The prior day had been long and hard. Once again, her uncle Edmure was passed out from heavy drinking after trudging home from a local pub. He had bet his best horse and lost. Sansa was furious at the man for that gentle horse was the only thing she actually cared for in this dreary place. At the young age of twenty, she had more sense and financial mind than that of a man almost twice her years. She was tempted to walk out the door and never return only to realize, just as she had during her time at the Eyrie, she had nothing and nowhere to go. She would starve, work hard labor or worse, end up in a pub or brothel in order to put food in her mouth and a dry place to sleep. No one in these counties would take in a traitor to the King no matter how horrible a king he seemed to be. There were no loyalties to her father here and with the growing discontent with the Tully family, Sansa found no sympathy as the daughter of the Earl's late sister.

She had retreated to her room as she did every night to cry herself to sleep. Only this night, the storm brewing gave her no peace. Local men of the gentry dined with them earlier in the evening and Sansa knew she would find her uncle drunk and broke again from playing five card loo. If this kept going, the manor would be empty save Sansa and her uncle. Sooner or later they would call in his debts and they would be penniless. Sansa's father had always reprimanded smaller lords in the north for gambling away their inheritances. Her parents were cautious in the suitors calling on their eldest daughter not wanting her to fall to a frivolous husband.

Another thunderous roar echoed through her room when the door to her chambers opened and a softy light from the candle came closer to her bed.

"My lady, you must wake," the kindly voice told her. "My Lord has asked me to fetch you downstairs."

Sansa wanted to smother herself with the pillow.

Dear God, what has he done now?

She swung her legs out of the warm but scratchy linens of her bed. Long gone was the finery she was used to for so many years. The rug was tattered and old and didn't keep the cold from her feet. Slipping on her worn dressing gown and a pair of shoes she only used for inside the house, Sansa followed the old woman out the door.

Pulling out her father's gold watch, the only thing she had left from him, the time told her it was just past midnight.

"How long have they been at it?" she asked with bitterness.

The old woman, that served as housekeeper, cook and maid shook her head dismally. "Since you turned in, my lady." The woman, Mrs. Cole, was the only one that ever addressed her as Lady now. There was a pity in the woman's eyes whenever she looked at Sansa and she was the only one that was remotely kind to her. She had nursed her mother and always remarked at how Sansa was a true mirror image of her at the same age.

Sansa sighed when she came to the landing and could see the men playing cards down below. It was an old manor that had been in the family for generations and felt as though nothing has been done with the place in just as long. Grandfather Tully, was an old-fashioned man from what her mother told her and just like her mother, Sansa didn't like this place any more than she did.

"Ah, is that the girl, Tully?" a laughing voice rose from the table below.

The other man turned his head up gazing at Sansa as well and fear began to well up inside her.

"My dear..." her uncle Edmure drawled drunkenly. "Come down here if you please."

Sansa's feet rooted to the spot even as Mrs. Cole began to descend the stairs with the candle.

"It's late, my Lord Uncle," she began formally. "I am not dressed properly to meet your guests."

"Oh, she is quite the proper lady, isn't she?" one of the men snickered and it made her shiver.

"Come here. I will not ask again," her uncle commanded.

Sansa slowly came down the stairs and felt the men's eyes on her the entire time. It was clear all the men had been deep in their cups but for her uncle to demand she greet strangers in nothing more than a dressing gown was unnerving.

"She is lovely, I must say," the older man sneered as he looked her up and down as if she were a prize racing horse. "Is she intact?"

Edmure spluttered with indignity to Sansa's horror. "Of course she is! A well-bred lady of my dearly departed sister..."

"A traitor's daughter is no lady, my Lord," the stout man goaded. "But even a pretty one is worth something."

Sansa's hands trembled and grasped the chair near the table to steady herself and held her chin high. She was used to insults and leers by men but something seemed amiss at the way these men were talking.

"What is the meaning of all this, uncle?" she demanded quietly.

"Oh ho! Quite the little high-minded Duchess, isn't she? We'll have to break her of that," the elderly man frowned. "Speak to me like that, girl, and you'll be begging on the streets or I'll sell you to the brothel. They know how to treat a lady in Cheapside."

The threat chilled her to the bone and she was about to demand her uncle to throw the men out for their disgusting behavior. Edmure Tully was Earl in this county and yet these men acted as if they owned him.

Just as the thought entered her mind, Sansa couldn't breathe.

Dear God, what has he done now?

That's what she had wondered in her bed only minutes before and now she was sick at the dreadful answer.

Hoping against all hope, she pleaded with the drunken man sitting at the table with a look a shame about him. "My Lord, shall I have... your friends... escorted out? You need your rest. You're not well..."

The two men laughed heartily at her frightened words and she unconsciously pulled her dressing gown tighter around her body.

"Oh, he's not well at all, girl," the stout man chortled as he came face to face with her.

His breath was rancid and he smelt as if he had not bathed in weeks.

"Shall I tell her or are you too drunk and cowardly, Tully?" he taunted. Not waiting for her uncle's reply, he added with a grin, "He's lost it all, dear girl. Bet everything, he did..."

His dirty finger drew a line up her arm making Sansa's stomach turn.

"You included," the elderly man smirked.

The stout man's eyes glazed a bit and stared at her in a way that made her feel naked. He grabbed her upper arm making her scream out.

"Uncle!" she pleaded.

Edmure didn't even have the decency to look at her and Sansa's fears were confirmed. Damn him! He bet his family's long held lands and her to two men that were no better than pigs. She pulled out of the man's grasp and moved to stand behind Mrs. Cole.

The taller, elderly man moved swiftly for his age and the old woman pushed the young girl further behind her plump frame.

"Now gentlemen, you'll be leavin' this young lass alone," she warned with the candle trembling in her hand.

"And you'll stay out of our business old woman if you know what is good for you," he snarled. "That girl and this house belong to me now. If you wish to keep your position, I suggest you move aside. Otherwise, you'll be out in the rain tonight."

To Sansa's and the men's surprise, the old woman didn't move an inch. "I will not sir. I have raised two generations of this family's ladies and I refuse to let you have one hand on this one."

Suddenly, the opening and closing of a door had a footman rushing into the room. The storm was heavy outside as it beat against the old stained glass windows. He whispered to her uncle leaning his head down on the table. Before another word was spoken, a man dressed in a black cloak entered the room unannounced removing his hat. He was soaked through but acted as if it were a mere annoyance.

"Edmure, my apologies for the late arrival. The River Road from Lannisport was nothing short of boulders covered with mud. I'm surprised my carriage wheels didn't break in this wretched weather," the man uttered removing his damp cloak holding it out to the nervous footman as the others in the room went unnoticed. "I think a warm brandy will be just the thing to take out the

chill.”

All too quickly the room fell silent as the stranger finally took in his surroundings. His eyes glanced from the drunken earl to the two men and then old woman protecting the young girl. He wasn't a tall man or broad of shoulder but he possessed a menacing appearance all the same. The dark haired gentleman was dressed in elegant fashion and his piercing eyes reminded her of a man she met once over a year ago.

“I see I have missed dinner,” the man smiled but it didn't reach his eyes Sansa observed. Pulling out his pocket watch of gleaming gold, he took a moment to look at the time but Sansa felt the man already knew the lateness of the hour and was using it as a distraction.

“My, it is late,” he murmured glancing up and smiled in her direction. This smile had a hint of duplicity she noted as he glided across the room toward the two women. He bowed gracefully and grinned at the old woman in front of her. “Mrs. Cole. It has been far too many years. I regret that most terribly. You are more beautiful than ever.”

His voice was familiar as was his devious smile. He kissed the old woman's hand and she gently swatted him. “Petyr,” she shushed him playfully, “Act like the high lord you are.”

The dark man's eyes flitted to Sansa hiding behind her matronly protector. She could see a dusting of grey at his temples contrasting the pitch-black colour of his hair. Fine lines on his face as he smiled gave Sansa the assumption that he was around the same age as her uncle despite the hint of grey. There was something increasingly familiar about this gentleman and Sansa racked her brain to place him.

“And you are, sir?” the portly man asked in slight aggression.

The stranger looked to her uncle for a proper introduction but it never came as he drunkenly lowered his head further to the table.

“Thank you, Edmure. Your courtesy and etiquette is still in top form, I see,” he chided lightly. “Nothing has changed in all these years.”

Mrs. Cole surprised Sansa and took a step forward answering the insolent man.

“You are addressing His Most Honourable Lord Petyr Baelish, the Marquess of Harrenhal,” she reprimanded the men harshly. Mrs. Cole spoke as if she were a proud mother making Sansa wonder what relationship she had with this lord. He clearly knew her and her uncle well by his manners.

“*And* member of the Privy Council as well as special advisor to the King. I'm sure I could drudge up some other pointless titles to dazzle you with but I think Lord Baelish will do for now,” the man jested with ease however frosted with just enough ice that dared the men to test him.

The men glanced at each other with a hint of nervousness. “Beg your pardon, my Lord...” the stout man offered before her uncle scoffed into his ale.

Lord Baelish adjusted his cravat and sat down next to the drunk Tully taking in the scene before him. The table was littered with cards from the last hand played and the congenial new lord smiled.

“It seems I have missed a rather entertaining game of loo. I've never been fond of piquet, I must say... too much arithmetic and quite pedantic in nature. Looks as though you've put yourself in a spot of trouble, Ed,” he teased picking up the man's cards and grimaced. “God man, you should quit hours ago.”

The dark-haired marquess gestured to the two men to sit down across the table as he poured himself a pint of ale.

“So, gentlemen, how much does my Lord Tully owe you this fine evening?” he began pulling out his purse.

“*Riverrun*,” the old man replied and hesitated for a moment, “and the girl there.”

Lord Baelish raised his eyebrows in surprise and turned around in his chair to look at the women behind him.

“Oh Edmure. How I would love to see your father's face right at this moment,” Baelish chuckled darkly. “I'm afraid I never carry that much gold with me when travelling, gentlemen. Highwaymen are so numerous these days.”

Sansa watched nervously as the man drank his ale with such patience. He had not objected to the loss of the family estate and certainly didn't seem to be bothered by the idea of a lady being sold like livestock.

Baelish set down his ale and glanced between the two men.

“Well, it appears you will need a witness of authority to transfer the estate to you legally,” the mysterious guest presented kindly to everyone's shock.

The two men looked at each other in astonishment before the lord added, “However, I cannot let you have the lady.”

The stoutly man objected first.

“My Lord, it was a fair wager with Lord Tully. The estate was won and then he bet the girl in order to win back his lands...” the man blubbered.

Baelish held up his hand and didn't care to hear more.

“Be as it may. I will not give you the lady,” he added with a tone of finality.

“Then we shall take this to the magistrate, my Lord. You are, as you say, Marquess of Harrenhal

but that does not give you authority over the Riverlands.”

The Marquess sighed with annoyance as Sansa took short breaths awaiting her fate. She was entirely in the hands of this man it seemed and not once did he utter a word of defense in her honour.

“In this downpour, you’re expecting to drag me all the way to Fairmarket to settle such a trivial dispute with the local magistrate?” Baelish huffed leaning back into his chair.

Trivial? Her life was trivial and a boring dispute? Sansa wanted to smack the man and felt the hard grip of Mrs. Cole upon her arm. She must have worn her emotions on her sleeve as the old woman sensed her anger.

“I could send post to the King giving me direct authority but that would require me to stay here longer than I intended. And I *intend* to leave by morning,” the man added, his tone clipped with ice. As quickly as it came, the tone disappeared and the lord was smiling in a way that filled Sansa with trepidation.

“However, to save us all some time and frustration, I do believe I have a solution to our little predicament. You are betting men...” he grinned as he picked up the discarded cards and remaining deck from the table and began to shuffle them.

“Your reputation precedes you, my lord,” the elderly man protested but didn’t embellish further to help Sansa understand the man before her. Was he really attempting to gamble her life away just as her uncle did? She didn’t know him other than by title but yet being a high lord gave him authority over that of any woman that wasn’t a Duchess or of royal title.

“Then you know I gamble high stakes, sir,” he smiled dealing a strange set that Sansa wasn’t familiar with. “You’ve managed to swindle an inebriated lord’s inheritance from him, now try a sober and far wealthier one. Let’s see what tricks you have left for me. What have you to lose but a Northern girl and this run down manor?”

The elderly man hesitated but the stout fellow had greed written all over his face as he sat down. “What is it that you offer, my Lord, in wager?”

“Harrenhal,” Baelish replied without a care in the world and the men looked like fish with their mouths hanging open in shock.

“You would bet your estate for that of this girl?” the man asked in disbelief.

“What does it matter? I’ve gambled, lost and won much larger sums than you could imagine,” the lord grinned wickedly with knowing. “This could be your very, lucky night, gentlemen. By morning, you could be the proud owners of one of the largest estates in Westeros. Now, I’m not much in the mood for five-card loo, but I’ve been learning this little game of *Vingt-et-un* whilst I was in Paris. Very simple and I’m far too exhausted to pay attention to Piquet...”

“We’re not that familiar with this, my Lord. Not exactly fair to spring a new game on novice players for such great wagers,” the old man protested again trying to regain some control.

“Yes, quite right, gentlemen, quite right,” Baelish agreed congenially. “I’m a fair man, of course. We’ll play for an hour and give you a chance to grow accustomed to the game. As I said, it’s quite simple...”

The Marquess explained the game with ease. It was only a matter of the cards equaling up to, but not over the sum of twenty-one. It truly was the luck of the draw and Sansa didn’t know what could be worse at the moment.

The lord politely advised the ladies to sit or to return to bed due to the lateness of the hour but Sansa stubbornly sat down at the end of the table to watch. She wasn’t about to worry in her bedroom waiting for the inevitable. The Marquess smiled at her and shuffled the deck before dealing out to each player.

The men played for three quarters of an hour and acted as if they were having a lovely evening at the pub. The Marquess’ demeanor was relaxed and cool sharing stories that men loved to tell each other when in their cups. The two men had fallen comfortable in the new lord’s company laughing and drinking their ale.

Sansa watched the game carefully and kept silent. She knew well enough that making a scene would not help her cause. Uncle Edmure was long unconscious as he snored quietly at the other end of the table ignored by the other men in the room. Mrs. Cole fidgeted silently and occasionally patted Lord Baelish’s shoulder hoping for some assurance that he knew what he was doing.

The past hour was tedious and long observing the men play with her life. Each had won as many times as they lost to each other. As calm and amiable as the Marquess was, Sansa noted something in his eyes. Every card that was turned over, his eyes caught with interest and Sansa could swear he was calculating everything laid upon the table. It wasn’t just each hand and who won. He had used this past hour to watch the cards move and something clicked in her mind. This man was playing them all along under the guise of pleasantry. He wasn’t so much as letting them win but watching every move they made and where the cards lay.

Sansa never understood why ladies were never allowed to play cards or gamble with gentlemen. She could play this game just as well as them. Why couldn’t she stake a claim for her own welfare? Sansa hated that women seemed to be nothing more than decoration for a man and only worth was beauty and ability to bear heirs.

Finishing his ale in one gulp, the dark-haired lord checked his watch and stretched slightly in his chair.

“Very well, shall we get on with it? Two out of three takes Riverrun and the lady,” he grinned, but again Sansa noticed it never reached his eyes. His tone implied that this was nothing more than a trivial thing and the other men chuckled in reply. However, those piercing eyes said something else when they glanced her way briefly.

She wanted so badly to speak out against this primeval act between men, however something told her again to stay silent. After watching the men play and especially this mysterious lord's subtle actions, there was a game within a game happening here. She was sure of it. Her uncle was not coming to her aid as he continued to snore peacefully. All that lay between her and desolation, were cards in the hands of a man that seemed to know what he was doing.

The first round played and Sansa felt that churning of her stomach for the stoutly man won with his cards totaling twenty as his companion busted and the Marquess only produced nineteen. The second round lay upon the table, and the lord easily won with twenty-one. As the last round was dealt, the butterflies fluttered madly as she closed her eyes. She couldn't watch. If these two horrible men won, she would kill herself. There was not a chance in hell, she would leave this house with them.

"You're a cheat, my lord," the plump man shot out angrily and Sansa opened her eyes.

The Marquess again produced twenty-one in the form of an ace and queen.

"The cards do not lie, gentlemen. One would think you have never gambled before. If you were not willing to risk, you never should have sat down in the first place," Baelish reprimanded with a laugh. "I risked far more with my estate to not one but two players, I might add. You came with nothing and shall leave with nothing. I bid you goodnight."

Baelish rose from the table without a glance to her and moved towards the dozing Mrs. Cole to rouse her.

The two men argued with each other and Sansa slowly got up and moved towards the housekeeper as well.

"I say he is a cheat. He waited till the end and fixed the deck..." the men rumbled.

"What did you think I was doing for the past hour, gentlemen?" the Marquess questioned loudly turning towards them as both women unconsciously moved behind him. "I observed every move you made. Oh, and I should of said that I'm quite good with numbers which makes this game very simple to win. You said you knew of my reputation, sir, well you should have kept that in mind instead of greed blinding you."

The round man's face was so red that Sansa thought it just might burst. He fished in his coat for a musket pointing it at the high lord.

"Do it. You both will hang by morning," he warned with a hint of mirth in his voice.

"Consequently, I should have mentioned in passing that not only am I on very good terms with Magistrate Williams but that the King made me Lord Paramount of the Trident recently... which I do believe gives me *authority* over the Riverlands."

Sansa's eyes widened at she stared at Lord Baelish chuckling from his own little ruse. He didn't have to gamble at all. He could have stopped this from the very beginning and yet chose to gamble the men at the expense of her fear and helplessness. Sansa was enraged to the point of clawing this man's face off, Marquess or not. Mrs. Cole held the girl back as she stepped towards the man.

"Now, get out. I don't want to see either of you here again, do you understand me?" he demanded coldly. All of the laughter gone from his face.

Thunder rumbled loudly from the storm and both men stood in shock before slowly gathering their belongings.

"Luthor, would you be so kind to see these men out?" Lord Baelish requested tiredly.

A stocky man with a strong jaw appeared from the foyer that no one had seen the entire time. He held a musket at the ready and had the disposition of a man not to be trifled with. The Marquess traveled with more than just a footman, so it seemed.

The men walked around the man servant with trepidation before scurrying through the foyer. The heavy oak door opened and closed with a thud but not before letting in a damp, cold chill through the room.

Lord Baelish sighed as he turned to the old housekeeper. "Mrs. Cole, I am weary from travel. I assume that Lord Tully forgot about my letter that I would be coming to Riverrun today."

Both looked at the drunken man sleeping on the table.

"No, my lord, he had not mentioned it to me. Don't worry, I will have warm bed ready for you," Mrs. Cole smiled and patted his cheek like a young boy. "I never thought I would see you return to this house again, Petyr. And now a high lord yourself? My how the years have changed."

"Money can change many things, my dear," he replied softly as if he were speaking to his mother.

Sansa felt she was frozen to the spot at the exchange and neither of them paid her any attention. She watched transfixed as Lord Baelish pulled her uncle up against his slim frame and walked him to the staircase and finally acknowledged the girl's existence.

"Would you be so kind to help me get him to bed, my lady? You seem a strong girl by the looks of you," he asked sweetly.

She wasn't sure if she should be offended or complimented by that remark but she walked to him none the less and took her uncles arm draping it around her shoulders. This man seemed to dislike her uncle but at the same time wasn't about to leave him there to sleep in the Great Hall. He had called her *lady* several times this evening. Sansa had not heard that from a man in some time. Only Mrs. Cole addressed her that way now.

It took some effort to lead Edmure to his chambers. Sansa lit a candle and pulled the bedclothes over him as she had done so many times before. The Marquess quietly watched her from the door as she cared for her uncle with practiced ease.

"Tell me, my lady, is this common place with Lord Edmure?" he asked softly as if there was a touch of kindness and regret to his voice.

"Yes, my lord. It's been this way for some months now," she replied in kind blowing out the candle. She didn't know why she was discussing family matters with this man all of a sudden. She was about to ask him where and how she knew him, but when Sansa turned around, he was gone.

Sansa walked out closing the door behind her finding the hallway and landing empty. She supposed it mattered not if she had met him before. He was leaving in the morning, he said. He kept her from being taken away and her uncle losing his estate. That's all that mattered. In the morning the man would leave and life would continue on as it had for over a year. Sansa sighed at the thought of cleaning the dusty tapestries today and trudging back to her cold room. It would be daylight soon and there was much to do. Tonight was the most excitement, if one could call it that, she had in a long time. Slipping into the icy linens, Sansa curled into a ball to stay warm. It would be another cold winter in this place and worse with the dwindling finances. Sansa sniffed slightly. She wished that someone could just take her away from all of this. She would even be willing to go back to her aunt, if the jealous woman would take her.

With a flash of a brief memory, Sansa lay in shock. Yes, that's how she knew him. He wasn't a Marquess then if memory served her correctly. Her aunt was furious that night at the ball and Sansa tried to explain that she had done nothing to entice the man. The Duchess wouldn't hear of it and days later she was sent to live in Riverrun. Sansa had practically forgotten what he looked like. It was his manner, his voice that sparked some recognition. Lord Baelish was not of old family influence and inheritance like that of the rest of the ton. There had been as many whispers and gossip about him that night as there were about the traitorous niece that was ward of the Duchess.

Sansa fumed once more. He was the reason her aunt sent her here to this gloomy place. He could have turned the men out the moment he arrived but chose to play games with them, and her, on some morbid principle that he *could*. It was a good thing Mrs. Cole held her back, for Sansa knew she would have flogged the man senseless. It would be best if he left as quickly as possible in a few hours, she grumbled to herself for she might just forget her upbringing and spit in his breakfast for good measure.

All too soon, morning came and Sansa had not slept at all. Her furious mind gave her no rest and when she washed her face and looked in the mirror, the dark circles under her eyes were more than obvious to her condition. She dressed in one of her older frocks that had seen better days. Today, there was much cleaning to help Mrs. Cole with and wearing her last decent afternoon dress to impress a man she detested was pointless. If the Marquess expected her to dress well in his company, he was surely mistaken. She was no longer a lady of title or of any social status anymore. Why should she pretend to be?

Sansa pulled her hair back and glanced in the mirror once again. Her mother wouldn't even recognize her now. Her face pale and slightly gaunt. She was not eating as well as her stay in the Vale. She had not bothered with her hair in months. It was simpler to braid and pin it up. There were no gentlemen to impress here. The Vale taught her one thing, she was doomed to spinsterhood. In fact, she looked more like the common young girls from the local village than a lady of breeding.

She donned a light shawl and made her way down the stairs where the two lords were breaking their fast. The Marquess immediately rose from the table while her uncle remained seated. Sansa was slightly flattered at the notion but pushed it down. This damned man, was the reason why she was here in the first place.

Lord Baelish came around pulling her chair out as she sat with a short 'thank you'. Returning to his seat, Sansa glanced at him briefly. He was again, well dressed in dark grey that seemed to match the colour of his eyes. In the sunlight, his greying temples were more pronounced in contrast to his thick black hair. The very air about him was that of refinement, a trait her uncle and the men in this place simply did not possess.

Mrs. Cole placed a soft boiled egg before her with toasted bread and butter. Sansa picked an apple from the platter of little variety of fruits and listened as the men resumed their conversation. Her uncle finally mustered an awkward form of gratitude at the reclaiming of his estate lost the night before. Lord Baelish drank his coffee and waved it off as if it were nothing to him.

The air in the room was thick for it was clear the two men disliked each other immensely. Why had this lord stopped in Riverrun if he and her uncle were rivals?

"Why have you come here, Petyr? Is it merely to gloat or do you have a more sinister purpose?" Edmure asked with contempt answering Sansa's question.

"I wanted to come and see my childhood home..." Baelish began.

"This was never your *home*," Edmure spat bitterly.

"...and as Lord Paramount, of course, it is of financial interest to know how the lands are being managed. As far as I can tell, there is a severe lack of leadership. The locals have run amuck, and their lord is in debt to his ears and unable to pay the most trivial of needs."

Lord Baelish glanced catching Sansa's eye and smiled as she turned away blushing. Had this man gone through her uncle's ledgers after what she had said last night?

Uncle Edmure tried to object but the Marquess spoke over him.

"I have the necessary papers here. Magistrate Williams will sign over the deeds to me on my way to Harrenhal," he said patting the satchel next to him.

"No! You are not taking my family's lands, Petyr!" Edmure exclaimed standing up abruptly. "You think your money can buy you everything... you were *nothing*, came from nothing... Brandon should have killed you that day."

Lord Baelish sat calmly with a slight look of annoyance at the man insulting him and Sansa could

only watch in fascination.

“The times are changing, old man,” he grinned. “This worn and tired aristocracy is dying. The game is an old one but one your lot has forgotten how to play. The one with the most gold wins, my friend. While your kind is indolent in the collection your inheritance generation after generation, my kind is going to take it all from you.”

Edmure was fuming and the tips of his ears were bright red as he threw his plate across the room shattering the china into a million pieces.

“As I said last night, but you were too drunk to hear... How I would love to see your father’s face right now. Knowing that I, who came from nothing am now a higher ranking lord than his only son and own his generation’s old family estates,” Baelish chuckled darkly.

Sansa finally spoke up in astonishment.

“But, my lord, you’re not giving back Riverrun to my uncle? I thought that was your honorable intention...” she muttered.

The Marquess smiled and his eyes gleamed in amusement.

“My intention is to rightfully take claim of that I have honorably won. Your uncle lost his estate of his own accord. I gambled my own estates and claimed his lawfully. If Lord Tully had gambled me last night, would you begrudge me my winnings my lady?” he mused.

Sansa started to panic hearing those words. He was going to throw them out. She was now penniless and homeless as was her uncle.

“Now, I’m not a horrible man, my dear. Edmure can continue to stay in his ancestral home but I will manage the lands profitability from now on and he will receive a modest allowance until it’s proven he will not gamble it away,” he continued nonchalantly.

“Now see here, Petyr...” Edmure roared.

Sansa closed her eyes in fear.

“And what of me, my lord? Am I to be thrown in the village streets?” she whispered.

Lord Baelish observed her with a quiet admiration but his next words sent shockwaves down her spine.

“Of course not, my lady. You will pack what little I assume you possess this very morning. You are leaving with me to Harrenhal.”

%MCEPASTEBIN%

The North Star

“Over my dead body!” the earl roared and strode across the room to his sword and a single musket that rested on a small table near the staircase.

Lord Baelish remained seated with a look of boredom on his face; however, the ice in his voice was unmistakable.

“*That...* can be arranged,” he warned and his manservant, Lothor Brune entered the room with his hand already on his weapon.

Edmure stopped dead in his tracks as Sansa sat stunned at Baelish’s previous declaration as to her future. Why was he removing her from her family’s care? There was no reason for it.

“She doesn’t belong to you, Petyr. She is my family and my responsibility,” her uncle protested as he held onto his musket that Sansa knew full well wasn’t loaded.

Lord Baelish rose slowly, his eyes never leaving her uncle. Sansa watched as he glided around the table standing next to her. All she could do was stare at her plate when his hand rested on the back of her chair.

“Do you really believe after last night that I would leave Cat’s daughter in your care?” Baelish spoke with quiet fury. “You nearly sold her into God knows what life with those men to save your own wealth and heritage. Look at her; she is practically a house maid here.”

The man had not lied but she was furious at the Marquess all the same. He bet her livelihood as well last night as if it were the most trivial of games.

“And how are you any different, my Lord?” she muttered indignantly, eyes cast down. “My well-being seems only a game to you that is as easily tossed around as cards on a table.”

Lord Baelish leaned against the table staring at her but she couldn’t meet his gaze.

“Had I not arrived when I did, you would have been well on your way to a brothel, I would gather, my lady,” Baelish said. “I wagered an estate that is worth one-hundred times Riverrun to...”

Sansa glared at the proud man. “Forgive me if I am not thrilled with being a bargaining chip between men. You didn’t have to wager a thing. You are Lord Paramount, as you say and could have called their winnings invalid. Gambling your estate was not for my protection but your own vanity. What am I worth, a traitor’s daughter? Ten guineas? Less? I doubt you’ll get your money’s worth, my lord. You might as well leave me here.”

She waited to be reprimanded for speaking so rudely to high lord but the man only smiled at her. A long index finger tilted her chin up to look him in the eyes.

“Well said, my lady,” he smirked. “Do give yourself credit. You are worth most decidedly more than ten guineas.” His eyes flared a bit and Sansa felt he was trying to rouse her anger more than a true insult. “If you were a shilling, I would still remove you from this place.”

“Shall I be more plain, my lord? I do not wish to be bought by you. I’d rather be a scullery maid than go with you,” she held her chin high letting his finger drop away.

“You have your answer, Petyr,” Edmure’s voice rang behind her.

The Marquess glanced at her uncle and then back to proud girl sitting before him.

“All due respect my lady,” he began with ease. “It matters not. You hardly have anything to say about it. If I were to give your uncle everything back... how long until you find yourself in even worse circumstances. No. You shall leave with me today. Mrs. Cole,” he turned to the elderly woman resting by the sideboard, “Make sure Lady Sansa is packed and ready to leave within the hour.”

Edmure protested hotly once again and the husky manservant moved across the room quickly divesting her uncle of his weapons. “Petyr, you cannot. Think of her reputation! It is completely improper for a young lady of her age to live with a rake such as you.”

Baelish chuckled darkly, “After gambling her away, you dare chastise me in caring for her? Edmure, I think we can all agree her reputation is long shattered due to her father’s rebellion. Neither you or Lysa came to Cat’s aid and they executed the entire family. Where was your family honor then? Your old fashioned *nobility* makes you no better than I. She will be treated like the proper lady she is in *my* household unlike the...” his eyes returned to Sansa with a grin, “... *scullery maid* you’ve managed to make her in yours.”

Sansa waited with baited breath for her uncle to make some defense. Instead he marched into his study and slammed the heavy oak door. Looking to Mrs. Cole for any form of help, the kindly old woman shook her head sadly.

“Mrs. Cole, I would be honored if you come to Harrenhal and take charge of the household. I know of no one better to manage such a large house, staff... and play chaperone to Lady Stark. It would be well if she had a familiar face while staying in my home,” Lord Baelish offered with such grace and kindness and Sansa felt a rush of relief that she would have one friend with her.

The old woman glanced at the door the Earl slammed moments before and smiled with regret.

“Petyr,” she called him informally, “I think my place is to watch over Edmure. He will be quite alone and in need now.”

Sansa's eyes widened in horror. Mrs. Cole defended her from the two men last night and yet she was letting this man, that Sansa was barely acquainted with, take her away.

He kissed the top of the old woman's head tenderly and added, "If you change your mind, all you need do is send me a letter and I will send a carriage for you. In the meantime..." Lord Baelish retrieved a purse heavy with gold. "Keep this safe. I trust you to spend it as necessary. Anything you require, write to me and you shall have it."

Mrs. Cole patted his hand and smiled sweetly as Sansa watched the exchange in wonder. Perhaps the man couldn't be completely despicable if he treated this woman, whom he had not seen in years, with such kindness and generosity. The fact lay in her lap that she was leaving with a man she only knew by introduction and reputation.

Lord Baelish was known for his scandalous behavior within the ton. Sansa knew of him from that fateful night of the ball at The Eyrie. He was not of noble birth but rose quickly through the ranks and rumored to be quite wealthy. His new titles and wealth did not seem to aid him in securing a wife. Either no lady of breeding would have him or he simply did not wish to be married. The man was nothing short of an enigma and endless gossip at balls and gatherings.

Uncle Edmure had called him a rake moments before and it seemed to fit his personality so far. He was as courteous as any other lord, but elements about him told her he did not care much for strict social etiquette. All Sansa could guess at was that he was self-made, wealthy and was quite used to things done his way.

Sansa felt as though she had no choice at all in the matter, just as Lord Baelish said. Whether by gambling or as high lord of the region, she was under his control. When Mrs. Cole roused Sansa from her troubled thoughts, the Marquess had left the room.

"Come, my lady," the old woman tugged the young girl's arm, "We must pack your things in haste. I don't believe his lordship will wish to wait too long. I think we can fit everything in the one trunk... and you'll need your trousseau..."

Sansa laughed bitterly at that. "No need. I'll never marry. I'll most likely end up keeping the household for him until he marries and ships me off to be someone's governess," Sansa grumbled.

"Perhaps, he will take you as his ward. He cared very much for your mother years ago. It would make sense," the old woman mused to herself as Sansa followed her upstairs. "You will be in a wealthy house again, where you belong, a lady of your upbringing. If the Fates are kind, you could be a Marchioness again..."

Sansa hissed in reply, "Do not say such things. I would never marry a man such as that. Uncle said he's a rake and I heard stories from The Eyrie. Not to mention, he's old... He must be close to forty..."

They entered Sansa's bed chamber and began pulling her few belongings from the wardrobe.

"Not quite, m'dear. He's slightly younger than your uncle," Mrs. Cole continued, "If there's any of the sweet boy left that I knew; I gather he's not as terrible as the gossip from the ton makes him to be. It tends to be full of lies more than truth, as you very well know. Life changes and hardens people, poppet. But just occasionally, there is a tenderness left."

"Why are you defending him? You are not worried that he may... a man like that, doesn't exactly have respect for a lady in his keeping. You really believe I will be safe with him?" Sansa asked in fear.

"My lady, he did save you from those two men. I don't know what I would have done to protect you had his lordship not arrived when he did," the woman explained. "Am I positive that no harm will ever come to you? No, my dear. Your father is not here to protect you and Edmure can barely care for himself let alone a beautiful young woman in these parts. Letting the lands go, as Petyr said, had created many greedy and distasteful men of late. They would take advantage of a lovely girl such as you. In Petyr's care, you will be better off under his protection. There's a good man in there, I believe," she added quietly.

Sansa crammed some of her books and small items she was able to take from Winterfell.

"And if there isn't?" she inquired harshly wanting to tell Mrs. Cole that Lord Baelish was the reason why her aunt cast her out of her home.

Mrs. Cole looked at Sansa with sadness. "Then you are a resourceful and intelligent girl. You find your way back here and we'll sort it out."

The women continued packing and Mrs. Cole lamented, "I cannot fathom that he would ever harm you, child. He loved your mother to the point of romantic idiocy. Duelled for her, he did. Younger than you are now. Just a sweet, naïve boy. A little mischievous, yes," she smiled to herself and then sighed. "Alas, he's a man grown now and I've naught known him since he was cast out by your grandfather at the age of seven and ten. He's come a long way from that young boy of such low birth. His father was only a knight and sent him here to foster... and now... a Marquess. How shocked Lord Hoster would be."

Sansa closed the trunk, locking it as Mrs. Cole found her trousseau in the corner covered in dust.

"Titles can be bought and sold these days," Sansa grumbled.

"Bought, sold, given and taken away," Mrs. Cole smiled. "It's the way it has always been, my lady even with the kings of old."

The game is an old one but one your lot has forgotten how to play. The one with the most gold wins, my friend.

The times were changing, indeed. Lord Baelish was right, it did not matter. He was now high lord over the region and she was beholden to him whether she liked it or not. Her uncle and Mrs. Cole were handing her over to him in accordance to authority.

Sansa wondered what Harrenhal was like. Her father and mother told wondrous stories about the grand estate, second only to the royal palace in Kings Landing and far more impressive than Winterfell in size. Her mother told her of such lavish balls and parties there when she was a young lady in her first season. However, years ago, there was a great fire and many died including the late Grand Duke of the Stormlands, his wife and only daughter. Many rumored Harrenhal to be haunted and even cursed over the generations. As far as Sansa understood that the estate had been left to disrepair with no lord willing to take it.

Perhaps, that is why the King gave it to Lord Baelish, a new lord by society standards. Even though Harrenhal was an estate with vast lands normally reserved for a dukedom or even royalty. Lord Baelish must have done something to garner such a gift from the king or it was more an empty gesture only because no other lord would take it. The cost of repairing and maintaining such an estate would require the wealth of royalty, not to mention the talk within the ton of a curse. For all Sansa knew, she was travelling to a house that was in even worse conditions than the one she currently resided in.

Sansa changed into her last decent afternoon dress and wool pelisse. Regardless if the house was run down or not, she could not walk into a place such as that wearing a tattered dress and shawl with the lord himself. Mrs. Cole tried to fix Sansa's hair the best she could in such limited time. Sansa glanced in the faded mirror one last time and sighed fastening an old bonnet. Once again, she was sent off to a new and uncertain home with a man she barely knew.

Two footmen knocked on her door asking to retrieve her belongings. Sansa followed the men down the stairs where the Marquess was patiently waiting. Her uncle was nowhere to be found and Sansa fumed at how easily the last family she had could disregard her so.

She embraced Mrs. Cole and begged her quietly to come and not leave her alone with the Marquess but the old woman shook her head with regret telling Sansa this was for the best. How did she know for certain? She remembered a boy of seven and ten, not the man taking her away now. For all this woman knew, Sansa would be a prisoner or God know what else alone with this man.

Sansa looked again towards her uncle's study, praying he wouldn't allow this but the door remained closed. Lord Baelish kissed Mrs. Cole on the cheek and offered his goodbye. Before the man could take her elbow, Sansa marched angrily outside to the carriage that awaited her.

Four beautiful black horses were teamed to a large and luxurious black and silver carriage. The footman opened the door when Lord Baelish caught up to her and offered his hand. Sansa glanced at it and refused to touch him climbing into the carriage on her own with little effort. Her dress was a bit too small for her frame now as it was a couple years old and a tad short for her legs that were longer now. She had tried in vain to alter the hem, but there was no material left to lengthen the skirt. After living at Riverrun, she didn't care anymore as there were no visitors to judge her out of fashion and ill-fitting clothes.

Baelish climbed in with an effortless grace about him. He sat across from her appropriately and tapped his cane on back signaling the driver to move on. The rain had died in the early morning but the scent of its freshness lingered. Sansa watched as the home she knew for over year disappeared in the distance and now all that was left was the mysterious man across from her and an unknown future.

The River Road ran parallel to the Red Fork River and the rolling hills along the south that hid Harrenhal. The terrain was impossible for carriage this time of year and dangerous yet to travel a lonely road for fear of highwaymen. The River Road and Kings Road were notorious enough with stories of many robberies but there was little choice to make.

Hours rolled by and Sansa felt herself drifting asleep occasionally until the wheels hit rocky areas jostling the carriage. Thankfully, there was an inn nearby where they would mostly likely stop and rest the horses. Another storm was brewing from the west and Sansa wondered if it would force them to stay the night before making towards Lord Harroway's Town and the turn to Harrenhal. Riding across the countryside would save them a day's travel but it would be even worse if they were caught in another storm in the middle of nowhere.

Since leaving Riverrun, the Marquess had not uttered one word to her and Sansa wasn't sure if she was affronted or relieved. This man was probably thinking he made a huge mistake winning that damned game of cards. Occasionally, she would catch his eye only to quickly look out the window fearing he would notice her staring at him. He seemed to be as uncomfortable as she was even in the spacious carriage. Boredom, lack of sleep had them both closing their eyes and essentially ignoring the other.

Thankfully, they came upon the small village and Sansa desperately needed to stretch her legs and use the privy. Stopping at the only inn, the ground was deep mud everywhere. Lord Baelish descended and draped his expensive cloak in the crook of his arm as his boots were ankle deep in sodden earth before offering Sansa his gloved hand. This time she had no choice but to take it or she would definitely sink and fall into the muddy ground. She stood on the last step debating where to even put her feet when the man decided for her, lifting her into his arms with ease carrying her to the wooden porch of the inn.

It was late afternoon and the inn was bustling with patrons ready to wait out the torrent weather. Lord Baelish took her arm and led Sansa inside. Many men were already drunk and shouting loudly for more ale as they flirted openly with the tavern wenches. A few men eyed her salaciously that did not go unnoticed by the Marquess.

"Ah! My Lord, good to see you again. Let me find you a more quiet table. I have mutton roasting for my betters. This lot will eat any ole' stew. I have a good ale... and Dornish wine for the lady..." the portly innkeeper boasted leading them to a cleaner corner as the man, Brune, followed with a watchful eye.

Baelish led her to sit as he followed suit.

"Thank you, Bennings. The lady and I are most famished. I say, the storm looks to be upon us and I fear taking my lady through it to Harrenhal. Have you lodgings?" the lord asked politely.

"We are full, but I'll kick one out for you, my Lord. The best room, I'll give ye," Bennisings smiled showing his missing teeth.

"You'll find me very grateful," Baelish replied tossing the innkeeper a few coins. Sansa was about to object and demand another room, but the Marquess gripped her arm tightly informing her to stay quiet.

"Thanking ye, yer lordship. I'll have the room ready for you and your lady," the man grinned wildly tucking the coins in his pocket greedily as he moved through the heavy crowd. Brune sat across from them and watched the roaring brood.

Sansa yanked her arm from Baelish's grasp and spoke lowly, "Why did you not procure another room? I'll not share a bed with you."

Baelish glared at her but also lowered his voice.

"You're clever enough to stay quiet considering our surroundings, so continue to use that brain of yours, sweetling," he spat quietly.

Sweetling? How dare he use any form of endearment towards her. Sansa was about to retort when he cut her off.

"Firstly, kicking one drunken man from his room is enough, two, and we bring too much attention to ourselves. I had hoped to make it to Lord Holloway's Town where I have men on my payroll for added security. Here, we do not have that luxury," he told her firmly.

"You are Lord Paramount..." she began.

"With only a footman, driver and Brune. Not nearly enough protection, for this area is thick with thieves. Now, do as I say and stay silent," he barked before a heavysset woman brought them food and drink.

The woman smiled seductively and Sansa cringed. Dear God, this could have been her if those men took her last night. The woman left and Sansa picked at her food.

"Besides, there is not a chance in hell I'm putting you in a room by yourself with drunk men knowing you are alone. My decision is final," he uttered into his ale. Glancing at her scowling face Baelish added, "I rarely sleep, my dear. The bed is yours."

The admission didn't make her feel any better. The idea of sharing a room, possibly a bed, with a strange man was unthinkable. Knowing the kind of man Lord Baelish was rumored to be, made it all the more impossible to consider. Sansa may not have a grand title anymore but she was still brought up a lady and this was something her father would have never allowed to happen. She could see her mother's disapproving glare even now as Sansa gazed into the hearth.

If only she could get back to the North, she knew the people there were loyal and loved her father. Sansa felt she would find those kind to her circumstances. She would never again go home to her beloved Winterfell, but at least she could be with those like her. She would not have to pretend to appease Southern lords and ladies. Maybe in the North she could find some solace and happiness.

Other than comfort and fine foods, the Vale was a cold prison as the Duchess, or wardeness as Sansa likened her, kept her under constant harsh control. Sansa was almost relieved when her aunt sent her to live in Riverrun, her mother's childhood home. Surely Uncle Edmure could not be any worse....

"You're not hungry, my dear?" his soft voice pulled her out of her thoughts.

Sansa didn't care for mutton, but it would a long time before eating in the morning. She forced it down reluctantly with the tannic wine to fill her stomach.

A brawl between two men erupted and suddenly Lord Baelish ushered her up the stairs to the rooms above. One of the tavern wenches showed her into a small room as the Marquess followed.

"There is fresh water in the basin, clean linens and chamber pots, m'lord. If you'll be needin' anything else, ask for me... Ellie, m'lord," she smiled with a wink and Sansa refrained from rolling her eyes. Baelish gave the brunette a coin and closed the door.

The room was tight quarters that hardly had enough space for a small table, chair and bed that would barely fit two unless they were very familiar.

"I say, there's naught room for your trunk, my lady," Baelish said mirroring her observations. "Shall I retrieve anything you might need?"

The man laid his cloak, coat and purse on the bed and stood in only his waistcoat and shirtsleeves. Sansa removed her bonnet and set it next to the basin in thought as she tried not to look at his purse. If she could get to a horse... Sansa played with the notion of cutting across the shallow river and countryside up to the northern route of the Kings Road. If she was lucky, the men would think she either headed back to Riverrun or east to Lord Holloway's Town. Her father and brothers were adamant about teaching the girls to ride well from a young age. With Baelish's full purse, she could make it past Moat Cailin to her own kind.

"No, I haven't much that is presentable. I would like to clean up, if I could have some privacy," she said hoping he would play along.

"Of course, my dear," he replied with a smirk and picked up the purse to her dismay. "I think I can entertain myself for a spell. It should be easy pickings downstairs. Brune will be nearby so you need not worry about unwelcome visitors."

He didn't pick up his coat or cloak, for it was very warm in the tavern. Lord Baelish gave her one last look and turned around exiting the room with the soft click of the door. Sansa released a sigh she had been holding in and sat down wearily. Gazing at the bed, she thought it would be much easier just to lie down and sleep for this silly idea growing in her mind was certain to be fruitless.

As a quarter of an hour passed, her stubborn and willful Stark trait would not let her rest. She didn't belong in Harrenhal with his man. She did not want to go with him anywhere or be subservient to him in anyway. A reckless plan hatched in her mind as she cracked open the door to see that Lord Baelish gave his word. Indeed, the man, Brune stood watch at the top of the landing. She could tell him that she wanted to use the privy, but somehow Sansa knew this man would see right through it and tell her to use the chamber pot in her room.

Sifting through his coat, she found his pockets empty. When feeling through his cloak however, she noticed a hard lump. A secret pocket held a small purse containing gold. Quickly counting the coins, Sansa realized it was enough to possibly get her to Moat Cailin. The Marquess didn't keep all his eggs in one basket, so it seemed. The noise was blustering as the men gambled and drank from below. Sansa bet that the Marquess was most likely doing well amongst these men. Somehow, she felt that it wasn't the money he enjoyed winning, it was the game itself. He loved to play, deceive and fool men to empty purses.

Opening the door wider, Brune turned at the sound and eyed her with a questioning.

"I would like to speak with Lord Baelish, if you please," she asked meekly casting her blue eyes to the floor.

The man gave her a look of suspicion but Sansa pressed on with the haughty air she used earlier in the evening. "Will you fetch your master to me, please? I will not go down there to seek him."

The stocky man huffed in annoyance and moved down the stairs into the roar of drunken rabble. Sansa immediately moved to the end of murky and damp corridor where she could see a small stairwell leading most likely to the kitchens and privy below.

Pulling her cloak tight and lifting her skirts, she flew down the stairs passing a barmaid and tall man rutting like animals against the wall. Sansa stepped outside and her worn boots sunk into the mud. She needed to move in haste for her ruse would surely be found out soon. Once in the stable, she almost tripped over a boy dozing off in a bed of straw. The stable was empty save her, the boy and several horses including the team belonging to his lordship.

Only a dusty grey horse was saddled seemingly awaiting for his master to leave and Sansa smiled at her good fortune. She just might get across the river before they knew she was gone. With effort and hiking her skirts under her arms, Sansa managed to swing her leg over mounting to ride like a man. This was not a fox hunt where decorum was scrutinized heavily as any ball. She was running away as fast as she could.

The boy woke to the clamor of the horse and its new master. Sansa quickly tossed a gold coin to the boy and brought her gloved finger to her lips.

"Even the Devil, himself, couldn't make me talk for a gold coin, my lady," the boy whispered in excitement for the prize of his silence.

Without wasting another word, Sansa rode out of the stable and got her bearings in the muddled moonlight. The wind was picking up and she feared another storm was closing in, but now she had no choice. This was her only chance and she had to take it. Searching the star lit sky, Sansa found The Little Bear, as her father called it... and there it was! The North Star pointed the way home and it was indeed across the river she had to go.

With a jab of her heels, the horse gave a loud whinny and started to gallop towards the river. Sansa heard her name shouted from the inn followed by several curses from the man that had won her the night before and she knew she had been found out. With hope and luck, time would be on her side. By the time horses were saddled, she could put some distance between them in the dense countryside.

The Red Fork was the shallow river compared to her two sisters and was the only river that could be crossed without a ferry or bridge. The three rivers converged at Lord Holloway's Town and then into the sea. Sansa needed to lose them and head northeast. The men would assume that she would go to Fairmarket and catch the ferry there. She was betting that they would think she was a simple girl but her father taught her and Arya to ride and how to take care of themselves in the woods if they ever became lost. Living in the North was a far cry from the southern aristocratic ladies whose biggest worry was dirtying their satin shoes and being out of fashion.

Just as Sansa hoped, the river bed was shallow here and her horse made its way without a lick of trouble. The inns distant lights gave her hope as she galloped towards the east praying the men headed westward to Fairmarket instead.

The wind grew colder as it whipped her hair from its braids around her head making her wish that she grabbed her bonnet at the inn. Sansa glanced back and she made some distance from the river as she headed towards dense trees. Perhaps there, she could slow down and let the horse breathe. When that storm caught up, it would be better to find a little shelter under the trees. With any luck, she could follow the Blue Fork to Lord Holloway's Town and take the northbound Kings Road.

Within the cover of trees, Sansa slowed her horse letting him take an easy trot into the woods. Occasionally, she turned the horse around checking behind her but there was nothing, not a sound except the wind through the trees and an owl singing its nightly tune.

Suddenly, something perked the horse's ears and startled him. Ignoring her guidance, the spooked animal reared up and Sansa felt a blow to her side that bashed her clean off the panicked horse. She hit the wet forest floor with a thud knocking the air from her already corset-constricted lungs.

Catching her breath, she felt two strong hands pull her muddied form upright until the face she saw was one belonging to one of the ugliest men she had ever seen in her life. His skin was heavily scarred, dirty and the foul stench of his breath made her wince in disgust.

"Well, well, well..." the man chuckled. "What's this we have here?"

The man raked his eyes over her as she tried desperately to pull away from him. Another male voice rang from the darkness and Sansa froze.

"Whatcha got there, Ranchold?" she heard the man ask from the shrubs.

"I caught me a lass," he laughed and his breath was even more rancid than before.

"A lass? Out here? Cor! Is she pretty?" another voice shot out from behind.

The man that held her pushed her into the moonlight as the others made themselves known in the small clearing.

"She's covered in mud, but still prettier than any wench I have ever laid eyes on... even with the mud!" he roared in laughter. "Come on, girl, let's have a look at you."

He tore her cloak away and Sansa shivered from the cold and fear seeing the four men gazing hungrily at her.

"Lost are ye, lass?" a tall but thin man asked sarcastically. "Good, that we found ye. A young lass is bound to run into trouble in these parts. There are no gentlemen in these woods."

All the men laughed darkly as they closed in on her.

"Good sirs, I want no trouble. Please let me go," she pleaded miserably. "I was separated from my lord husband; he will pay handsomely if you return me safely." The lie escaped her lips effortlessly.

"Lord husband, eh?" the foul breathed man chuckled. "What dandy lord would let his pretty little lady get so lost in a place like this... in the middle of the night no less?"

Sansa shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. "They'll be searching for me..."

The man was so close that his hand clasped her slender throat and her blue eyes grew wide.

"Please, I have gold. Just let me go and it's yours," she shook desperately.

"Gold? Give it to me, girl, and I will let you go," he smiled with crooked and missing teeth.

Sansa fished inside her skirts and pulled the small purse handing it to the man. He opened it and with surprise written on his face, counted the gold pieces inside.

"She tellin' the truth?" one man asked.

"Aye," he answered.

"You have twenty pieces to share. Please, you said you would let me go," she begged with tears in her eyes.

The burly man pushed her back making her fall into another man behind her.

"I said I would let you go, on my honor," he grinned. "But they didn't."

"What else is hidden in that dress of yours, lass?" he said sniffing her hair as his hands held her indecently.

"Nothing! I gave you all I have!" she cried.

"Oh, I think you have much to give us, girl," the tall man laughed heartily and tore at her bodice revealing her corset and chemise.

Sansa screamed at the top of her lungs and could hear her voice echo back to her. The two men tore her dress from her body as the other held her steadfast. She kicked and screamed as they pushed her down to the ground.

"This little redhead is full of fire," the man hooted pulling at his breeches. "Never had me a proper lady before."

He pushed up her chemise when Sansa kicked him between his legs as hard as she could making him topple backwards. The man howled in pain as the other climbed on top of her trying to thrust her legs apart. She tried to kick him but his hands were strong and kept her knees down.

Drastically, she clawed at his face when he lowered his head to hers and he screamed as her nails drew blood.

"Argh! You bitch! You'll pay for that!" he yelled and slapped Sansa so hard across the face she saw stars. "Hold the whore down!"

Sansa screamed and screamed as tears rolled down her stinging cheek when she tried in vain once again and kicked the man on top of her. A fist connected to her left cheek and everything went black.

Two Dresses of Blue

Chapter Notes

Okay... moving right along. I think I know where I want to go with this story for the most part. We'll see how it comes around.

Cold. That's all she could feel. The warm heaviness that lay upon her had disappeared and now the chill encompassed her completely. A far off voice called her name and she strained to see in the darkness. A dim star twinkled in the distance and her father's voice called her name again. A peace enveloped her as she felt herself drifting towards that calming voice. She was going home.

The star was coming closer still and Sansa wanted to reach out to it but her body couldn't move. Father's voice called again but it had changed somehow. He sounded different.

"Sweetling..."

Sweetling?

"Open your eyes, love," the voice begged and a sudden pain seared through her head.

Her fingers sunk into damp earth and everything jolted back in a flash. A voice that sounded like hers screamed as she kicked and hit the man above her. Strong gloved hands caught her wrists to halt their assault.

"*Sansa!*" the familiar voice called out, "It's all right now. You're safe."

"Look at me. Open your eyes," the voice demanded holding her wrists tightly.

Fearfully, she did as he commanded and saw the owner of that voice glaring down at her. There was blood on his white cravat and unexpectedly Sansa felt a cool wetness all over her chemise. Her eyes followed her hands down to her body and finding it covered in deep red.

It wasn't her blood and the reality made her scurry back from the dark-haired man only to bump into something large and warm. Turning around, the dead body of the foul smelling man lay with his eyes staring at nothing.

Sansa screamed and recoiled as if touching a hot iron. The voice behind her was trying to calm and sooth but all she could see as she tried to stand, were the bodies of four dead men littering the ground. The sight chilled her more than the evening cold.

Her eyes darted from one dead man to the next, to the man Brune cleaning blood off his saber before gathering the horses and the Marquess standing near sheathing his elegant rapier with a look of fury on his face. Her stomach lurched and she felt faint. Looking down at herself, Sansa was soaked in blood and mud that dried leaves stuck to. Her shredded clothes lay strewn to the side as Lord Baelish removed his cloak. No sooner had the man wrapped its warmth around her did she collapse into him.

The gentle rocking motion and heartbeat opened her eyes. A strong arm held Sansa about her waist as dense trees gave way to a clearing. Her muddied feet dangled alongside the horse that moved at a steady gait and could see Brune ahead with a few horse tethered behind him.

"You're finally awake, I see," the Marquess grumbled and Sansa had no idea what to say.

Thank you seemed an awkward answer in every way and Sansa thought better to stay silent.

"I will say this only once..." he began and the vehemence in his tone was menacing. "If you ever do something that stupid and dangerous again, I will not come for you. Cat's daughter or not. I do not have the time nor the patience to chase after foolish little girls running off to get robbed, raped and murdered in the wilderness."

His grip on her waist dug sharply making her wince slightly.

"Do we understand each other, *my lady?*" he spat and Sansa could only nod her head against his chest that heaved with anger. "Good."

Sansa had been sheltered her whole life despite living in the North. The people there had a certain respect for each other and her father never worried too much that someone would truly harm his daughters. After her family's execution, Aunt Lysa had never allowed Sansa to leave the Eyrie without a proper chaperone. She was rarely permitted to go anywhere for fear that she might embarrass the Arryns amongst the ton. The Duchess kept a tight tether on her niece regardless of how well-behaved she was.

Uncle Edmure was less and less mindful of her after months in Riverrun. Fairmarket was too far and only the small village down the road was frequented for their needs. Even then, Mrs. Cole always accompanied her and the villagers never paid them any mind.

Tonight, she was reckless and willful in running away into the unknown. She thought she could buy her way North but never thought it through. There were men that would want more than gold from a young girl. How naive she really was. Lord Baelish didn't have to come after her and was lucky to find her. Those men were going to rape her and possibly kill or leave her for dead.

The tears welled up and a sob racked her lungs. Hot and salty streams ran down her face and she

couldn't stop crying into his chest. The man's grip lessened and suddenly the ferocity left his voice as he hushed her softly.

"Sssh, everything will be all right now, don't cry," he whispered leaning his chin on top of her matted hair. "It will be all right."

Sansa didn't believe him. Nothing was ever going to be right again. Tears fell relentlessly as she sobbed and held onto this stranger that saved her life not once but now twice. The roar of the sky erupted as it began to pour down upon them. She heard the man curse and commanded the horse into a full gallop. Sansa held onto him tightly fearing she might slide off. Rain mixed with tears and she could see the faint lights of the inn just across the river.

A wave of relief came over her cold and shivering body. Once the rain came down, it made the chill of the night unbearable. Fingers trembled holding onto the man even as they entered the stable. Brune helped her down as his master climbed down from his horse. She was more aware than ever that she was clad in nothing more than a bloodied chemise and cloak. The idea of walking back into the inn like this, with everyone's eyes on her, was disheartening. Sansa's legs wobbled a bit walking towards the door before arms lifted her into his carrying her across to the inn quickly.

Lord Baelish didn't parade her through the pub but instead hauled her up the back stairwell, back to the room she should have stayed in. Setting her down, Sansa sat in the wooden chair and held the soaking wet cloak tight. The man glanced in the faded mirror and huffed in annoyance at his drenched reflection. Clearly, this was not what he had in mind this evening and Sansa avoided looking at him.

"Considering how little you are wearing, I can expect to find you here when I return," he said curtly and without waiting for a reply, Lord Baelish left her alone once again.

It felt like ages as she sat there in the cold, sodden cloak. Sansa dared not move. The basin with water sat on the table next to her and she desperately wanted to wash the filth of tonight from her body. However, a certain man could walk in at any moment and so she waited shivering in the chair. The latch of the door clicked and the Marquess entered the room as soaked as when he left but wearing another cloak.

From under his arm and the protection of the cloak, he produced a bundle of several garments and laid them on the bed. An old wooden screen was tucked in the corner of the room and the man extended it open between the bed and the wall. Draping the wet cloak over the top, he kicked off his muddy boot one by one. When he hands went to the buttons of his coat, Sansa's eyes widened and desperately looked away. She heard him sigh and move behind the screen. Agonizing long minutes went by as she listened as he discarded his clothing. Sansa spied his bare arm in the mirror reaching for clean, dry clothing on the bed only to disappear again.

He walked around the screen buttoning his pale green waistcoat and did not bother with a cravat. He glanced at her briefly before taking in his reflection and slicking back his wet hair.

"If there is not enough water to clean yourself up, Brune will be standing guard just outside. He will have a maid bring you more. Shall I send up some tea or do you need something stronger to take off the chill?" he asked so casually as if nothing had happened.

"Tea," she uttered so softly that it barely passed her lips.

"Hmm... perhaps a little honey and whiskey just in case. It does wonders for consumption. I'll return in an hour or so," he added and left the room.

Sansa stood and let the wet cloak drop to the floor the cream lining stained with blood. She was about to pull her chemise away when she paused looking at the door. Quickly, she dragged the screen across the room shielding her from the door. Sansa peeled the bloody chemise and threw it on the floor. That and the dress left in the woods were the last decent ones she owned. Glancing at the bundle of clothing on the bed, she saw a single piece of soap on top.

It took some time to cleanse the mud and leaves from her hair and just as the Marquess guessed, she needed more water. Brune brought up another pitcher rather quickly setting it just inside the door before closing it again. Sansa was finally clean and tossed the dirty water out the window into the rain.

Untying the bundle, Sansa gazed down in sadness. Lord Baelish had brought her clothing from her trousseau. Before her was the light blue dress her mother had made for Sansa's wedding. Her parents truly thought she would be engaged before her first season was out. Indeed, the King made the arrangement with his old friend the Duke to wed their children. Sansa would become a princess. Then the king died and a revolution began and Sansa never truly understood why. She never loved or even cared for Prince Joffrey but it was a match that any young lady of the ton would dream of. She was a Duke's daughter after all.

Sansa fingered the soft muslin and silks. They were at least six years old and starting to fade. The last time she looked at anything in her trousseau, Sansa lived in The Eyrie. Now, she was a fair bit taller and even though lost weight during her time in Riverrun, was not quite sure the dress would fit. She used the soft linen the clothing was wrapped in to dry herself. The stockings were too snug on her long limbs but the chemise was so soft that Sansa closed her eyes to the feeling. She had not worn something so fine in years and it was only a shift for heaven's sake.

She set the corset aside until morning and slipped on the dress. It was short and noticeably so. With the corset cinched tight, she just might be able to lace the back of the dress. Gazing in the mirror it was all too obvious the dress was old fashion and meant for someone else. Sansa wasn't that girl anymore. She hadn't been for years. The mark on her left cheek was proof of that.

It had been at least two hours since he left and Sansa was exhausted. The candle was low when she climbed into the bed pulling the rough wool bedclothes over her. The storm raged overhead and she wished it would pass quickly. She hated thunderstorms now and always dreaded them knowing peaceful sleep would never come.

Exhaustion winning over, her eyes closed and her mind drifted to the past. She was pleading with

the new king and his mother.

Spare them.

Mercy.

Mother, father, Arya and all of her brothers stood in the rain facing the firing squad. Sansa screamed and cried as a guard held her. A wicked smile formed on the king's face when he gave the order.

"Fire!"

The gunshots rang out as the loud clap of thunder boomed and Sansa closed her eyes and screamed. The guard was shaking her and she kept pushing him away.

"Wake up," Lord Baelish ordered gently.

Sansa opened her eyes seeing the Marquess above slightly shaking her as she still pushed at his chest.

"You're having a nightmare," he told with concern written across his face.

She was lying in bed and the man was hovering over her on one side of the small bed. His shirt was loose and his hair mussed from sleep.

He had been sleeping in this bed unbeknownst to her.

Sansa shoved him back hard pulling the linens to her neck.

"How dare you, my Lord," she recoiled. "You promised..."

"I promised nothing, my lady," Baelish retorted coldly. "You forfeited my kindnesses when you ran off tonight. I am beyond fatigued and refuse to sleep in that god-awful chair for your benefit. You're more than welcome to it."

He turned his back to her and pulled the blanket over his shoulder.

"Go to sleep. I have no interest in raping women," he added and then said no more.

Sansa lie frozen on her back next to him. Everything she had been taught told her to get out of the bed, but she was also exhausted from the past day and stared at the chair in dread. Glancing at his back, Sansa debated whether to take the blanket and lie on the floor. He certainly wasn't going to be gentleman in this situation. It was terribly cold and Sansa was sure she would freeze on the wooden floor.

Frowning, she scooted to the edge of her side of the bed putting as much space as she could between her and the Marquess. Sharing a room with this man was more than enough to compromise her in the eyes of the ton. They would demand he marry her and Sansa winced. If he refused, the Marquess of Harrenhal would even be more notorious than his libertine reputation and she would be a whore. He would still be in standing with the ton because of his title and gender and Sansa would be the scourge of any lady of breeding.

Men could practically get away with anything without tarnishing their character and some even getting praise for it. However, all women tended to be judged harshly regardless of title and very few could save their reputations depending on who they were associated with and money. Sansa had neither.

She tugged on the bedclothes and the man had the audacity to tug back. She pulled again and the man sighed harshly. All of a sudden, he rose from the bed and took his now dry cloak hanging from the screen. Donning the finely tailored wool, he climbed back into bed keeping his back to her. Sansa pulled the rest of the blanket around her and curled into her edge of the bed with a small smile.

Sansa was fixing her hair when Baelish sent up a maid to help her dress that morning. Unwilling to sleep only in her chemise, made her once bridal dress rumpled and creased. Whom was she meant to impress at Harrenhal? His staff? It mattered not. The girl laced her corset and Sansa was distressed when the bodice was obviously still too small. Sansa did not lace the garment before going to bed for comfort's sake but now as she stood before the mirror, she did not know what to do. She had the girl do her best and tie it off but in doing so Sansa could scarcely breath and she couldn't move her arms in fear of tearing the delicate silk and lace.

Gazing at her reflection, Sansa wanted to cry. This is how she might have looked had she married Joffrey minus the darkening bruise forming on her cheek. Had her father not rebelled, she would have been married to that awful boy and probably given her more bruises judging his violent temper. Her feet ached inside the silk slippers that had never been worn and that her feet were now too large for. The girl in the mirror looked ridiculous, Sansa thought. Wrapping the delicately woven cashmere shawl around her shoulders to hide her laced back, Sansa went downstairs to break her fast.

Lord Baelish was already waiting as she sat across from him.

"Best be mindful of what you eat today, my dear," he began. "You're ready to burst out of that gown. That would be quite an introduction never seen at Harrenhal."

The smirk on his face irritated Sansa as she ignored his obvious bait.

"I doubt your staff would be surprised, m'lord," she countered. "Considering the lewd women you are known to associate with."

She wasn't attempting to be pleasant any longer. Looking up, however, the smile on his face was not the expected frown she received.

The round woman from the previous night gasped when she set down a bowl of porridge in front

of Sansa. The woman stared at the bruise on her face and then scowled at his lordship.

"I did not give that to her," he sneered. "I'm betting women receive far worse around these parts."

The woman took her coins and moved on leaving them alone. After a few spoonfuls, Sansa couldn't stomach any more pushing it away and drinking a horrible tea that probably would taste better with honey and whiskey.

The meal was blissfully silent and immediately the carriage was brought around for their hasty departure. Lord Baelish wanted to arrive at Harrenhal before night fall. He lifted her to the step avoiding the deep mud once again but when she grasped the handle alongside the door to help herself in, she heard and felt fabric tear along the seam of her shoulder. She sat down and huffed in annoyance. It seemed to be just one thing after another. She fixed the shawl to cover herself and waited as his lordship ascended the carriage.

They had travelled for several minutes when Sansa broke the silence.

"Why did you bring this dress, I had others in my trunk. Why look through my trousseau?" she asked angrily.

The man did not even have the decency to look at her as he spoke instead choosing to watch the countryside.

"I looked through your trunk, my dear. There was nothing suitable in there," he grimaced. "I won't have you looking like a *scullery maid* when entering my home and meeting the household."

"What difference does it make, my Lord? I look ridiculous in this dress that, not only does not fit me, but is six years old and out of fashion. At least in my other clothes, I would be comfortable and able to breathe," she spat viciously.

"Ladies fashions often bemuse me," he contemplated, "Impractical, uncomfortable and really only for the eyes of men."

"Then why am I wearing this?" she asked in irritation.

"I was merely curious as to how your old wedding dress would have looked on you," he mused as he finally looked at her. "You would have been a vision, my lady."

Sansa did not know what to say to that and used her shawl as a shield, wrapping it around her bosom. The man laughed and leaned his head back against the cushioned seat.

Before noon, they reached Lord Holloway's Town and Sansa thought it was refreshing to see a real township again. The market was bustling and everyone had a place to be it seemed. Sansa was famished and was disappointed when the carriage stopped, not at a place to dine, but a tailor. Mr. Wiltshire, it read on the sign.

The cobblestone streets were wet but thankfully clear of mud as Sansa descended the carriage refusing the Marquess' hand this time. It wasn't Kings Landing or even The Eyrie, but strangers gave her an odd look when they passed by. Sansa's ankles were showing, as her skirts were too short and she consciously pulled the shawl tighter around the ill-fitting bodice.

Baelish escorted her into the shop and Sansa sighed seeing they were the only patrons. Sansa wandered to bolts of fine fabrics to busy herself as the tailor walked in recognizing one of his best patrons.

"My Lord, lovely to see you again. How may I serve you?" the man, Wiltshire, beamed.

"Ah, I would like another one of those beautiful cloaks you made me months ago. And..." his head turned to Sansa's direction and she went back to looking at the fabrics, "I would like you to take the lady's measurements. She will require a new wardrobe."

Sansa's eyes widened in disbelief. Why would he buy her a new wardrobe? What was she to him, a doll he could dress up, a façade to present to any guests in his home?

"A *full* wardrobe, m'lord? Delicates and everything?" he asked quietly as if he might offend the young lady in his shop.

"Everything," Baelish stated firmly. "I want the finest, mind you. Only the finest will do. You know my tastes. Madame Berkins in Kings Landing has all the latest fashions, of course. Money is not an issue..."

"Oh no, of course not, m'lord," the tailor smiled. "And I'm a man of discretion..."

Both Sansa and Baelish caught his meaning turning to look at him. Sansa then glared at her new benefactor. She would not be labeled as some kind of kept woman... a whore.

"Discretion? I don't know what you mean?" the Marquess feigned surprise. "The Lady Sansa and I were attacked on the River Road by thieves last night. I'm afraid they took almost everything including my lady's trunk. All that was left was an old dress that wasn't ruined, as you can see. Which brings me to another inquiry," he smiled. "Have you a dress that is *prêt-à-porter* for my lady right now? She is terribly uncomfortable."

The man squirmed a bit before answering.

"I do, my Lord, but" he hesitated.

"But? I will pay you handsomely, Wiltshire," Baelish offered in kind.

"You see, it was made for Lord Frey's new young wife... He will be expecting it in a few days..." the tailor muttered anxiously.

"Ah, well nothing is easier my friend," Baelish said pulling out his purse of gold coins. "You tell Frey that it will be a little longer but you will give him a dress finer than the one he purchased for his child bride. She's not a large girl, is she?"

The Marquess paid the man more than whatever Sansa thought the dress was worth.

“Oh no, my Lord. I’d say she’s about the same size of your lady here,” he smiled. “Not as pretty though.”

“Extra for your troubles. If Lord Frey is not satisfied, you send him to me,” Baelish grinned. “Now, if we can move along, I am in a hurry to return home.”

“Of course, my Lord, of course,” the tailor smiled greedily. “Come, my lady. I’ll have my mistress measure you and fit Lady Frey’s dress. You poor thing, it must have been a terrible ordeal. Robbed by highwaymen.... My Lord Baelish will bring some needed order to this county...” the man blathered on as he took her into the next room.

Over an hour later, the woman had measured, dressed and fitted the new gown to Sansa’s frame. Lord Frey’s new bride was just a tad larger around the middle and bosom, but everything else was almost a perfect fit. Sansa wondered at the age of the new Countess and gagged at the thought of having to marry a man so old that he could be her grandfather. Sansa would have drunk poison before letting her parents marry her to someone like that. Not to mention that Lord Frey, who swore fealty to her father, betrayed him for the King. If there was a vengeful God, that man would die a horrible death.

The woman was finishing the laces as Sansa looked in the mirror. The dress wasn’t beautiful but it would do. She could hardly complain. It was better than anything she had owned in years. The dark blue suited her red hair and azure eyes. It wasn’t a ball gown but more suited for evening than a traditional morning or afternoon dress. However, it was more current in fashion than her old bridal dress and everything in her trunk.

“There you are my Lady, you look lovely if I may say so,” the woman smiled sweetly and reminded Sansa of Mrs. Cole. “If I know his lordship’s taste, you’ll have the finest wardrobe of any royal in Kings Landing.”

Sansa didn’t want to think about that. She didn’t want things from him, for that would mean she would be indebted to him in some way. However, she smiled warmly at the woman and thanked her properly for the dress and kindness.

She retrieved her shawl, leaving the old bridal dress behind. The shawl was the last thing she had belonging to mother and could never throw it away. Sansa walked back into the main parlor where the men were discussing politics of the region.

Lord Baelish’s face held a look of satisfaction when his mouth twitched into a smile before correcting himself. He bowed slightly and gave Sansa his arm before turning back to the tailor.

“Remember, send Madam Berkins her measurements, hair colour, ivory skin and blue eyes. I want only the latest and best for my Lady Sansa. Come to Harrenhal to have her fitted properly.”

“I will, my Lord, have no worries,” the man replied as Baelish held the door open for her to the busy streets.

Once in the carriage, Sansa spoke with reluctance, “Thank you, my Lord. The dress is lovely...” she hesitated again.

“But...” he answered in wait.

“I do not need a wardrobe or anything from you,” she said softly not meeting his eyes.

“You would rather walk around in rags?” he laughed incredulously.

“No... but it is not for you to buy me such things,” she added. “I refuse to be indebted to you, sir.”

At that he laughed loudly further angering her as she tried to ignore him completely.

“My dear, if you wish to wander about my house in rags, I will not stop you,” he chuckled. “However, I think I may know you better than you realize.”

Sansa scowled at him, “You nothing about me other than who my parents are.”

“I know you are still a Marchioness and should be a Duchess, I might add, regardless of what the King says. Ladies of your breeding do not wear rags,” he smiled at her turned up and stubborn chin. “You, my dear, should never be covered in rags.”

At that moment her stomach growled in a very unladylike fashion making him chuckle again.

“We’ll stop and have lunch. There’s a place I know where the food is actually edible,” he grinned. “Come, take that sour look off your pretty face. That bruise is bad enough without you frowning too.”

“I wouldn’t have this bruise, if it weren’t for you,” she said under her breath but he heard her clearly and immediately the mood changed for the worse.

“I see. If you wish, I can have you escorted right back to those men in Riverrun. We’ll see what brothel they’ll have you slave in first and how many men beat you senseless when you don’t please them,” he spat cruelly. “What say you?”

Sansa clutched her mother’s shawl for protection and could not answer him out of pride, making the Marquess huff loudly.

“Starks... pride, stubbornness, duty and ridiculous family honor... utterly ignorant of the world around you until it’s too late,” he muttered to himself.

The carriage stopped and Baelish ordered her to stay inside while his man, Brune, acted as warden. A half hour passed when he returned with a basket and two bottles of wine. He ordered the driver to take them to Harrenhal and Sansa sat in confusion.

Lord Baelish was in a foul mood and she dared not argue with him when he handed her a bottle. He placed a serviette on his lap before buttering a slice of fresh bread and retrieving a small chicken leg and began eating quietly avoiding her stare. He pushed the basket over to her and said nothing.

After several minutes of silence, he glanced her way with an eyebrow raised.

“If you’re not hungry, my dear, we can stop and I’ll give the rest of this to my men. I’d rather it not go to waste,” he growled. “Dinner at Harrenhal will not be until eight. I don’t need you fainting again for I’m rather tired of carrying you around the past two days, so eat something.”

He uncorked the bottle and took a long drink before taking another piece of chicken. Sansa’s stomach clenched in hunger and decided to swallow her pride for food instead. The wine was better than that at the inn, and she was tempted to drink the entire bottle to get tipsy. She knew that she would end up vomiting all over her new dress and instead took small sips to wash down her lunch.

Blessfully, the trip from Lord Holloway’s Town and Harrenhal was much shorter than she anticipated. Out the carriage window, as they crested a small hill, Sansa could see it and it took her breath away. The house was grander than anything she ever saw. It dwarfed Winterfell and even The Eyrie by comparison. Sansa had never travelled to Kings Landing, but if the palace was any larger than this, it couldn’t be by much.

She had read the history and knew how old Harrenhal was. It was the original royal palace back in the day of the Mad King. A massive fire destroyed much when His Grace, the Duke of StormsEnd lived there. Sansa could have never imagined such a place.

Lord Baelish must be wealthy indeed for the house looked as if flames never touched it. It not quite the old castle Sansa envisioned in fairytales with a drawbridge, massive stone towers and turrets. It had been remodeled greatly. Harrenhal had been given to his lordship almost a year ago and he managed to turn it into not only a livable home but also a stunning one that rivaled any wealthy family in the South.

The lake was visible behind the house and she could see craftsmen still working on the roof and many gardeners preparing for the coming winter.

This is where she would live now. This house with such history, sorrow, debauchery and wars. This place that was said to be haunted or even cursed by those in the Riverlands. This is where Fate and the Stars had brought her and Sansa wasn’t sure if it was for better or for worse.

Midnight Sonata

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait, but I haven't been much in the mood for writing lately. This one is a bit shorter, but I like it.

Thank you very much to those that are reading, commenting and leaving kudos. You don't know how wonderful that is to see and read. Whether you like it, hate it or just good old fashioned criticism... it all helps. It was new territory with Underworld as a modern fic and I'm really playing around with this period of late 18th/early 19th century, etc. Hopefully, I'm not mucking it up too badly even though I know I'm cheating a bit with the music and art (oh well... at least I admit I'm cheating LOL)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The carriage made its way over a stone bridge towards the great house of Harrenhal as Sansa watched in amazement at all the buzzing of busy bees. The groundskeepers were preparing for winter, but she could imagine how beautiful the gardens would look come spring. Hedges trimmed in exquisite detail and flowerbeds just waiting for warmth and sunshine. Carpenters on scaffolding were still working on what appeared to be the west wing of the house and Sansa wondered what it looked like on the inside.

The stonework still held elements of its ancient history but clearly, the late Duke and now the Marquess had made substantial changes from the old drawings she had seen in her father's study. The massive walls surrounding the once great royal castle meant to keep out one's enemies were no more, but in turn for beautiful gardens with stone terraces. Where an old moat should have been with a drawbridge, was now a bubbling brook with a simple stone bridge. The Marquess had managed to turn this old, half-burnt and dreary castle into something fit for a king.

Staring at the grand estate, Sansa fancied if the rumored ghosts approved of all the new changes to their home. So many were the stories of all who died at Harrenhal. Sansa could hardly believe them when she was a child. Arya was the one that loved the old Northern faerie tales of the wailing banshee, changelings, *daoine sidhe* and the mischievous pucas. If any place could be ripe with such legends, it would have been this place back in the day. Every lord of Harrenhal since the days of old met with a disastrous fate. It had been deemed cursed and since the demise of the Duke of StormsEnd, not a single lord was willing to take it. Such men would never admit this was so, but still they refused the wealthy estate time and time again. She preferred to believe the happier tales of the grand balls with ladies in silk dresses who danced with handsome lords. Gazing at her new home, it did not look like a place filled with ghosts and goblins.

The horses halted and the carriage came to a stop. A footman opened the door as Lord Baelish stepped out and held his hand for her to follow him. All eyes would be upon her and Sansa dared not appear rude as she was a guest in his home. Her mother's teachings were ever present to always be the well-mannered lady she was expected to be. Sansa took his gloved hand and descended to find everyone watching her every move.

Baelish guided her up the grand entrance just as the heavy oak doors opened revealing a slender but stern older man with a deep frown upon his pale face. His posture was rigid as he bowed curtsy and followed them into the marble foyer.

"My Lord, we expected you earlier," the man spoke and suddenly gave Sansa questioning look and dismissed her just as quick. "The gardeners shall be finished by tomorrow. However, the west wing will not be completed until week's end. It took longer than expected for the new architect to adapt the foreign-designed water pipes that you requested. It's ready for your inspection as is the new staff."

The Marquess removed his cloak handing it to the footman and Sansa remained quiet watching the exchange between the two men.

"Have we acquired a housekeeper yet?" Baelish asked.

"No, my Lord. Mrs. Ames is handling the bulk of the house staff and I am taking charge of the rest. We'll manage for now," the man replied.

"Very well, Duncan. Lady Sansa should be able to take charge of the household in due time. A place such as this needs a proper lady," Lord Baelish smiled and Sansa was seething with anger but said nothing.

So, she was right. Lord Baelish was making her a glorified housekeeper in return for living in his home.

"My dear, this is Duncan. He has been the majordomo of Harrenhal long before I took ownership. Until I can procure a housekeeper, work with him on getting this staff into proper order," he introduced lightly as he inspected some of the workers moving furniture about. "Duncan, this is the Lady Sansa. Niece of Lord Tully and Her Grace, the Duchess of The Vale. She will be staying with us as my ward."

Sansa glanced at the butler nodding at him kindly and wasn't sure if Lord Baelish was going to elaborate further or not. She did not want to appear weak in front of this man but at the same time, she did not wish to breach etiquette. She couldn't speak and act the way she did with Mrs. Cole and those at Riverrun. Harrenhal's grandeur demanded a lady of a great house as The Vale and Winterfell. She pulled on her teachings and observations of her aunt and mother and waited for

her benefactor to take the lead.

Seemingly satisfied with the progress, Lord Baelish walked back to her and grimaced.

“We must do something about that nasty bruise, my lady,” his voice softened. “Duncan, my lady is weary from our journey from Riverrun where we encountered some trouble on the road. Things were stolen, unfortunately. Take what remains of her trunks to...” he paused in thought with a hint of a smile, “I think the lavender room shall do nicely.”

“Yes, my lord,” Duncan replied with another curt bow and snapped his fingers at the footmen to follow.

“Come, my dear,” he chuckled under his breath. “Let see what they’ve done with my money.”

The sour man from the carriage was gone and this genial one had replaced him. The Marquess had the ability to change his character in an instant and Sansa found it an odd trait. He guided her gently through the foyer and Sansa was in awe. Polished marble and rich mahogany spanned the architecture. A massive grand staircase wound its way up three stories high as light poured down from the paned windows high above in the ceiling.

Lush greenery filled corners giving the vast space the feel of southern gardens. Lord Baelish was proud of his new and richly decorated home. He spared no expense in making it nothing short of his own palace. The parlor was dressed in hues of blue. The room was inviting and everything looked as if it were new and never used. Beautiful tapestries and colorful Persian rugs adorned each room with paintings and sculptures that only men of wealth could afford.

Lord Baelish loved color and variety by the way the house was decorated. Winterfell and even The Eyrie paled in comparison to the richness of her new surroundings. The scent from the numerous bouquets of flowers filled the air as he drew her into the music room. She had not played a piano since leaving her aunt’s home and Baelish caught the smile on her face.

“Do you enjoy music?” he asked with a strange look upon his face.

The piano was beautiful and finer than anything she had ever played. Her fingers drifted across the ivory wishing she were alone in this room. She would play for hours back home to her brother’s and Arya’s irritation. It was the one way she could get back at them for all their teasing of her girlish ways.

Closing her eyes, Sansa’s right hand unconsciously played out a little melody letting the acoustics of the room embrace the sound. For a moment, she felt light of heart until his voice interrupted.

“Will you play for me, sweetling?” he asked. Sansa opened her eyes to find him appraising her in a way that made her look away.

Sweetling. Why did he call her that? He should not be using such an endearment to a woman he barely knows, she thought stubbornly. It was simple request, which normally would not have bothered her in the slightest. The way he asked unnerved Sansa.

“If you wish, my Lord,” Sansa replied thinly, sitting and refusing to meet his eyes.

Before he could utter a word, her fingers found the keys and the melancholy tone of Beethoven’s Sonata #14 echoed in the room. Sansa focused on the music as her hands glided across the ebony and ivory. She could see Baelish move closer and Sansa closed her eyes again wishing he wasn’t there. She wished she were back home playing while her mother embroidered and father read quietly by the fire. She could almost hear the children playing in the garden when a tear fell. For a slight moment, the world stopped and she couldn’t play any more.

He didn’t ask why she stopped nor did he seem to expect an answer of any kind. Only one word came from his lips uttered in gentle praise.

“*Beautiful.*”

Sansa swallowed with difficulty not wanting to cry in front of this man. She wanted to be away from him, away from everyone in this house.

“I’m very tired. I should like to retire... if I may be shown to my new room...” she breathed avoiding his unwavering gaze.

“Look at me,” he demanded softly and Sansa raised her head catching something in his eyes for half a heartbeat and then it was gone.

He cleared his throat and in an instant, he smiled, but it never reached his eyes.

“Come. We’re on the second floor in the east wing,” he pointed out nonchalantly and started walking out of the room.

We?

Lord Baelish had a way of saying a simple word that struck a strange awkwardness in her core. It wasn’t exactly fear, for he could have taken advantage of her at any time in the last two days. He was an educated and worldly man. A man not born into family but bought his way up. He was a gentleman in some ways and yet not in others. Sansa did not know what to make of him.

She reluctantly followed feeling the stares of the staff as she walked past. Surely, they were wondering why she was here. They certainly weren’t expecting him to arrive with a lady in tow.

Sansa picked up her skirts to catch up with the Marquess’ long stride to the grand staircase. He waited patiently and took her elbow gently guiding her up until they reached the second floor. Everything in the house was ornate and beautiful but this floor was breathtaking. Thick rugs expanded the dark wood floors and the walls gilded with gold leaf with high vaulted ceilings.

Lord Baelish stopped and opened a door for her enter. The room was bathed in cream and lavender as soft light filtered through the curtains. It was prettier than anything she had from her

aunt and uncle's homes but it still did not feel like it was hers.

"Not all of the rooms are finished, but this will do," he stated easily. "I wasn't exactly expecting guests so soon."

Sansa saw his reflection leaning against the door from the small vanity table.

"I'm sorry I have inconvenienced you, my Lord," Sansa replied with a touch of annoyance. If she was such a bother, why didn't he just leave her in Riverrun?

He chuckled lightly, "Not so much an inconvenience but..."

Lord Baelish hesitated and Sansa was curious as to what he was going to say. Instead he, sighed and straightened his posture.

"This room doesn't have an adjoining privy. You'll need to use the one down this hallway," he offered wryly. "I'll send up one of the maids for tonight and you can choose whom you wish tomorrow."

Sansa nodded and wondered at the time.

"When do you expect me for dinner this evening?" she finally asked.

"I don't. I'm afraid I'm not in the mood for entertaining tonight. I'll see that Mrs. Ames brings your supper to you. I believe we've had enough of each other for now. Goodnight, my lady," he replied coolly.

Just like that, he shut the door and Sansa was alone.

Sansa did not know what to make of her new benefactor as she wandered a bit around her new room. It was lovely if not a little chilly. Looking out the large window, she saw Gods Eye lake. It was larger than she could have imagined with a small isle resting in the middle. A vast forest bordered the west bank of the lake that stretched many acres into the countryside.

Nearer to the estate, Sansa could see a few small rivers coming from the lake and two large water mills at work. They had water mills back home but not with copper pipes running from them to the house. It looked as though it was feeding water directly to the first floor and possibly up to the second. Sansa overheard some men talking about new science from foreign countries and laughing but Lord Baelish seemed to put it to use. Duncan had pointed out that the Marquess' plans took longer than expected and it peaked Sansa's curiosity.

The gardens and terraces behind the house were larger than what she had seen when they arrived. A pathway led to a huge set of hedges and Sansa had to stare at it for several moments in the dimming light only to see that it was a labyrinth of sorts. The hedges were taller than two men standing atop of each other she gathered. Why would Lord Baelish want a labyrinth? It seemed an odd thing entirely.

It wasn't long until a maid brought her dinner and helped Sansa undress. The small bath chamber had a copper tub barely large enough for someone half her size. Sansa was tall for a woman, nearly Lord Baelish's height, and the tub was only useful for a full sponge bath. At least this time the water was hot and the soap gentle. It was late by the time she was bathed and ready to crawl into bed. She hadn't seen or heard from the Marquess the entire night and clearly he seemed to be as tired of her as she was of him.

Perhaps he was second-guessing bringing her here, Sansa smiled. Perhaps, in the morning, he would admit his mistake and send her back to Riverrun. Sansa giggled at the thought of the arrogant Lord Baelish conceding a mistake but when she climbed into the warm feather bed, all thoughts of leaving Harrenhal vanished for a moment.

The linens were a fine weave and the bed so soft that she sunk into it as if wrapped in a cloud. It had been so long since she had a bed so comfortable, one that did not smell of must and dampness. Sansa pulled the bedclothes up and snuggled deep. The scent of lavender was on the pillows and the heat created from the bed warmer lulled her worries away. Tomorrow was a new day and she would take it one step at a time. Right now, Sansa wanted to forget everything and dream in this blessing of a bed. No longer were knights in gleaming armor or perfect gentlemen to save this sullen girl from her lonely tower. No, she was on her own. No family but herself.

It wasn't the dreaded thunder that woke her out of a dead sleep. The room was silent save a strange sound that seemed to come from below. Sansa opened her eyes and felt as if someone had been watching her. She curled the bedclothes up to her face and the scent reminded her she wasn't in her own room anymore. This wasn't Riverrun, but Harrenhal and the past two days rang through her memory.

The sound reminded her of something but couldn't place it as her eyes scanned the room with trepidation. It felt as if someone was walking over her grave. The moonlight streaming through the curtain told her it was very late. The household was sleeping and yet she was wide awake now. Moving out of her warm bed, Sansa put on her dressing gown and went to her door. Yes, there was something going on downstairs. Through the door, it sounded like music?

Who would be playing at this ungodly hour of the night? And it struck her. The stories of Harrenhal's curse played up her childish fears. She cracked the door open and peered into the darkness. The moon's silver light glimmered down from the windows above casting eerie shadows down the grand staircase. Not a voice or candlelight could be detected as her eyes glanced down the hallway.

The music was clearer now as she stepped towards the marble bannister and dared to look down. Someone was playing the piano. It wasn't just any melody but the solemn one she played yesterday. The music room was directly underneath and yet not a flicker from a candle could be seen. It was dark and quiet except for the anger that came from below. It wasn't so much the same sonata that gave her fear but the way it was being played right now. There was a quiet fury in the gloomy tune. Sansa was about to speak when one of the servant girls hurried down the hallway catching her by the arm.

"Sssh. It's best not to let them know you hear them," the young woman hushed as she pulled at Sansa's arm.

"Who?"

"The spirits, m'lady," she whispered.

Sansa scoffed a little, "There is someone playing the piano downstairs, that's all. Why at this time of night, is unusual..."

"No, m'lady. *They* come out at night in this place. His lordship might have rebuilt Harrenhal, but *they* have always been here only to remind us," she said pulling Sansa back to her room.

"I don't believe in such things..."

"Well, beggin' your pardon, you should. This isn't Riverrun. There's a reason why his lordship has trouble keeping staff here. They leave sooner or later," she continued to whisper as the music played on.

Sansa wanted to go downstairs and prove it but the maid practically hauled her back inside her room and closed the door.

"Silly superstitions. I thought only Northerners believed in such things," Sansa huffed and took off her dressing gown.

The maid put her ear to the door and sighed, "Mrs. Ames says that when the living returned to Harrenhal, they woke the dead. I don't think they like his lordship. Ever since he came, we hear them more and more."

"How do you mean?" Sansa wondered tucking her feet back under the covers.

The girl smiled as if she found a new friend and sat next to Sansa on the bed, "Well, Duncan says this place is cursed. A couple of the footmen said there's a torture chamber somewhere under the house... when it was an old castle but no one knows for sure. I think they were just trying to scare the other maids. There are strange sounds that come at night and then the music started. It's always at this hour and whenever anyone goes down into the music room, it's empty. *Every time.*"

"It's not someone playing a silly game, you think?" Sansa smiled.

"When I heard it tonight, I came out thinking it was you that had gone downstairs. But when I saw you on the landing... No one had ever heard that song before you came yesterday. His lordship doesn't play. There has never been any music in this house unless it's this hour. Sometimes you hear sounds that seem to come from the floor and walls. Duncan says the gates of hell are under this house and that's why the marble floors are so warm downstairs."

Sansa grinned and leapt out of bed, "Let's go see. Show me."

"Oh no, m'lady. I don't go down there at night. You could give me a gold crown and I still wouldn't do it," the girl shrank back.

"Well, I'm not afraid," Sansa giggled and opened the door looking back at the girl. "Are you coming?"

The maid followed Sansa to the landing but no further. The music had long ceased as Sansa crept down the grand staircase. Her heart was pounding as she reached the bottom, from exhilaration or fear, she knew not. The music room was dark and Sansa was actually frightened to look inside, afraid she might see a real ghost. Just as she thought, the room was empty. The piano stood in the middle of the room casting a large shadow on the rug from the moonlight.

Sansa moved to the piano as silent as the dead scanning the room with wide eyes. She felt the bench and it was cold. She pressed a few keys and waited. Nothing. Sansa smiled to herself. Someone was playing a game to scare the maids and it was working. Just as she started to walk out of the room and loud bellow came from the floor and Sansa froze.

Turning around slowly, she half expected to see a ghost staring back at her for entering his domain but there was nothing. She was practically panting as her heart raced faster. Slowly, she stepped backwards until her feet slipped a little on the marble. Out of fear or stubborn determination to prove the maid wrong, Sansa pulled her bare foot from the slipper and placed it on the cold marble.

Only it wasn't cold. It was warm. Her foot flinched as if it had been burned and slipped it quickly back into her shoe. A deep and dark chuckle reverberated from the floor and walls sounding like the Devil himself and it was enough for Sansa to scurry back up the stairs to safety of the second floor finding herself alone once again.

The maid had disappeared and Sansa wondered for a moment if the girl wasn't a spirit as well, there to warn her. Sansa ran back into her room and locked the door before jumping into bed and pulling the linen over her head. If spirits wanted in, a locked door surely would not keep them out.

Minutes passed slowly and nothing happened. The house was again quiet and cold and Sansa snuggled deeper into the bed. Dear God, not only was she ward of a man she detested but now living in a haunted house. She prayed that Lord Baelish would send her away tomorrow. She did not want to be here no matter how beautiful the house was. Sansa did not belong here and she repeated that until finally her troubled mind fell to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I have the story fairly mapped out now and I did say I'm using the time period relatively LOOSELY in this fic since it still has the fantasy element to it. I should say that I'm using music from around the same time period but in a general way. There is an opera coming in a later chapter that isn't written until the 1850's but it's so perfect for this story, I had to use it. So, I am aware I'm using music and some art from different time periods. It's fanfic... oh well. Love it or hate it.

Beethoven's Piano Sonata #14 in C-Sharp Minor, Opus .27, No.2 "Moonlight": I. Adagio Sostenuto was finished in 1801.

Old celtic legends : wailing banshee, changelings, daoine sidhe (faeries) and the mischevious puca (pooka: a faerie goblin that is a shape shifter :: Many small mountainous lakes and springs in Ireland are called 'Pooka Pools' or 'Pollaphuca', which means Pooka or Demon hole for future reference)

Morning Tea

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the amazing comments.

This will be more of a slow burn... just FYI. I'm trying to get things in motion and have quite a bit planned for upcoming chapters. :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sansa found it odd that Lord Baelish entered the small dining room long after she had been served, even waiting for his arrival before tucking in not wanting the food to go cold. He didn't seem to mind or consider the notion rude as he sat at the head of the table adjacent to her while a footman poured a cup of tea.

"You're up earlier than I expected," he smiled sipping his tea as a hot plate of breakfast was placed before him.

Sansa raised an eyebrow finishing her eggs. "I don't know what you expect, my Lord."

"Aren't titled ladies prone to sleeping until mid-morning?" he teased tucking into his food.

Sansa scoffed causing him to raise his brows in amusement. He seemed to be in a jovial mood this morning.

"You forget, my Lord, I am no longer a lady of title. Even back then, I never slept late or lay about expecting to be waited on hand and foot like some I know of..." she muttered testily.

Baelish barked in laughter making her scowl at him. Sansa was in no mood for his games so early in the day.

"You are in quite the pleasant mood this morning," she added not sure as to why she was attempting conversation with him.

He buttered a small crumpet and grinned, "Ah, it's remarkable what a long, hot bath and a comfortable bed can do to a man's disposition. Did you not sleep well, my dear?"

"Fine, thank you," she quipped finding her teacup suddenly fascinating.

"The dark circles under your eyes tell me differently," he pointed out simply and Sansa hated his sharp observations.

"The bed was soft and the room lovely," she offered but he didn't take it.

"I didn't ask about your bed, my lady," he smirked into his tea.

Sansa had enough of his games. "I'm in a stranger's home and know not what will become of me. I suppose restful sleep wasn't in the *cards* for me," she retorted picking at the fruit on her plate.

Lord Baelish grinned and played along. "Well, if you wish to leave..." and suddenly Sansa's ears perked up, "...I'll not stop you. It's a long walk to Riverrun, it's best to get an early start, I'd say."

If servants weren't standing nearby, Sansa would have stood and slapped him across the face. Instead, she sat and fumed in silence. This man was no gentleman regardless of the title he held.

"You would have a lady walk across the countryside alone dragging her belongings behind her?" she sneered quietly.

He sipped his tea and didn't even have the grace to look at her as he spoke, "I would have you stop this foolishness. I can see that recklessness in your eyes, my dear. You are not my prisoner here and I shall not force you to stay. If you wish to leave, then do so, but you do it of your own accord. What did I tell you the night before last?"

Sansa did not have to think on it. Lord Baelish made it very clear he had no intention of running after her if she bailed again. Perhaps if she wrote to Uncle Edmure, he would send a carriage or at least a horse and rider for protection.

"If you're thinking of writing your uncle, by all means, go ahead," he added and Sansa wondered if mindreading were one of his many strange talents. "I would be morbidly curious as to his reply. However, his tremendous debts, for which I shall be settling today may give him second thoughts."

Sansa seethed and wanted nothing more than to toss the china across the room shattering it into a million pieces. He wasn't keeping her captive, but he wasn't giving her a viable alternative either. No matter how he worded it, she was trapped here and Sansa despised him for it.

She stood abruptly. "If you'll excuse me, my Lord," she said politely as she could.

"Of course," he replied with disinterest. "The morning room is to your right. The gardens may be a bit chilly this early. Do as you wish."

Sansa was desperate for fresh air and made to turn left towards the gardens when his voice rang out.

“Stay clear of the labyrinth, Lady Sansa. It is quite dangerous,” he projected calmly.

Sansa rolled her eyes and walked out onto the terrace pulling her shawl around her shoulders. The faded rose dress was worn and the material thin and Sansa should have retreated to the morning room as he suggested, but she needed out of this house even if for only a few minutes.

It was chilly, just as he said but she refused to let him win. By damned, he may be the master of the house but he wasn't the master of her, Sansa thought as she walked down the stone steps and watched the groundskeepers and carpenters at work.

It had been unseasonably cold with too much rain this year and this season's small harvest was proof. It would be a harsh winter in Riverrun and Sansa remembered the money Lord Baelish gave to Mrs. Cole. If she needed more, he said he would provide and for some reason, Sansa believed him. He was tender as a loving son to Mrs. Cole and yet, Sansa wondered if her being here would make or break that offer to the old woman and her uncle.

Sansa did not know what to think anymore as she sat down on a beautifully carved stone bench. The terrace overlooked the lake as grey clouds drifted from the south. Rain was usually a good thing, but Sansa was sick of it. She wished winter was already over and spring was near. She could almost feel the sunshine and warmth when a gruff voice spoke from behind.

“Lord Baelish sent me to fetch you, my lady,” the old butler announced and Sansa sighed.

She wrapped her mother's shawl around her shoulders with cold fingers and stood reluctantly. Obviously, she wasn't meant to have any time to herself if the Marquess could help it.

“You are Lady Catelyn's daughter, are you not?” the man asked sternly but Sansa nodded all the same. She wanted to correct the man that her mother was, in fact, a Duchess, but for some reason she felt that it did not matter any longer.

“Hmph. You best not bring your Northern treachery to this house, girl,” he grumbled and Sansa rose to her full height but remained several inches shorter than the old man that looked at her with disgust.

“It is not *your* house, but the Marquess',” she retorted politely however laced with ice. “As he mentioned yesterday, I shall be overseeing the household. If it is not to your liking, you may see to him about it.”

The man stood his ground and smirked.

“Lords come and go, Lady Stark,” he sneered, “but Harrenhal is Harrenhal and will continue to be after his lordship is long gone. This is an ancient house of royal blood...not fit for traitors *or* the low born.”

Sansa wasn't quite sure what he meant by that. Duncan was nothing more than a steward over the estate since His Grace's demise. Other than her and Lord Baelish, everyone in the house was low born. Baelish came from the ton, not a wealthy family but part of the peerage all the same. He was not born a high lord but made so by the king. All the lords of the realm were given their prestigious titles by a sovereign at some point in time which made Duncan's argument pointless. Sansa did not want to defend Lord Baelish, given his reputation, but somehow she felt just as slighted as a traitor as did he for being a self-made man.

Defiant, she walked up to the old butler and stared him in the eyes, “Well, tis a good thing that neither traitors nor low-borns, other than yourself, reside here.”

Sansa hated referring to the common folk as low born, but she wanted to put this man in his place. Who was he to treat her so distastefully? She had been nothing but courteous since her arrival yesterday. The Riverlands were not quite the southern gentry and aristocracy her parents spoke of but clearly being a Northerner here was a black mark as any. Lord Baelish had introduced her as niece to Lord Tully and the Duchess of The Vale but not the daughter of the late Duke and Duchess of Winterfell. Whether conscious or not, Lord Baelish did not point out her Northern heritage at all.

She marched past the old man and made her way into the house asking a footman where to find his lordship. The boy took her to the kitchens seeing Lord Baelish talking with the staff about the new water system.

The water was pumped from the water mill on the river and the pressure brought it straight into the kitchen. From the dumbwaiters, it could be transported with greater ease to the upper floors. The women seemed most happy about this modern convenience but Sansa still wondered at the set of copper piping that led up to the second floor of the east wing.

“Ah, Mrs. Ames, I wish you to meet the Lady Sansa. She will be taking charge of the household for a time,” Lord Baelish said with a knowing smile at Sansa. The older woman lined up the maids and a few footmen as the new mistress came into the warm kitchen.

“Madam, tis good to have a fine lady in Harrenhal once again,” Mrs. Ames smiled warmly. “We are at your disposal. Some of the girls are new, but do not worry, I'll have them sorted properly. Any changes to the household that are needed, just come to me... or Duncan,” the kind old woman added as an afterthought.

Sansa grinned, perhaps she was not the only one that did not care for the old majordomo either. Looking around the massive kitchen, she saw a large greenhouse just outside that peeked her curiosity at what was growing inside. The scent of fresh baked bread and dried herbs hanging from overhead filled the air and oddly Sansa felt she had more reasons for staying at Harrenhal than leaving. Spying the smug grin on the Marquess' face, perhaps that's what he had planned for all along.

“Thank you,” Sansa replied to the old woman and smiled to the staff waiting for her approval. “I'm sure everything will work out fine.”

Sansa wasn't sure what they thought of her. Perhaps, they expected a snobby, little rich girl or

someone like her Aunt Lysa, which gave her a thought.

"My aunt, the Duchess, ran a very tight household. I hope you will find that I am not as..." Sansa paused trying to find the right words, "rigid in that way." She knew she needed to appear firm and strong, but Sansa did not want to be viewed as a hard-handed harpy as well. "The house appears well maintained, I'm sure Lord Baelish appreciates all your hard work, Mrs. Ames."

Sansa glanced to her benefactor who had a look, was it pride in his slight smile? She could feel a blush begin to tinge her cheeks when Mrs. Ames came between them and turned her face slightly in concern.

"My Lord, you were right. Such a nasty mark on her pretty face isn't it?" the woman said as she inspected Sansa's left cheek. "Don't worry my Lady; I'll fix that up with a little comfrey and mugwort. In a few days, you'll never know you ever had it."

"Thank you," she uttered shyly but with sincerity.

"I'll send Sarah up with a fresh poultice tonight for you. Leave it on during the night. Is there anything you wish for tonight's menu, my lady?" Mrs. Ames asked and Sansa glanced to the Marquess. Would he dine again in his chambers?

"My Lord," she began, "I do not know your tastes as of yet."

"Mrs. Ames, anything will do. Whatever pleases my lady. I'll leave it up to you. If you'll excuse me," he answered and left Sansa in the kitchen presumably to do what women do.

Sansa spent the remainder of the morning with Mrs. Ames and found her very agreeable and kind. In time, she could grow a similar fondness she had for Mrs. Cole but there was something odd about the old woman. Some of the plants in the greenhouse were far from edible and most modern doctors didn't use the old ways much anymore. Sansa learnt much from her mother and caregivers in the North. They still adopted those old ways even though the new religion was accepted and practiced throughout the country for generations. Sansa had heard of women that were tortured and burned as witches because they were free thinking and wise. It seemed Southern ladies were reduced to nothing more than glamour on a gentleman's arm. A southern lady of good family was expected to be cultured but quiet and Sansa did not know if she would have been good at that.

Lord Baelish had one good quality about him. He did not admonish her for speaking out even when against him. Sansa's mother would have been embarrassed by her eldest daughter's insolence towards a high lord, even if it was someone like the Marquess. Before her family's death, Sansa never would have spoken of ill tongue. It was always Arya who was reprimanded for such egregious behavior.

Footmen delivered the Marquess' lunch in his study upstairs while Sansa ate in the library. The man seemingly wanted nothing to do with her today and Sansa tried to convince herself that it did not bother her. In the back of her mind, she couldn't escape the feeling of abandonment in some way. He brought her all the way here and now could not stand her presence.

A couple hours passed and Sansa was bored with her book. It had begun to rain outside giving the house a dreary feeling even with all the scuttling about by servants and workers. Lord Baelish probably would have given her a tour of his home yesterday until she demanded to be taken to her room. It was clear she wasn't going to see him until dinner tonight and so Sansa decided to inspect her new home. As the new lady of the house, it would not seem odd for her to walk about, Sansa told herself and set the unfinished book aside.

Footmen were lighting fires as she wandered, to warm the house in the growing chill of the storm that raged outside. The dining hall could seat forty comfortably and looked as if the room had not seen one supper.

I wasn't expecting guests so soon

The smaller dining room she broke her fast this morning was warmer and more inviting, she thought. The sideboards were set with polished silver serving trays, chaffing dishes and gilded cutlery. In the servants pantry, Lord Baelish had the finest china and crystal just begging to be used.

Crossing the gallery, men were hanging a beautiful painting that covered the entire wall and Sansa gazed at it lovingly. Whatever else, Lord Baelish might be, he was at least a man of good taste. He had an eye for current artists, ones Sansa's father never approved of, and that of the old masters. The rugs, furnishings, all were the finest workmanship. His selections did not seem to merely impress guests but were that of personal interest and taste. Somehow, if she asked him about any one of the paintings in his home, Lord Baelish would be able to tell her about it and the artist in detail unlike most houses that just wanted the best and most fashionable but knew nothing.

As she wandered from room to room, Sansa found so many things that were foreign, leading her to believe that the Marquess was well traveled indeed and a man of wealthy means. She heard her father talk of the smugglers and blockade runners that were constantly pirating ships and merchants he needed for the revolution. The night Lord Baelish arrived at the Eyrie, all the talk was of the smuggler that bought his way into favour with the king. For all Sansa knew, Lord Baelish was partly responsible for her father's failed revolt. His father could not have been anything more than a knight, and now his son was one step away from the title of Duke if his luck continued. It was most likely a major reason why many lords of the ton were not accepting of this new high lord. Luck, money and now power for a man of lesser family name and means had brought him now to own one of the greatest and wealthiest estates in the land.

Sansa stepped onto the intricate parquet floor in diamond patterns with golden sunburst inlays. The ballroom was truly a sight. Stunning crystal chandeliers twinkled above as mirrors, rich woods and tapestries graced the walls. Of all the stories her mother told of balls at Harrenhal, Sansa thought none would be as grand as one held in this room now. She could hear the music play as ladies in folds of silks and lace spun across the floor in the arms of gentlemen with pristine white gloves. Oh, it would have been lovely to have her first season in a place such as this.

Sansa looked down at her worn dress and sighed. Those days were long gone and never again

would she have such a moment. Gentleman from good families were not vying for her hand now and she would be lucky to be a housekeeper or even a governess at this point with her reputation. As much as she loathed being the poor winnings of a card game, Sansa figured her situation could be worse. If Lord Baelish continued to ignore her, she could go about her daily business and sleep in a comfortable room at night. Until he married, she smirked. Sansa wondered how long it would take him to cast her aside when the real mistress of the house came home.

In the music room, Sansa couldn't help but feel a sense of discomfort. Last night, whether she wanted to admit it or not, was frightening. There, the piano sat as if asking her to sit and play it but Sansa couldn't bring herself to touch it right now. She was almost tempted to touch the floor wondering if she was dreaming the strange heat coming through, but there were too many eyes about her and instead decided to go upstairs.

Maids were cleaning and setting up other guest rooms as she walked across the landing. Was Lord Baelish expecting guests soon? She didn't dare ask him. The chatter of servants was low but Sansa could make out a few giggles and heard one or two comments about her dress. She tried to push those feelings aside as she used to do in The Vale. Sansa never knew how hurtful ladies of the ton could be. Living under her aunt's constant scrutiny was bad enough, but Sansa learned to detest balls and parties of the Duchess. She was always trying to show society how it was done. How any lady would be a prize for her son. Even when Sansa was introduced into society, her parents never acted so ridiculously as the Duchess.

Those ladies in their fashionable silks and lace were cruel and even the handsome young men only flirted with her thinking she was wanton. Daughters of traitors did not court serious suitors even if they were still the niece of a Duchess. So many times, young men would ask for dances, kisses and try to steal her away into the gardens. Eventually, Sansa became the dreaded wallflower and refused all invitations and advances in fear of her aunt's retribution but more so because she knew they were only interested in one thing and it was never honorable.

The west wing was almost finished just as Duncan said. From the way the house was constructed, it seemed that the guest parlors and rooms were here as were the servant's quarters. The south and east end of the house was built for privacy. A few rooms including the one she occupied were here and at the far end were two sets of carved double doors and another across the hall that was partially open at the very end.

A footman walked by with a tray as a maid told him he was late with his lordship's tea. The young man entered the open door and moments later hurried by again to head down the stairs. The same maid entered one of the rooms leaving the door ajar and Sansa's curiosity got the better of her. Peering her head inside, Sansa held her breath in astonishment. This wasn't a bedroom, it was heaven.

She had never seen something so luxurious and beautiful. Sansa could spend the rest of her life in this room with never a complaint. It was three times the size of her room and that did not include the dressing room and small parlor. This was a bedchamber fit for a queen. The walls were bathed in a silvery damask and dark mahogany carved trim. The tapestries matched with hints of soft, pale green than hung from ceiling to the rich carpeted floor.

Sansa's feet sunk with each step and felt as if she were walking on a carpet of soft moss. The maid smiled and finished fluffing the pillows on the gigantic bed leaving Sansa alone in the room. The canopy draped down in layers of sheer linen and the same green tapestry giving it a majestic feel and Sansa had such desire to sit on that bed. Delicate satin in champagne, silver and green covered the bed and she was afraid to even touch it.

An overwhelming feeling told her she did not belong in this room as if the lady of the house may walk in at any moment and catch her, but Sansa's feet could not move as she took in the splendor of the room. She knew she should leave but when her brain finally willed those stubborn feet, they took her to the dressing room instead of the hallway. It was larger than her room in Riverrun, Sansa sighed sadly. Dressed in the same colours as the bedroom, it held a huge vanity on one wall and the rest lay empty waiting for the wardrobe of the new Marchioness.

Sansa felt a twinge of jealousy. Her own mother, a Duchess, never had a room as grand as this. Walking back into the bedchamber, Sansa noticed two separate doors on the opposite wall. One had to be the connecting door to the Marquess' rooms and the other was a mystery. Hoping Lord Baelish was still in his study; Sansa moved to the first door and found it locked. The second door of the other side of the bed opened and she poked her head inside with wonder.

It was a private bath with a massive copper tub trimmed in painted porcelain. There was a strange warmth in here that left a hint of condensation on the smooth white marble and yet the fireplace was not lit. The tub had a fixture next to it and a pipe that cut into the marble floor leading to the wall by the window. Looking inside, it seemed it was meant to drain the water out which would explain the pipes that Sansa thought led up to the second floor.

"Rather ingenious, isn't it?" the voice behind drawled making Sansa scream.

Lord Baelish grinned as he leaned against the doorway which led to his bed chamber. Sansa was caught red-handed in a place she knew she was never meant to pry. She could not form a single word in her defense as she stood frozen next to the bathing tub.

"It amazes me how far behind the times we are in this damned country," he mused as he slowly walked towards her. "Romans had sophisticated aqueducts and baths long before our time and we're just now catching up. I've invested quite a bit in the new powers of steam to the ridicule of many lords in the ton. Alas, I have clean and heated water while they are still using wells and chamberpots."

Sansa did not know what to say. He didn't appear to be upset she had entered his private chambers without consent and continued on as if he had taken her on a tour of the house all along.

"This is the only bath with water than can be pumped in. See the handle here?" he pointed to the fixture with pride of this modern amenity. "Saves the time of having to lug up buckets of water. This valve here, drains it to a pipe just outside. But *this* is something every man... and lady should have in this day and age."

Sansa relaxed a little and tried not to laugh at a man so proud of his bath and followed him to an odd corner of the room that looked like a wardrobe. He opened the door and Sansa smirked.

"It's... a privy," she said in confusion. It was polished wood with a porcelain basin and odd hole in the bottom, but a privy all the same.

"Yes and no. It's called a water closet. Ah, but do you smell that?" he grinned like a boy with a new toy.

"Smell what?" This was the strangest conversation she ever had in her life.

"Exactly," he grinned and pulled a long cord and a rush of water drained in the basin down the pipe. "Never could stand the smell of shite. I had my townhouse in Kings Landing fitted with one of these a year ago. How anyone can abide an old privy is mad. The stench in that city is bad enough. Now with these modern boilers, plumbing, steam engines, that a Northerner invented I might add, one can alleviate illnesses with better sanitation, not to mention the uses in industry..."

At any other time, Sansa might have been impressed with modern advances, especially after having to share a privy with several boys in Winterfell but being in such a private room with this man was too much. She was still raised a lady and it was inappropriate for her to be here at all let alone with a man.

"I apologize, my Lord. It's inexcusable of me to pry into your private chambers," she muttered with eyes cast down.

Sansa should have remained silent for the Marquess would have continued rambling on about modern science and most likely forgotten she had intruded into his private rooms. Now, he was quiet and observing her in that odd way of his. Sansa cursed herself for drawing his attention to her.

"I assume you have *toured* the rest of the house?" he smirked.

There was no point in lying, she thought. "Yes, my Lord," she answered.

"Good, saves me the time," he said walking past her into his future wife's bedchamber as Sansa followed. "Now that you know where everything is, I gather you'll have no trouble managing the house while I'm gone."

Sansa stopped in her tracks by the huge windows overlooking the lake and labyrinth.

"Where are you going?"

She couldn't disguise the fear in her voice.

"I'm inspecting the harvest and collecting taxes. The Riverlands have been in incompetent hands for too long," he replied turning towards her. "Many things need to be righted before winter sets in... before I head back to Kings Landing..."

"You're leaving me here all winter?" she said to herself more than to him.

Lord Baelish crossed the room and stood before her with a look of curiosity.

"I haven't decided what I'm to do with you just yet."

Chapter End Notes

Little FYI: steam engines, basic principles for plumbing were either invented (post what ancient civilizations had already figured out) or modernized in late 18th-early 19th century. a few decades later would modern passenger steamboats and locomotives become standard travel and of course how much steam technology modernized industry.

Only the very wealthy had access to such things for their homes if so desired. Seeing some of the old water closets are so strange not to mention portable privies and standard privies inside or outside the home. Ugh. I really would not have wanted to live without modern conveniences. I see Petyr being interested in modern sciences and would invest in such technology that he knew would advance industry and make him money. I totally see him putting such things in his home and being smug/proud as hell about it.

Music Box

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry for the wait. December was a rough month for me and I just had zero time for myself and none to write. Now, I feel refreshed and re-read the story and getting back to where I need to be in order for some chapters to start rolling out.

Thank you for sticking with me if you decide to give this story another go.

It was a quiet affair as they dined together that night. Sansa drank her wine and ate quickly hoping to avoid conversation with him as much as possible. The footman refilled her glass several times and occasionally the Marquess would raise his eyebrows in silent questioning. Sansa did not care what he thought. It had been a long time she had a decent wine and rather felt like indulging for once. Perhaps being tipsy would lessen her frustration at being here with him.

Lord Baelish was leaving the following morning and expected to be gone for at least a fortnight, he told her. Sansa would be left to her own devices in this enormous house and she wasn't quite sure how she felt about that. She didn't have the confidence to manage a household such as this. How her mother ran Winterfell was a hazy memory at best and Sansa tried to draw from her time at The Eyrie however vowing never to act like her aunt. Mrs. Ames seemed very pleasant and accommodating but having to deal with Duncan, rattled Sansa's nerves. She very much needed to focus on something, anything else.

"Am I allowed to go riding? Or are you worried that I may steal a horse and fly back to Riverrun?" she asked pushing a piece of asparagus around on her plate.

Baelish smiled sardonically, "I don't doubt your willfulness." He sipped his wine watching her over the rim of the crystal. "I'm betting that you won't."

"How much are you willing to lose?" she fired back softly.

He chuckled at that and seemed to enjoy their battle of wits.

"I never lose, my dear," he mused and stood up placing his serviette on the table. "But please, prove me wrong. I would enjoy it immensely. Go riding, if you must. Be careful of the woods, I hear they are haunted with ghosts and goblins."

He walked behind Sansa's chair, pulling it out for her to stand. She thought he was going to bid her goodnight when instead, he took her arm and led her into the library where a roaring fire crackled in its warmth.

Sansa picked up her book from where she left it that afternoon and made herself cozy on the sofa when she watched Baelish pour a brandy and relax into a leather chair nearer to the fireplace as he opened the widely published news periodicals. The post had come in the afternoon from Lord Holloway's Town with a bundle for the Marquess which seemed to occupy his time in his study as she wandered the grand house. He didn't offer her a nightcap and Sansa felt as though he had judged her on how much wine she drank at dinner. Sansa rose subtly and made her way to the sideboard pouring a small glass of sherry.

"I think you've had more than enough this evening," he spoke softly from behind his paper.

"You know nothing about me. I can hold my drink," Sansa retorted with the same tone and returned to her spot on the sofa.

"I don't know which would be worse to bear," he drawled, "that you would pick up bad habits from your uncle... *or aunt.*"

The scent of a cigar drifted across the room and Sansa wrinkled her nose. Her father and brother smoked and she always detested the smell.

"Does it bother you, sweetling?" he asked, his eyes never leaving the paper.

"No," she lied.

"You'll have to give more effort to lying if you're going to live around me," he mused and snuffed out the tobacco.

Sansa raised her book to cover her smile. How strange it was to smile considering her situation. For moments, the Marquess was tolerable in his swift wit and determination to ruffle her feathers. At the same time, he wasn't angered when she attempted to toss it right back at him. Sansa wondered if he spoke to everyone like this.

"Are there any special instructions you would like me to follow in your absence, my Lord?" she asked changing the subject quickly and then smirked, "That is if I haven't run off after you leave and set fire to the place."

Was she actually flirting with him? Sansa cursed herself immediately. Too long, had she been able to speak freely with Mrs. Cole and her uncle without any thought of upholding decorum or fearing retribution as it had been with her Aunt Lysa. This was not her home and Sansa could hear her mother's voice warning her.

Her blue eyes nervously glanced over to see his paper fold down partially and a pair of grey-green eyes stare back filled with mirth.

Sansa couldn't hold his gaze even though it only lasted for a moment. Suddenly, he flicked up the newspaper and she swore that he was smiling behind it.

"I knew I should have left that painting in my townhouse. Such a waste," she could hear a slight laughter in his voice.

What was happening here? Was Lord Baelish trying to make her soften to him or was she actually enjoying bantering with him? Sansa focused on her book but his presence was overwhelming as he sat quietly reading by the fire. Uncle Edmure wasn't much of a conversationalist even in his rare moments of sobriety and spending time with Mrs. Cole was different entirely. Being in the company of someone new after so long was a bit refreshing.

He is the reason Aunt Lysa cast you out. He is the reason you are here against your will.

Yes, she convinced herself. *You are not supposed to like him.* This man is a cheat and a liar. A smuggler, profiteer off her father's rebellion and advisor to the king she loathed. She had every right to hate him. He could dress her up in new fashions and hold her up in a beautiful house, but it was still a prison.

She downed the sherry and ignored him with her book.

It must have been late, for Sansa thought she had read the same paragraph several times. Her eyes were heavy and blinked tiredly. Too much wine at dinner, that's what it was. She should not have drunk the sherry either. Uncle Edmure was soused almost every night and Sansa chose not to drink in order to have one sober person in the household besides Mrs. Cole. It seemed that she could not hold her drink after all and the effects of the wine had taken its hold quickly.

Sansa wasn't sure when she dozed off on the sofa with the book resting on her lap. She didn't quite hear her name when the man lightly shook her shoulder before pulling her up. Her head was light and fuzzy and her feet did not want to obey at all. Sansa felt more tired than last night after two days of travelling. All she wanted was her bed and never to leave it again.

"Papa, may I please stay up a little longer?" she whispered and rested her head on her father's strong shoulder.

He chuckled softly, lifting her into his arms. "No my darling, it's bedtime for you."

Sansa wrapped her arms around his neck as he carried her upstairs. Arya never liked father to coddle her even when she was very little. Every now and again, Sansa loved it when he would let her sit on his lap or give her kisses. Sansa hoped she could find a man as good as him. He loved her mother and was a good father.

Her body was laid down on the feather bed but she refused to let her arms go from his neck.

"Promise me..." she muttered.

"Anything, sweetling," he murmured.

"Don't leave again... I don't want to be alone anymore."

Hands gently peeled her arms away and pulled up the bedclothes. Sansa could feel tender fingers caress her face when lips met her forehead. Warm breath that smelled of mint and brandy was not her father's and lingered near her face as she fell deeper into sweet sleep.

"Oh sweet girl, *what am I to do with you?*"

Her head was pounding when she woke. Never again, Sansa promised herself, that she would ever drink that much again. It must have been late morning judging by the light from her windows as she pushed herself from the soft bed and a little knock sounded on her door.

"Come in," she groaned and one of the maids entered with a tray.

"Beggin' your pardon, my lady. Mrs. Ames told me to come and wake you," the shy girl said as she set the tray down on the table.

"What is the time?"

"Oh, nearly noon, my lady," the maid spoke setting up the breakfast.

Noon? Heavens, she never slept this late unless in bed with illness. Sansa tied her dressing gown around her and sat down looking at the breads and fruits and was relieved. She never would have been able to stomach porridge this morning. The tea was hot and soothing and Sansa debated whether to just stay in her room today.

"Mrs. Ames said if you're feelin' up to it, that she would like to go over some of the household needs this afternoon and Mr. Duncan, wanted to speak with you as well," the girl said timidly as if waiting to be scolded by her new mistress.

Sansa sighed, "Very well. Tell them I will see to them in an hour."

Another maid came later to help her dress and Sansa decided to meet with Duncan first.

Might as well get the worst part over with first, she thought descending the stairs. She spotted him with two footmen and waited patiently. He knew she was there and yet he kept her waiting on

purpose. She couldn't imagine Aunt Lysa waiting and yet Sansa held her tongue.

The old majordomo gave his orders and finally turned to his new and very young mistress with grim expression.

Sansa held her chin up and straightened her spine trying to hold her mother's posture.

"I'm told you wished to speak with me?" she spoke with a voice no quite her own.

Duncan smirked, "Yes. Lord Baelish left instructions for you in his study. He will return in a fortnight and told me that the tailor would be expected around that time with your new wardrobe from Kings Landing. He would like you to make use of his absence in education of managing your new home."

Not once did he address her as Lady or as his superior in anyway but Sansa decided to let it go for now. Duncan, it seemed, was not going to let his power go easily or quickly, especially to a woman thrice his junior.

"I'm quite well read on Harrenhal, Duncan, thank you," Sansa began, "And you needn't worry yourself about the handling of his lordship's affairs of the estate. My mother and aunt were excellent tutors, both Duchesses of grand estates. I'm sure it will be no time at all before I have a firm grasp of the needs of... *my new home*, as you so put it. I trust that all of the staff will aide me in my role here. If there are any misrepresentations of my Lord's instructions given to me... well, I will surely speak with him when he returns home. Surely, he expects, as do I, the complete cooperation of the household."

Sansa smiled as if she had won a small battle. Lord Baelish expected her to take charge of his house and so she would. This bitter old man wasn't going to walk all over her.

The butler looked her up and down in her worn dress and smiled back but it was far from pleasant and enough to chip away at her newly won satisfaction.

"*My lady*, I think we both know why you are here. I am not as ignorant of the Marquess as you seem to be," he smirked again. "The daughter of a northern traitor is no lady no matter what titles they possess. Learn what you can, for it will be of little use. I expect you'll be on your way before spring once he tires of you."

Sansa was speechless. Never in her life had a servant been so openly rude and disrespectful to her. She had her share of snickers and mean gossip at The Eyrie and lewd gapes from men in the county, but it was something she always swept under the rug. This man, that should be following her orders clearly was never going to accept her as anything other than some plaything his lord drug home one day.

"You assume too much," Sansa mustered drawing on some courage, "You should be wary of Northerners. We are made of stronger stuff than the weak folk of the Riverlands. You would never survive a day in Winterfell. As for *Lord Petyr*, I think he will be interested to know how kind you have been to me in his absence."

Sansa turned on her heel and didn't give the man a chance to retort. She was scared of him but tried not to show it. When entering the kitchens, Sansa took a deep sigh of relief. It was going to be a long two weeks with that man and she wished Lord Baelish would return quickly.

"How's your head, my dear?" a kindly voice echoed behind Sansa.

Mrs. Ames had a basket of potatoes that looked far too heavy for a woman her age to carry.

"I'll not touch of drop of wine for a week," Sansa smiled feeling completely at ease with the woman.

"Good taste, his lordship has," she laughed. "Too good to stop at one glass, I wager."

"Yes," Sansa laughed softly.

She liked Mrs. Ames very much. The thin, old woman was half the size of Mrs. Cole but full of the same sharp spirit that made living at Riverrun bearable. The kitchen was warm and inviting as Sansa sat with the female servants making bread as others peeled potatoes. The girls seemed a bit shocked when Sansa pushed up her sleeves and started kneading dough with practiced hands.

Sansa was raised a lady with all the proper teachings but she loved to spend time in the kitchens at Winterfell mainly for the scent of fresh breads and the warmth during colder days. The kitchens were always alive with chatter and laughter from the women that worked there. In Riverrun it was a welcome distraction to the dreariness of the endless days with not a soul to talk to.

If anything was going to make her stay at Harrenhal pleasant, it would be to have a good rapport with the female staff of the house. There was always nasty talk of her Aunt Lysa at The Eyrie and for good measure. The Duchess of the Vale was not a kind woman in any sense of the word except to her only son.

Her mother, Lady Stark, was respected amongst the household and the small folk. She was a generous and kind woman and never treated the servants poorly. This duchess wasn't afraid to roll up her sleeves. Winterfell wasn't as grand as Harrenhal but Sansa wanted to emulate a kind and fair mistress as her mother had been. Catching the busy bees with honey would be an easier task than that of the sour, old butler.

Time flew by and when she sat for dinner, the mood had changed drastically. Suddenly, the house was cold and quiet as the servants went about their duties for the new lady of the house. There was no one to talk to and Sansa wondered how often Lord Baelish took his supper upstairs.

The night was lonelier still as she sat in the library reading in his chair by the fire. She had only met the man a few days ago and oddly she missed his company, whatever it was. This house was too big for one girl all alone. Sansa understood why he was leaving to Kings Landing before the snows came. To be stuck here alone all winter would be maddening, she thought.

That thought was depressing because that's exactly what was going to happen to her. Sansa looked around the library and wondered how many days it would take for her to read every tome on his shelves before she lost her mind. The light hearted conversations from the kitchens that afternoon warmed her a little. Yes, Mrs. Ames and the servant girls were nice. She could spend time with them. It was the lonely nights that would have to be endured until...

Until what? Until he returns to spend a month or a week and leave you again?

Sansa shrugged off that voice inside her head. She had a grand home, warm bed and at least a few friendly people to fill her days. What else did she have? She should be so lucky. If either her uncle or aunt had refused to take her after the executions... well, she thought. *I could be worse off.* If Lord Baelish was true to his word and made her mistress of the household, she wouldn't have to care for a drunken uncle every day at least. If he rarely visited Harrenhal, she could do as she liked for the most part. It didn't have to be as bad as it seemed, she tried to convince herself.

A footman lighted her way up the stairs and the place was quiet as the dead. It was a long time before she fell asleep and there was not a sound. No whispers, no ghostly music drifting from downstairs, just peace. Closing her eyes, Sansa began to resign herself to her new situation. If she could deal with Aunt Lysa and Uncle Edmure, she could handle the Marquess and Harrenhal.

The days began to pass quickly as Sansa grew accustomed to the ways of this grand house. She was grateful of her skills learned from each of the family's houses and the tasks became easier each day. Sansa spent most of her time with Mrs. Ames and the women. She could feel Duncan's disapproving eyes on her but she chose to ignore it. Only once did he bark at her when she wandered too closely to the massive labyrinth behind the house. It was forbidden, Lord Baelish said.

Stay clear of the labyrinth, Lady Sansa. It is quite dangerous.

Sansa stood in front of the great archway leading into the maze. The hedges were taller than she estimated and in need of pruning. In fact, the greenery looked as though it hadn't been taken care of in many years. Overgrown and full of weeds as she peered through the opening that only showed a long corridor.

Why would it be dangerous? Dangerous of getting lost for hours perhaps, but she always loved puzzles and games. The overgrowth couldn't possibly be treacherous, but as instructed, Sansa didn't attempt any further. Lord Baelish would surely hear that she disobeyed his command.

Perhaps will all the other ground work, they didn't have any time for the labyrinth before winter to clean it up properly. It must have been built long before the Marquess had taken ownership, she guessed. Maybe by spring, if she was still here, she could ask for the groundskeepers to fix it up as it once was. It must have been grand once. She could imagine giddy lords and ladies trying to find their way out on a sunny afternoon.

Once again, dinner was lonely and quiet. She could hear a hint of laughter and chatter and knew some of the servants were probably eating in the kitchens past the pantry. Several boring minutes passed and Sansa heard it again. Setting down her utensils, she made a decision. Quietly, she picked up her plate and wine glass as she shushed the footman as he tried to take it from her.

Sansa pushed the pantry door open and the chatter died immediately as a few of the footmen stood up in shock.

"Please, sit," Sansa commanded sweetly. Surprised eyes stared at her dumbfounded as to why the mistress of the house was in the kitchen instead of dining. "I don't believe I can stand another supper in that room by myself. May I join you?"

Mrs. Ames smiled widely and a few of the maids giggled but the men didn't seem to know what to say. Sansa spied Duncan across the room with a scowl on his face and she sat down in an empty chair just to spite him. One of the young footman helped scoot her chair in before glancing at the old butler as if waiting for him to protest the action.

The awkward silence persisted for a few minutes and Sansa knew she needed to break the ice a little. Clearly, this was something they were not prepared for at all.

"So, I'm curious, what's to be done with the labyrinth?" she smiled taking a bite of chicken.

No one spoke as she looked around the table.

A young man cleared his throat nervously, "His lordship plans to have it torn down in the spring, m'lady."

"Oh?" she smiled again trying to make conversation. "It seems more work to do that than maintain it. I've never seen one before. Not that large anyhow."

"The Mad King built it many years ago. Long before the late Duke Baratheon had the estate," Mrs. Ames jumped in. "It hasn't been used since, I do believe. Is that so, Duncan?" she called over her shoulder.

"His Lordship has forbidden anyone to use the labyrinth for their own safety," Duncan rattled from the corner of the room by the hearth. "I will inform him if his wishes are not obeyed."

Eyes travelled from the majordomo to the new mistress in questioning.

"Well, I shall speak to Lord Baelish about it upon his return," Sansa goaded drinking from her glass with a smirk. "It's rather cold this time of year to be wandering about in such a thing. Oh, Duncan? Would you be so kind as to have the fire lit in the study. I wish to use it this evening."

The man grumbled in his corner and after a few minutes pushed his plate aside and left the kitchen glaring at Sansa. The moment he left, a heavy weight lifted in the room and one by one the servants began to converse as Sansa caught a smile from the old housekeeper across the long table.

The study was warm and inviting and Sansa guessed that Lord Baelish spent a great deal of time

in this room. Ledgers, figures, and stacks of paperwork that dealt with the many properties along the Riverlands littered the desk. Glancing through a few stacks, it was clear that the Marquess hadn't lied about the disarray of the lands. It seemed that Lord Petyr had spent a good portion of the past year trying to rectify the region. This harvest wasn't going to be prosperous due to the heavy rain but it seemed the new Lord Paramount had plans for the next year. The Riverlands were known as the most fertile lands in Westeros and for it to fall into such decline was more to do with poor management than just poor weather. Uncle Edmure was so deep in his cups that he probably didn't have the slightest clue or care what was happening.

Sansa spied a letter in her aunt's handwriting. It was weeks old and she was sending Lord Baelish grain and some supplies from The Vale for the winter. She would send this man aid but she refused when her own sister begged for help during the rebellion. Sansa scanned the letter and read that Aunt Lysa invited him to The Eyrie for the winter. What was between her aunt and this man? The Duchess threw Sansa out because of him and one dance over a year ago.

She pulled out the letter he left her that morning and read it again. It wasn't so much as instructions but everything that Duncan had already told her. He had sent word to Kings Landing to Madame Berkins demanding first priority on her new wardrobe. The fittings would be handled by Mr. Wiltshire upon arrival in Lord Holloway's Town. Sansa didn't know how many seamstresses worked for this woman but to have a full wardrobe in such a short time was surely costing him. Sansa frowned and pushed the papers aside. There was nothing or of notable interest in his study. Nothing that he had not deemed more important to lock away it seemed.

Moving to stand, a bit of tattered lace caught on the wood of his desk and Sansa heard it tear. She bent down to unhook it and saw a crumpled piece of parchment under the desk. The servants must not have seen it while cleaning. She picked it up and unraveled it.

Lady Myranda of House Royce?

Her handwriting was perfect in its elegance and Sansa wondered at why a unmarried lady would write to a man if she was not betrothed or already engaged to him. Surely, her father, Lord Royce would be the one to correspond with another high lord.

Sansa knew she should not read something so personal but she couldn't help herself. He had crumpled it and seemed to want to throw it away. It couldn't be that important.

Lady Myranda wrote of missing him since he left The Vale. Her manner was coy and of light playfulness. She was flirting with him, Sansa laughed. The woman made it obvious enough even to an obtuse man. She was spending the winter in Kings Landing and hoped to see him, she wrote.

Sansa leaned back in the chair and thought back to that night of Aunt Lysa's dreadful ball. Could Lord Baelish have had designs to marry Lady Myranda? She was of a good family but not a lady so high up in the ton to snub her nose at the new Marquess like many probably would. The ton was a pretentious lot. It wasn't so much as just being a part of the peerage but your social standing and money. However "new money" as it was called was still not as socially acceptable as old family wealth and heritage. Lord Baelish was possibly wealthier than most of the ton, Sansa guessed, but even his new title stilted him from making a good match.

Lord Royce was an earl but not a rich one from The Vale. His family was old but marrying his daughter to a Marquess of Harrenhal and Lord Paramount was a huge step up. He probably set quite the dowry for his daughter to wed knowing of the Marquess' wealth. It would give the new lord more social standing marrying an old family.

Sansa smiled to herself. They probably deserved each other, she laughed quietly. Sansa thought Myranda was nice when she first came to live with her aunt. She was more experienced with men and told so many tales that made Sansa's eyes bulge. Myranda was convinced she would marry well even though Lord Harrold cast her aside and there were rumours of her wanton ways. It didn't surprise Sansa that she would set her sights on the Lord of Harrenhal. He was older, yes, but Sansa had to admit, he wasn't ugly or unattractive.

She sighed and crumpled the letter tossing it on the fire. Perhaps Duncan was right in a way. After he wintered in Kings Landing, Lord Baelish could most certainly return to Harrenhal with a new bride on his arm and Sansa would likely be sent away or work for them indefinitely. The idea of being servant to Myranda made Sansa grimace. She would rather work for another family as a governess than let that insufferable girl gloat and order her around and watch their horrid children run about.

Sansa lit a candle and left his study. She was about to retire to her bedroom when she stood staring at the double doors across the hallway. It was late and the servants would be getting ready for bed as she glanced down the corridor. She knew she shouldn't but Sansa just read a letter that was none of her business a moment ago. Unlike the day she was caught in master bath, Lord Baelish wasn't here. Pausing in front of the doors, she touched the latch expecting it to be locked but it moved freely.

In the candlelight, Sansa opened the door and quickly stepped inside afraid that a servant or Duncan might see her. The room smelled like it belonged to a man. Hints of cologne, cognac and cigars were subtle and the décor was a contrast to his future wife's chambers next door. Dark mahogany, emerald green, gold and silver shown in the faint light as she walked around his room. Every fiber of her being said she shouldn't be in here but Sansa couldn't help but wonder what his bedroom would be like.

In every way, it was distinctly him. Very masculine but refined and elegant. Even without a fire lit, this room had a strange warmth to it. Sansa had noticed it in the next room and the bath chamber as well that day he caught her wandering and couldn't figure out where it was coming from... just as the marble floor in the music room.

His dressing room was immaculate and tidy. Sansa kept looking behind her expecting to find him staring quietly but only darkness and silence greeted her. A dressing table held his grooming items and curiously a gilded box that did not look like it belonged in a man's room. It was delicate and quite feminine as her fingers brushed against the carvings. Lifting the lid, music filled the darkness

almost making Sansa yelp in surprise. Why would a man such as him have a music box? He was a strange man, this Marquess. Even more strange, the tune sounded familiar but Sansa couldn't place it at all. Afraid someone might hear, Sansa closed the lid did not open it again and decided it was better to leave his room before someone did catch her snooping around.

Her hand was on the latch of the door when suddenly the tinkle of the sweet tune came from his dressing room making her freeze in terror. She was alone, wasn't she? She would have known if he returned. No, surely, it wasn't Lord Baelish playing a mean trick for sneaking in his rooms.

"My lord?" she whispered.

Suddenly the music stopped and Sansa did not wait for an answer. She ran out of the room and down the hallway to her own as the flame blew out. Turning around briefly, she saw a faint reddish light come from his door before it slammed shut into darkness.

Sansa never mentioned that night nor was she questioned about his room or anything amiss. Since that night, Sansa did not use his study again or even go near that corridor of the east wing. Lord Baelish was still away and yet someone or something was in that room with her.

I don't think they like his lordship. Ever since he came, we hear them more and more.

Surprisingly, the week passed by quickly. Sansa filled her time with Mrs. Ames and work around the house. Some paintings were moved and furniture adjusted to suit the décor of the rooms. If Lord Baelish didn't like it, he could order them to move it all back. He may have taste, but so did Sansa. He left her in charge and she was going to make good use of it while she could. At least she could be artistic with decorating his home. Aunt Lysa had wretched and gaudy tastes but her mother was more subtle and sophisticated. Harrenhal was indeed beautiful and the Marquess had an eye for detail and beauty, but somehow it needed a woman's touch, Sansa smiled.

Every night she dined with the staff in the kitchen and enjoyed their conversations. Duncan took to eating early and avoiding her as much as possible and that was fine by Sansa. The less she had to deal with the old man, the better.

The construction was finished and the west wing was fitted with furniture and last details to finally make the entire house livable. Sansa inspected the finishing touches and by midweek was pleased that everything would be to the Marquess' liking and ready for guests.

The next day, Lord Baelish was expected to return. Sansa was helping Mrs. Ames in the greenhouse that afternoon. The woman was a true apothecary. So many of the herbs and plants were medicinal and Sansa noted several that only came from the North. Remedies and recipes that most modern physicians would turn their nose up to. Many women were healers from the North and revered for their knowledge. The fear of the old ways and witchcraft practically destroyed the rituals, common beliefs that the common people knew for ages. Even as the new religion grew across the land for generations, the North still clung to the old ways in secret. Duncan never entered the greenhouse and Sansa found it a welcome sanctuary from his disapproving glares. He seemed more superstitious than anyone else in the household. A pious man that held such an open disgust for anything that wasn't right in his eyes.

One of the footmen entered explaining that the tailor from Lord Holloway's Town had arrived. A new wardrobe, the Marquess had promised and it made the girl inside her giddy with excitement. Her one presentable dress had made her weak to the idea of new clothes despite that they came from a man that bought them especially for her for that matter. The finer things in Harrenhal reminded her too much of the better days when Sansa only knew of refinement. She had been spoiled in her surroundings to deny herself fashionable clothes that were not ill fitting, faded and old.

In the foyer, footmen carried several trunks as a smiling Mr. Wiltshire and his wife took in the grandeur of Harrenhal.

"Ah! Lady Baelish! Good to see you again, my dear," the tailor beamed and Sansa flushed pink.

Lady Baelish?

Sansa didn't remember how the Marquess introduced her that day in the man's shop but she certainly would have remembered if he referred to her as the lady of the house.

My lady... the Lady Sansa...

She couldn't fault the man's mistake. He probably assumed the woman travelling with him was his wife or intended.

"Lady Sansa, please," she smiled at the man.

"Of course, my lady, of course," Wiltshire bowed taking her hand. "I think you'll be very pleased. Very pleased indeed. Finest workmanship. Madame Berkins is the best in Kings Landing. Lord Baelish will be happy with his purchases for you, my dear."

Sansa couldn't help the flush of her cheeks at the constant reminder of who was buying everything for her and that he spared no expense.

“He is away but is expected to return tomorrow. I’m sure everything is lovely,” Sansa praised.

“Well, what a vision he will see upon his return home. For that’s what you will be, my lady. A vision. Come let’s have these fine frocks fitted properly,” the tailor smiled.

The afternoon was a whirlwind of giggling maids swooning over the beautiful dresses and accessories as Sansa tried on garment after garment. She felt like a princess in a fairytale each time she gazed in the mirror. Lord Baelish had taste, there was no denying it. Sansa didn’t know how strange or unnerving it was that he knew fashion so well or that he knew ladies apparel in such detail that everything was made for her and her alone. Delicate muslin, silks, satins and lace were the finest Sansa had ever touched. Only the wealthiest of the royal family wore such finery. Lord Baelish must have spent a fortune not to mention that the tailors probably devoted all their time to his order. The Marquess must be a good patron indeed to forego other customers for him in such a short time. The dresses were exquisite and needed virtually no alterations. They fit her perfectly. Madame Berkins certainly knew her trade.

How would it had been to have a season with dresses such as these? Sadly, Sansa thought that her father, a duke, probably could not have afforded such things for his eldest daughter. A wave of melancholy rushed over her as hands poked and prodded, hemmed and pinned as she stood in front of the mirror. She should not be enjoying herself. She was only here, in this house, because her family was dead and buried. Now, she was dressed up as a fashion plate for man she knew nothing about. The woman that stared back in the mirror wasn’t her. It was a kept woman in beautiful clothes, but a kept woman all the same.

By six o’clock, the fervor died and Sansa sat in her bedroom littered with all the things he bought for her. Two of the maids had finished putting her clothing away as others found places for everything else. Her bedroom simply wasn’t large enough for the multitude of her new possessions.

If she left, would all of it still belong to her, Sansa wondered? It was almost time for supper when Sansa drifted down the stairs in her new gown of sky blue silk and lace. It was strange wearing fine clothing again. The corset was a little too tight and she would need to remind the maid next time she dressed. The rustle of the soft muslin and silks around her was intoxicating as were the satin slippers and soft stockings that didn’t fall down her legs. She had forgotten what a lady wore.

Supper wasn’t ready for another half an hour and Sansa was restless. Should she dine in the kitchen again now that she was dressed as a proper lady or would even Mrs. Ames insist she dine in the dining room? Her question was answered as she passed by and saw the footmen setting the table and Sansa sighed.

At Winterfell and even The Eyrie she never really dined completely alone. There was always *someone* there. Here, she was a lone lady with a house full of servants. Sansa wandered around and saw lights in the ballroom. The construction wasn’t complete when she first arrived in Harrenhal. At last, all the chandeliers had been cleaned and hung. The mirrors on the walls and the parquet floors polished and gleaming in the empty room.

Her satin slippers tapped slightly on the floor as the flow of silk followed ever so slightly behind and around her. Sansa caught her reflection in one of the mirrors and stood dumbfounded. The maid had pinned up her hair with a few of the new pearl combs but just a few stubborn curls that refused to stay put had framed her face lightly.

She hardly recognized herself. It had been so long since she looked or felt like a proper lady again. Picking up the folds of her skirt, she curtsied and many of the old mannerisms came back. She closed her eyes and remembered her first ball at Winterfell. She barely had a moment to rest, for she was dancing all night. It was before she was betrothed to Joffrey and the whole mess began after King Robert died so suddenly.

She could hear the music and see the twirling of couples on the floor. Dances changed from reels, minuets and the newly popular waltz. She loved the waltz the best because you were so close to the man and didn’t have to change partners. The only problem was if the man couldn’t dance well and your toes suffered for it.

Before she knew it, her feet were moving in time and felt the sway of her skirts. She pretended a handsome young lord swung her across the floor in his arms at the envy of all the mean ladies of the ton. This time they didn’t giggle or make fun of her as the wallflower but at how beautiful she was in her stunning dress as she flowed with the music.

Sansa could feel his hand holding hers every so lightly as the other held her small waist and guided her around the floor. She never wanted the daydream to end. The looks on their faces, the sound of the music, the scent of mint...

Her eyes popped open to see grey-green orbs smiling so closely.

“Oh!”

Startled, Sansa stepped on his foot and froze in his arms. How long had she been dancing with him? How long had been watching her? She could feel her cheeks flush bright red and did not know what to do for he was still holding her.

“It’s much better with a partner, don’t you agree?” he teased lightly and his eyes were filled with mirth.

Her hands dropped from his and he let her go but not stepping away.

“You weren’t expected until tomorrow. How long have you been watching me?” she flustered not able to meet his eyes.

He chuckled softly, “And here I half expected a warm welcome home.”

The floor became overwhelmingly interesting as she muttered, “Welcome home, my lord.”

His boots stepped back and Sansa finally raised her head.

"I see you've made some changes in some of the rooms while I was looking for you," he spoke with a hint of praise as he strolled around the room a bit.

"If you don't like it..."

"Oh, I do. Our tastes are very similar, I think," he smiled and his eyes twinkled a little. "And then I saw a light in this room and there you were... looking very lovely."

Her cheeks burned again at the thought of him watching her dance to her own music.

"I knew that colour would suit you. You float like an angel but even an angel shouldn't dance without a partner," he smiled taking her in from head to toe.

He slowly strode towards her with a gleam in his eyes and Sansa's feet froze to the spot.

Taking her hand again and sliding the other around her waist, the man leaned next to her ear and whispered, "Where did you learn the waltz so gracefully?"

"I don't know," Sansa lied. She knew exactly who taught her that night.

"Such sweet lies fall from those rosy lips," he murmured as he took a few steps in the silence of the massive ballroom.

"There isn't any music," Sansa said stupidly.

"It didn't stop you a moment ago," the man smiled leading her gently. "It's all counting, though, isn't it? One, two, three..."

It wasn't all counting, she wanted to say. Sansa danced with enough young men to know that they could count all they liked and her toes still hurt in the end. Some people had rhythm and natural grace for dancing, and others didn't.

Lord Baelish had natural grace in spades as he glided her around. He seemed to be tuned to a music only he could hear. Dancing came naturally to him, Sansa noted. In fact, his simple moves and gestures since she met him a few weeks ago seemed to have their own elegance. He was always immaculately dressed and even though he was cynical and harsh, there was beauty in his manner. He was very graceful but not in a foppish way some gentlemen over-exaggerated a bow or in their speech.

Lord Baelish spoke frankly and could even make an insult sound light and airy as if it were compliment after all. He was intelligent, worldly but didn't let privilege blind him. Coming from a poorer family of the ton, gave him a unique view of both worlds. He knew how the other half lived and knew how to use it to his advantage she guessed.

Dancing with him though, any woman would believe he never spent a day outside the life of the aristocracy. Without a shred of music, he was a better dancer than any man Sansa had ever been with. For a moment, she let herself get lost in the movements as in her daydream only minutes before. Sansa didn't know why, but the faint twinkling tune of the music box rang in her head and she couldn't understand why.

All of a sudden it stopped and Sansa could feel his breath on her face. His face was so close when she opened her eyes that it took her own breath away. Fine lines marked his skin along his forehead and eyes showing a hint of his age. His eyes appeared a darker green as he looked at her. The hand that held hers drew it closer to his chest.

She knew she should pull away but that look kept her grounded in curiosity. It had been a long time since any man looked at her in such a way. Her only real male contact for years was with young Robert or her uncle. Now, here she was in the company of a man that she was not related to in anyway. One, that was wealthy, powerful and oddly attractive in his own way despite the age difference. The young man she knew didn't have the presence as the one that held her now. Something that only seemed to come from age and experience.

Those half lidded eyes glanced down to her lips and Sansa held her breath. She could detect the mint even more strongly as his mouth was a breath away from hers.

"Ahem," a voice uttered from across the room and the moment was gone. "Excuse me, my Lord, dinner is served and I have John preparing your room..."

The Marquess stepped away and a smile that didn't reach his eyes painted his face.

"Thank you, Duncan. I'm very weary. I'll take my supper in my room this evening," he spoke as if they had not just been caught in each other's arms.

He bowed charmingly and kissed her hand. He was going to kiss her lips before he was interrupted, Sansa was sure of it. Even more distressing, she didn't know if she would have stopped him. What was happening here? Sansa was so confused.

"Goodnight, Sweetling," he muttered softly. "Don't drink too much wine tonight. I regret I'll be asleep and not able to carry you to bed again."

Baelish flashed a brilliant grin and left her speechless in the middle of the ballroom.

The Smuggler and the Traitor

Chapter Notes

The flashback some of you were curious about... :D

A dim light streamed into the hallway when Sansa walked to her bed chamber coming from the direction of his study. He lied, she thought. He wasn't asleep after all. She stayed up reading in the library hoping the Marquess had indeed retired for the night as he said in the ballroom.

Sansa couldn't stop thinking about it no matter how hard she tried. Alone in the dining room with nothing but those troubling thoughts for company and the book she had attempted to read for the last two hours had not helped at all in erasing it from her mind. She was so lost in her daydream that she hadn't realized that the man was dancing with her. He praised her skills during his absence and then took her in his arms again around the ballroom floor. She could have almost forgotten it was him. *Almost.*

It was the sudden intimacy that was so disconcerting. Never, since she had met him a few weeks ago had he shown any real interest, no, *desire*, for her as a woman. His taunts, goading and reprimands went with a grain of salt but occasionally his wit and humour was pleasant companionship. Tonight he gazed at her from across the room with an appreciation and warmth that made her blush even now. Perhaps it had been the new clothes. Now, she actually looked like a proper lady and not a servant.

Sansa wasn't stupid. She knew she was pretty. She was always the pretty one, they said. The one that would make a good match. Marry well. The eldest daughter was the one that caught young men's eyes. Arya never cared. Sansa believed she would have been happier if born a boy. She never cared for dresses, balls, music lessons, art or anything that Sansa fancied. Arya teased her relentlessly when their father announced that Sansa would wed Prince Joffrey. She was going to be a princess and move south to the capital, to the royal palace. Arya said she would never leave the North regardless if her sister was queen or not. She was right, Sansa thought sadly as she undressed and climbed into bed. None of them left the North. They were all there, except for her. The blood traitor to the King. The one that renounced her father's rebellion attempting to save herself and them from execution. Only in the horrible thunderstorm did the new king make her watch her family die before a firing squad leaving her alone in the world.

Not since her first and only season at the age of six and ten had she felt a flutter in her stomach from the attentions of men. That year felt so long ago. She had so many admirers then. Her first kiss had been from a young man in the stables that she never told anyone about in fear of her father's anger. Sansa was the eldest and meant for a good marriage as the daughter of a powerful duke. She could never have a man below her station her mother told her. Many of the proposals she received that first month would not be accepted and Sansa could have been happy with a few that called on her. When her parents sat her down and explained that she would be wed to the son of her father's friend, Sansa was shocked that he meant the crown prince. Naively, she was excited. The young prince was rumored to be as handsome as so many of the Lannisters tended to be. He took after the Queen Mother it seemed and Sansa knew her to be very beautiful.

He was handsome, however that's where any beauty he had ended sharply. Prince Joffrey was cruel and a marriage to him would have been an inescapable hell. When the king died, Sansa realized just how terrible her life was about to become. How could her father have given her so easily to such a horrible person?

To the kingdom's shock, the king had named her father, the Duke of Winterfell, Regent even though Prince Joffrey was of age. Within days, a small rebellion broke out and her father came back north to build his alliances. The new king was illegitimate, he said and the rightful heir was the brother to the late Grand Duke of StormsEnd. That was the only bit of information she had been told. Ladies were never permitted when the men spoke of politics and business. All Sansa knew was relief that she would never have to marry that wretched boy and once the rebellion was won, she could entertain suitors once again.

Sansa curled into her soft feather bed and sighed. She was so immature and stupid then. She thought for certain her father would be victorious. Duke Renly joined with him as did many of the northern lords. They won several battles until reaching the Riverlands. Aunt Lysa and Uncle Edmure refused to fight against the crown and when Lord Lannister along with Lord Tyrell's reinforcements from the west blocked their path to the capital. Without support from the Riverlands or the Vale, her father was outnumbered with his supplies cut off from the sea and the North. Duke Renly died in battle and her father taken prisoner.

Her mother cried for days when the news of defeat came. Prince Joffrey along with his Lannister family marched to Winterfell hauling their gravely injured father behind. Joffrey threatened to have Sansa and her sister stripped and raped by his soldiers if they did not recant. He kept Sansa for days in his bedchamber but not once did he rape her. Instead, he beat her and threatened a slow death. His most terrible cruelty was the feigned kindness. She would still be his wife, his queen, he promised. He would spare her family if she would publicly renounce her father's rebellion and swear fealty to the new king.

The terrible things he promised he would subject her family to were too much to bear. Lord Lannister wrote up a declaration that her trembling hand finally signed and cried at her own treachery to her beloved father. She thought she was saving them. Yes, she was a stupid and naïve girl then. She thought nothing could be as terrible and terrifying as death but she was wrong. Living in the aftermath was crueler. Shunned by many northerners by declaring her own father a

traitor and loathed by the rest of the ton as a traitor's daughter. She was mud on their shoe. Being completely alone seemed more frightening and painful than the few minutes it would have been in front of the firing squad standing proudly with her family.

Tears rolled silently down her cheeks as she hugged her pillow. It was hard to believe how many years had passed since that night in the rain. She was nearing her birthday and it would be in a house full of strangers. She spent just one in Riverrun and it was solemn affair with only Mrs. Cole and two servants as her uncle was at the local pub instead to gamble and drink.

Before that, was her last birthday at the Vale and it went uncelebrated. Her aunt would have preferred Sansa never came to her home, she guessed correctly when she first arrived almost five years ago. Her Grace said it was the king's decree that she take in her niece and that she was only abiding by his command. Sansa was sure that her aunt would have turned her away had she come for help. The woman seemed to have no love for the new king or the Lannisters but Sansa felt an intense hatred from her aunt that she just could not understand. Living at the Vale was only for food and shelter. There was no love or kindness. Her son Robert was a sickly boy of four and ten and the only person that liked her. He was spoilt and terribly childish for his age but had it not been for his adolescent affection, Sansa never would have left her room.

The doctors said the boy needed fresh air and Sansa was allowed to take him to the gardens and just occasionally to the small city nearby. The Duchess threw numerous balls trying to find a bride worthy of her only son, the future Duke of the Vale. It would have to be a strong girl indeed to put up with his immature ways. It wasn't Robert's fault though. Aunt Lysa had made him that way. He rarely, if ever, left the house since he was a baby, she was told. The Duchess even breast fed him until he was almost the age of ten. Sansa wondered if gossip such as that had travelled far enough to other respectable houses or how odd the Duchess was.

Her aunt blathered on about how no lady from the North or Riverland families were good enough for her precious Robert. She would have to seek a bride from the South instead. Sansa suspected those families weren't about to subject their daughters to such a woman and her ill son, Duchess or not. Southern families perhaps would not know such gossip and would be more willing to marry into title and wealth for the Arryns were an ancient family with royal blood lines stretching back generations.

Sansa remembered that ball in detail as the tears dried on her cheeks and her eyes closed tiredly. The music was playing downstairs and she could feel herself drifting further and further into that swirl of twirling silks and polished leather boots.

The chatter became louder and louder as she descended the staircase in her only ball gown of lavender. She had tried desperately to lower the hem and hide a few worn spots with little flowers she had embroidered. They were placed to look as if they were a part of the dress' design and not meant to hide its age.

Carriages arrived all afternoon carrying the lords and ladies of the South. Local gentry came for the ball that evening but the Duchess seemed to have invited as many eligible young ladies and their well-connected fathers as possible to secure a match for young Robert. Sansa pitied the boy. She knew too well what arranged marriages could mean.

Her maid pinned her auburn tresses up using a few of her mother's old combs. It would have to do, she sighed. The dress wasn't that bad. The embroidery and a few little silk flowers she made using fabric from a blue dress that didn't fit anymore gave her lavender dress a renewal. Her aunt did not offer to buy any new clothing and Sansa did not ask. The woman was terrifying in her every changing moods. Sansa learned just how quickly the duchess could swing from mildly pleasant and into a rage. The servants were in constant fear of her judgmental and over demanding ways. A maid was almost beat when she accidentally spilled tea on the woman and was dismissed that day. Sansa decided it was best to just stay out of her aunt's path and not draw attention to herself.

Sansa looked in the mirror and she saw more and more of her mother staring back. There was a portrait of her made when she married father and right now they looked so very much alike. Aunt Lysa pointed out that fact many times during her stay and Sansa realized there was no love lost between sisters. In fact, Aunt Lysa hated Sansa's mother. Something in regards to her mother being wanton and taking the attentions of a boy Lysa fancied.

Her mother was supposed to marry Uncle Brandon but he died and ended up with father instead. In the end, she married and found love. Aunt Lysa was married off for family, duty and honor and ended up with an old man. Jon Arryn was old enough to be her grandfather apparently and had a difficult time getting her with child. Not long after Robert was born did the man die under suspicious circumstances. Often she told Sansa how she hated being forced to marry. She wanted to marry her childhood love but he was sent away because of Catelyn. So, a boy loved her mother more than her aunt and Grandfather Tully sent him away and Aunt Lysa forever blamed Catelyn for her woes.

Now, she was attempting to marry her son off to a family with the best heritage and wealth. The irony made Sansa laugh bitterly as she entered the grand foyer. Young ladies in beautiful gowns passed giggling madly and Sansa's heart dropped. Her own lavender gown was old and out of fashion regardless of the hard work she put into it. These southern ladies were dressed in stunning silks and laces and looked like little princesses with pretty jewels around their necks and in their hair. The local gentry did not have the wealth of the families invited tonight and Sansa felt completely out of her league. When her father was duke, Sansa never worried about such things. Her mother kept her and Arya in the latest fashions especially since Sansa was introduced into society as Marchioness with quite the dowry for marriage.

She took a step back and was about to go back to her room when Lady Myranda approached and Sansa sighed.

"Oh Lady Sansa, there you are," she smiled with her sing-song voice. There was nothing pleasant about her tone that Sansa knew so well. Myranda made faking pleasantry to an artform.

"Lady Myranda. You look lovely. Her Grace will be pleased you and Lord Royce could attend," Sansa offered the same practiced graciousness. Sansa hadn't lied, not really. Myranda's dress was

very pretty in a pale rose that accented her plentiful bosom. She would surely gain plenty attention from gentleman tonight.

"Father loathes these things, but he does it for me," she smiled and her eyes looked Sansa over.

"That colour suits you, it's a shame the dress is old fashioned but you're pretty enough... perhaps no one will notice," the brunette said touching the embroidery with a smirk. "You're quite good with a needle, I must say, but sooner or later, Her Grace *will* have to buy you something new if you are to attend more balls."

"I don't care for balls. I'm only here to appease my cousin. He is a bit nervous," Sansa said trying to find an escape.

"Oh yes, he vomited last time didn't he? Poor lad, his mother will have to pay quite the dowry to find him a suitable bride," Myranda laughed but Sansa did not find her funny.

"Still looking for a groom yourself, I see?" Sansa mumbled before she could stop herself.

"Oh, playing the jealous spinster is not attractive, *Lady Sansa*," Myranda spat under her breath smiling at two men as they passed by. "If fact, I have found a rather rich lord and Father intends to speak with him this very evening. While your cleaning up after your cousin, I'll be a Countess or even a Marchioness by the time I marry. Oh, you were a Marchioness once weren't you? How quickly things can change, isn't it?"

It was hard to believe Sansa thought Myranda was nice and could be a new friend when she arrived in the Vale. She was a gossip and only looking for a way to better her circumstances. Befriending Sansa allowed her into the duchess's home only for the reason to gaining information and making contacts hopefully for a profitable marriage.

She watch the buxom woman sashay across the foyer finding the two men that passed by moments ago as young Lord Robert's voice rang out in excitement.

"Sansa! I'm so glad you're here. Mother said she didn't think it was proper for you to attend tonight but I told her I wanted you to come. I said I wouldn't go if she didn't allow you to come downstairs," he gleamed in satisfaction.

"Thank you, my lord," she smiled sadly for she would have preferred to stay in her room tonight.

Robert tried to stand tall but he was still several inches shorter than Sansa as he leaned in close and whispered, "You have to dance with me. Promise. I'm very nervous about dancing with all those ladies. I'm not good at all... with everyone watching."

Sansa took his hand and smiled sweetly. "You're a very good dancer, my lord," she lied. "Any one of those ladies should be proud to dance with you."

The boy grinned and held her hand tightly, "I wish I could marry you instead."

Sansa felt such a terrible pity for him. He dreaded tonight just as much as she did. "I'm not worthy of such kind and good future duke. You're meant to marry a lady of good family. Not someone like me. Your mother would never allow it," she frowned but in her heart she was grateful. She couldn't imagine having to marry her cousin.

"*Robert!*"

They both turned to see the duchess come from the sitting room. Sansa bit her lip to keep from gasping and wrinkling her nose at the floral perfume. Her aunt was dressed as a woman half her age. Her plump and sagging body squeezed into her corset to the point of bursting. She had curled her hair and pinned it up in an old style similar to her mother's portrait back in Winterfell. Her face was powdered with painted rosy cheeks, lips that aged her more than it helped. A well placed beauty mark crinkled when she frowned and the lines on her face grew deeper.

"Stop dallying with your cousin and come with me. We must greet our guests," she seethed and Robert dropped Sansa's hand and immediately went to her mother's side.

Aunt Lysa eyed Sansa with contempt and smirked at her dress. "My son has insisted on your attendance. Do not embarrass us in front of your betters or you'll wish you were with your dead, traitor mother."

Sansa refrained from saying that she would prefer to share her mother's cold grave than live here and waited for them to disappear into the next room before trying to calm herself. This was just one more ball she had to endure, Sansa convinced herself. Just stay quiet and out of the way and it would all be over soon enough.

Unfortunately, the night dragged on slowly as Sansa tried in earnest to make herself invisible. Robert insisted on one dance early in the evening when he was too scared to ask any of the young ladies waiting and giggling at the scared future duke.

He stepped on her toes so many times, Sansa thought they'd break but she didn't show any sign of discomfort and only smiled at her poor cousin. As the ball progressed and the wine flowed, she could hear the disgruntled talk from fathers at how they were going to marry their daughters off. It sickened her at how they wished the boy would die after the marriage and they could seize control of the estates. In a way, Sansa was beginning to be glad she was no longer considered marriageable material for people like this. Is this what the father's of all the sons thought when sending proposals for her hand? Lands, titles, gold and how many heirs could she bear? It was revolting. It seemed all a girl was good for was what lay between her legs and her dowry.

Sansa drank a few glasses and felt the alcohol calm her nerves. She was nothing to these people. It wasn't her hand anyone was vying for tonight. She needed to play her part and hopefully leave without Robert noticing.

Walking around from room to room, it was the same mindless conversations. Men were discussing politics, business and something about an earl that was gaining favor in court. The man was blockade runner and smuggler and now had become a financial adviser to the king himself. The

jealousy made Sansa smile a little. So, there were men that still alienated the ton. How lovely! However, if he was in favor with the king and gaining new titles, he wasn't a man that had any good qualities, she surmised. Anyone associated with the royal family was lower than horse shit, her brother Robb always said.

The empty chatter amongst the ladies was no better. They fawned over each other and complimented their gowns and jewelry and Sansa had to cover her laugh. Were they all such bad liars? God in heaven, did she talk like this once upon a time?

"What are you smirking about?" a girl wearing a yellow dress scowled at Sansa.

"Me?" Sansa feigned ignorance.

"Yes. I do believe I was speaking to you," the girl said haughtily.

Aunt Lysa's warning rang clearly in her mind and Sansa warmly smiled, "Oh, I was just holding a sneeze. These flowers tend to bother me, my lady."

The girl looked at Sansa's dress and grinned, "Yes, well, I suppose you're used to mud and rocks where you're from."

The other girls giggled and whispered to each other. Sansa was used to her aunt's rudeness but she wanted to smack the smirks from these girls' faces. She spied Lady Myranda a few feet away with three men fawning over her and the woman smiled nastily. Sansa was about to turn and leave when a blonde wearing a peach coloured dress came up to her.

"My sister had a dress like this years ago but not as old and ugly," she laughed fingering a blue silk flower near Sansa's shoulder. "She gave it to our governess. Did she give it to you?"

Sansa held her chin high and refused to let these little girls get the better of her. She was one and twenty and did not have to play these childish games.

"Oh, this is Lord Robert's cousin. Father said the duchess had taken her in after her traitor father was killed," a brunette said behind her. The pretty ladies had surrounded her like predators stalking their prey and Sansa held still. She could not make a scene.

"Is this what a Northerner looks like? I heard her father was a lumbering troll and her mother a whore. Nothing but filthy bastards. To think they give any of those northmen titles," another girl sneered.

Sansa seethed, "Don't you dare..."

She didn't get to finish her sentence when the chatter climbed and people began filtering into the ballroom.

"Is that him?" a female voice said.

"He is a rake, my brother says. Lost two hundred to him in gold just last winter in Kings Landing," said another.

"I can't believe the duchess would invite such a man..."

"Is he handsome? Most rakes are handsome aren't they?" a girl giggled.

"Isn't he supposedly very wealthy?" another frivolous voice rang out.

The girls' attention was now on the mysterious man that had entered the ballroom and it gave Sansa her escape. Just as she was about to sneak into the foyer, Lord Robert came bouncing in as if he received a birthday gift.

"He came, Sansa. Uncle Petyr came to my ball. I didn't think he was going to come but he did," the boy smiled and Sansa wasn't too sure who he was talking about. Surely not the man that was the rumoured smuggler and rake.

Robert took her hand and dragged Sansa into the next room where the crowd was whispering and gossiping wildly as a dark-haired man bowed and kissed the duchess's hand. The image was something she never thought she would ever see. Her aunt giggling like a girl her son's age. She mussed with her hair and dress so many times that Sansa wasn't sure it wasn't the same woman she knew.

"Uncle Petyr! You must meet my cousin," Robert piped up pulling her along.

Sansa could see the disapproving glare on her aunt's face as they moved closer and then the man turned around, his cloak swirling elegantly with him. He wasn't a tall man but he was still taller than Sansa. His mouth smiled but not his eyes. It was his eyes that caught her attention. A deep grey-green that seemed to see right through her. He was acutely aware of his surroundings and the duchess burning a hole in his back.

He bowed softly and took her hand leaving a dry kiss on her fingers.

"Lady Sansa," he said graciously holding her gaze for only a moment. "The pleasure is mine." Immediately, he straightened his posture and grinned at the young boy. "I hope I haven't missed much, your Grace."

"Don't call me that, I hate that," Robert frowned and then quickly smiled again. "It's not late and mother said I could stay up late tonight if I wish."

"Haven't stepped on too many ladies' toes yet, I'm guessing," the man chuckled.

"No. I'm a very good dancer. Sansa... I mean Lady Sansa says so herself," Robert smiled taking Sansa's hand again.

The man smiled genuinely this time looking directly at her.

"Did she? Well, I'm wagering she was taught well. Tully women are very graceful," he smiled and suddenly turned to the duchess. "Aren't they, my lovely Lysa?"

The scowl disappeared and she giggled like a girl again. "Petyr, you sinful man," she whispered. "You know you shouldn't be so informal with me in front of these people."

He bowed again and teased, "Of course. We must keep up appearances, mustn't we?"

Removing his cloak and handing it to a waiting footman, the man made her aunt smile and laugh and Sansa began to back away when Robert did not let go of her hand.

"Where are you going?" he whispered. "It's not late yet and I want to dance again."

Sansa's toes cried at the thought but before she could answer, her aunt chimed in.

"Oh no, darling. Your dance card is full," she said in a sing-song voice and Sansa was relieved. "You can practice dancing with your cousin any time. There are many ladies patiently waiting to dance with my handsome son."

"I want one more dance with Sansa, mother. Just one more before the night is over," Robert whined and she could see the dark-haired 'uncle' roll his eyes.

"Lysa let him have one dance. Lady Sansa, I'm sure, will have time later. The young gentlemen are certainly going to be lining up for her hand the moment the music starts," the man said smiling. "That will give young Robert plenty of dances with all of these lovely ladies."

Sansa cast her eyes down refusing to let them see the hurt. She didn't know this lord, but he was either woefully misinformed or he was just like her aunt. *Cruel*. There were no gentlemen lining up asking her to dance. She had not been asked once all night.

Adding salt to the wound, her aunt laughed and pulled the man with her across the room. "Fine, Robert. One dance," she called over her shoulder and then leaned into the man, "and you, sir, will be all mine tonight."

Robert looked sad and asked, "You're not really going to dance with lots of men tonight are you, Sansa?"

"No. I'll be waiting over there when you've pleased your mother," Sansa smiled and pointed to a small chaise lounge near the terrace doors. If she was lucky she could disappear before he noticed and give her excuses tomorrow that she drank too much wine and felt ill.

The young lord wandered over to a gaggle of the same girls that insulted her minutes before and she could almost hear them groan in dismay. Good, Sansa thought, let their toes suffer for a few hours.

To her disappointment, Sansa glued herself to the wall and watched as Robert danced terribly but kept looking for her each time he faced her direction. She wasn't going to get out of this one, sadly and drank a few more glasses of champagne. Aunt Lysa bought the best for functions such as this. She was always trying too hard to impress others when she did not have to. She had the name, title and wealth without having to brag but brag she did. At the very least the food and wine was good as Sansa stood bored watching everyone dance in reel after reel having a wonderful time. A handsome young man asked her to dance and she was about to accept when she could see his friends snickering in the corner.

As she watched, she could see faces staring at her and whispers shared behind gloved hands. As they passed by, she could hear the hurtful things these people said and tried to pretend as if she didn't.

"Traitor."

"These northerners in their country dresses... no better than servants."

"The duchess is a saintly woman for taking *her* in."

"Can you believe the king was to marry the *likes* of her?"

The traitorous wallflower, that's what she was to southerners so it seemed. The one man asking her to dance was merely a cruel joke so they could laugh later. Her aunt was monopolizing the dark-haired man's time but he occasionally would look her way and once Sansa thought she saw a hint of sorrow on his face. Lord Robert was waving at her as he stepped on the blonde's foot and apologized and Sansa waved back sadly. Another young man came by and started flirting but it was mainly to get her to go with him somewhere private. Apparently, she was expected to be a whore as well since no one in their right mind would marry her. She slapped the man's hands and he muttered "northern slut" as he walked away. It was too much. None of the previous balls had been like this. The local gentry was bad enough but this was more than she could endure. The tears welled up and Sansa refused to let them see her cry. She would not let them see they finally broke her.

Sansa slipped out the door onto the terrace praying no one else was outside for the tears spilled uncontrollably. The night's chill was enough to keep everyone inside and Sansa was grateful to be alone at last. She would rather freeze out here than go back inside. The stone bench was ice cold as she sat and couldn't stop the sob that escaped her throat.

Why did people have to be so cruel? Never in her life had she experienced real loathing directed at her. These people did not know her. All they knew was the vicious gossip the king spread about her and her family. He mercifully spared her life and punished her accordingly. It was worse to be shunned and alone than dead. Sansa glanced over the balcony and wondered if it would hurt. It was a long drop to the stone terrace below. No one would even think to look for her, she thought bitterly. No one but Robert, she sighed. Annoying and spoiled as the boy was, he seemed to be the only one that remotely cared if she lived or died.

"Careful, my lady," a soft voice uttered behind her. "Lean too far, I daresay I won't catch you in time."

Sansa turned slightly to see the dark-haired man walking slowly towards her as if not to frighten her.

"I'm fine, my lord," she sniffed trying to hide her tears. "I would rather be alone, if you don't mind."

The man continued forward, "I'm afraid I do mind. It's not wise for a lady as beautiful as you to be out here all alone. One of those young boys might think to take advantage of you."

"And you're the gentleman coming to my rescue, is that so?" she retorted coldly choking back another sob.

He chuckled softly, "I'm no gentleman."

"So I hear," she added and turned to look across the gardens.

He laughed at that and sat next to her but just far enough for the sake of decorum.

"They say many things, don't they?" she could hear the smile in his voice but then it changed. "Don't let them see you cry, my lady."

A handkerchief held by a pristine, white glove waited patiently before she finally took it knowing she should say thank you out of politeness but it didn't come.

"I'm not a lady, if you have listened well enough in there," she said dabbing her eyes.

He was silent and Sansa glanced up at him as he stared at the frivolity inside the doors. He had a striking profile, she noticed. Chiseled features, a straight nose and eyes that seemed to be deep in thought. He was older but seemed younger than her aunt if Sansa had to guess. He was not handsome in the way that young girls would swoon over but he was far from unattractive. Clearly her aunt was doing her best to keep his attentions tonight.

"If *they* are the measure of a lady, I daresay I'm happy you're not one," he spoke serenely not looking at her. He stood after a time and offered his hand. "Come, my lady. It's too cold out here. You'll catch your death if you stay much longer. I can't have that on my conscious."

There was a knowing look in his eyes and the way he spoke as he stared at her. Reluctantly, she took his hand and dabbed at her nose until he stole away the soft cloth. Surprisingly, he gently dabbed around her swollen eyes making Sansa gaze at the man in wonder.

The music drifted outside and Lord Petyr smiled.

"May I have the honor of this dance, my lady?"

Sansa knew the music and the dance. The waltz was her favourite when she debuted her first season but that meant she had to be close to this man and it made her nervous for some reason. They were alone on the terrace and it simply wasn't proper not only for her to be outside alone but alone in the company of a man not of her family.

"I'm sorry my lord, I never learned this dance," she lied easily letting her nerves show. She should not be out here and stepped away only to be drawn back into his arms.

"Then I shall teach you," he whispered.

"It's not proper, my lord," she objected when he took her and in his and leaned forward.

"Would you rather learn in there?" he tilted his head towards the doors.

Mortified at the thought of dancing with him with *them* watching was too much.

"No."

"Then stop fidgeting," he teased. "It's simple. Count one, two, three starting with your left foot moving backwards and follow my lead. One..."

Sansa purposefully stepped on his foot hoping he would give up and leave her alone but he didn't.

"Again, left foot backwards box step. I find it difficult to believe you are not a quick study," he chastised lightly and Sansa surrendered and followed his lead with ease. She would give him one quick dance and then retreat back inside and run to her room. Robert, be damned.

He was a patient teacher even though she knew the steps perfectly and when he did not let her go, Sansa finally let him take control. He guided her gently in small circles and before she knew it, the music ended and her all her self-doubts and fears rose to the surface stepping away from him.

Lord Petyr took her hand and pulled Sansa along with him and his long gait back to the doors leading to the ball inside. He stopped briefly in the filtered light and scanned her face, seemingly satisfied, the man took her arm guiding her inside. A few people whispered at the young woman and older lord coming in from the terrace and Sansa could only imagine what was being said about them. Looking to the man, he did not seem to care at all as he moved through the bystanders until pulling her onto the floor where other couples were waiting in two lines for the next reel to begin.

Sansa's eyes glanced quickly around the room seeing the whispers and shaking of heads. Her aunt was nowhere to be seen in this unnerving band of spectators and yet it did not quell her fears but Myranda's eyes were full of disdain as she whispered to her father, Lord Royce. The music started and the first pair moved down the line and she caught Robert's gleeful smile as he bowed and took the young lady's hands near the end. A slight cough from the man standing across from her brought her senses back as he took her hands gently with a smile. The dance progressed but in reels there was no time to speak to one's partner as they switched regularly until the end.

Dancing with people that detested her and yet had to hold her hands was comical and slightly rewarding in a strange way. Lord Petyr left her as he spoke to the musicians and returned quickly

as the dance space emptied and the onlookers stared in curiosity. He took her waist and right hand bringing his body so close he could whisper in her ear.

“Shall we give them something to talk about?” he teased and before she could object, the music started and he glided her effortlessly into the waltz.

To Sansa’s horror, they were the only couple on the floor as eyes watched their every move. Lord Petyr was a splendid dancer and at any other time, she might have enjoyed dancing with him. Fearful eyes scanned the faces wondering where her Aunt Lysa could be. She would not be pleased. She clearly expressed that Sansa not embarrass her tonight and yet here she was dancing with a lord that sported quite the reputation. The pair of them would make for enough gossip to last months.

She didn’t know which would be worse, if she broke away from the man right now or just finished the dance. Glaring eyes answered her question and Sansa stepped away immediately as the sight of her aunt chilled her to the bone. The woman was furious and Sansa knew that gossip made its way to her ears as Myranda stood next to her with a look of satisfaction. She seduced him out on that terrace, that’s what they would say. That’s what her aunt would believe but it wasn’t true. Nothing happened but who would believe her. No one. Aunt Lysa was jealous of her mother and now of the daughter. If she threatened to beat a maid over spilt tea, what would happen to her?

All of a sudden Sansa was dressed in her new, blue gown and he was dancing with her alone with the music box’s sweet and intoxicating tune. He glided her around the floor and there were no eyes judging them this time. The music stopped and those grey-green eyes were filled with desire as they gazed at her lips. Sansa waited for Duncan’s interruption and it did not come. She held her breath when his head lowered she didn’t stop him.

Those lips were soft and she could smell the mint on his breath. She felt herself melt into him as he deepened the kiss leaving her breathless. Sansa was getting lost in it, in him, his kiss. She wanted it and wrapped her arms around his neck holding him close. She liked it.

No, you shouldn’t like this.

“But you do,” his voice answered though his mouth was firmly pressed to hers.

No, it’s wrong. This is all wrong. I should not be here.

“But you are,” he answered again.

I do not want to be here.

“Such sweet lies…”

Sansa woke in a cold sweat looking around the room. She was in bed, not downstairs, not at the Eyrie. She lay her head back onto the feather pillow and stared at the ceiling. She was living in his home now, well over a year after that fateful night in the Vale. Never would Sansa have guessed that she would have ever met this man again.

The dream felt so real as she touched her lips. Her mind decided to let her know what his kiss would have been had Duncan not taken the moment away. Just as in the dream, she knew she probably would not have stopped him. Not right away.

As much as she hated to admit it, Sansa missed those attentions before they turned sour and filled with loathing. It felt good for only a moment to be held and desired. Looking into eyes that didn’t look back with disgust.

The fact still remained heavy in her mind. Her aunt cast her out because of ruthless gossip and a man that danced with her that night. Sansa wondered if Lord Petyr knew that immediately after he left, that the duchess sent Sansa away. Did he care about the lasting effect of his actions? For all she knew, he cut her down the moment she left the ballroom to save face in front of his peers, especially the duchess and her son. Of course, they would be more important than a northern girl no one cared about. Reading her aunt’s letter in his study, she clearly had let the matter go a year later. He was now a high lord with wealth and power behind him. Aunt Lysa probably thought he was only taking pity on her shunned niece not realizing the consequences of his kindnesses.

Laying in the warm bed, Sansa just could not understand why she was here. He did not have to gamble at all. He could have left her at Riverrun and never think of her again. Oddly, he brought her to his lavish home, purchased the finest clothing and essentially made her head of his house. Why?

He did almost kiss you.

No, Lord Baelish couldn’t be obtuse enough to make someone like Sansa his wife. If he were to stay in favour, not only with the royal family but the ton as well, he would need to make a good marriage from an established family, not a blood traitor to the king. No, she thought, he was just a man acting on his basic instincts. He did call her beautiful and lovely after all. She was just a pretty face that he would never have to worry about a smudge on his character or fear the pressure of marriage from an angry father.

He was a man that lived for himself only. He took the opportunities to gain wealth and power by aligning with the Lannisters and supporting their claim to the throne. Because of his connections, he was now the Marquess of Harrenhal and Lord Paramount of the Trident. He wasn’t going to throw that away for the daughter of a woman he cared about from his childhood.

Her mother. Yes, that was it.

Mrs. Cole said he was in love with her when they were children. Everyone always said Sansa looked like her at that age. Perhaps that’s why he might have kissed her. It wasn’t Sansa he was desiring but a memory of the past until Duncan brought him to his senses.

Strangely enough that thought hurt as well. That the one man who was showing her kindness was only doing so because of someone else. Sansa was going to live out the rest of her life not experiencing love or affection. She would be a spinster and end up an old housekeeper or governess. No man would want to marry her now. Her father's line would die with her. The idea of living like this into old age seemed a worse fate than dying with her family with honor.

Sansa wondered if she really would have plunged to the stone terrace below if Baelish had not come outside that night. Sadly, he had saved her not twice but three times since meeting him. What did he save her for? There wasn't exactly much to live for. Having left behind the last of her family, she was completely on her own and either had to fend for herself or finally let it all go.

Giving her a home seemed to be the only thing he had in mind. Most likely, Lord Petyr would be away in Kings Landing or wherever his business took him. He said himself, he would be leaving for the capital before winter. That meant she would be left here to housekeep for him. If he married, perhaps he would take his bride south instead of this lonely place. A southern lady would not want to live here all year except on holiday trips to the country. Even Sansa was excited at the idea of moving south to the capital city of Kings Landing and away from the northern countryside. There were theatres, gardens, warm weather and city life. She imagined of all the royal balls and parties she would attend as princess and eventually queen.

A sound drew Sansa out of her melancholy thoughts and she sat up in bed. Straining her ears to hear, the soft melody echoed her sadness and Sansa knew where it was coming from. Wrapping her satin dressing gown around her delicate and sheer nightdress, Sansa padded to her door and pressed her ear to the wood. Yes, it was definitely the piano again.

Sansa cracked open her door and the sound drifted up and around her. She glanced down the hallway and it was dark. No light streamed from Lord Baelish's study and Sansa's clock told her it was almost two in the morning. There was no strange reddish light as she witnessed that day she snuck into his room only the somber tune that played below.

She stepped from the safety of her room and moved to look over the bannister. This time a frightened maid did not rush to her side and Sansa could only listen. When she went downstairs the first night it happened, the music had stopped before she left her room. This time, it played and she was here listening. She could go downstairs and actually catch the person if she dared.

Sansa tried to forget the ghostly voice that bellowed when she stepped on the warm marble floors as she moved around the bannisters slowly making her way to the grand staircase. The piano played on as she took her first step descending down.

The gloomy melody filled the air even as she reached the bottom and could see the moon's light coming from the music room. One door was slightly ajar and she could not see inside fully. It was darker than the first night and Sansa wished she had brought a candle. She could hear a rainstorm had begun and it seemed to play in time with the piano and snuff out the moonlight leading her way.

Her foot hit the leg of a small table against the wall making Sansa stumble knocking over a vase. She winced before the porcelain crashed to the floor and the music stopped abruptly into an eerie silence. Sansa waited for the person to come into the foyer for the music room only had one door. In the darkness she waited but no one came.

Sansa stepped around the broken pieces hearing one crunch beneath her foot and winced again. Entering the music room she found it once again... empty. Only a shred of light aided her eyes to see as she found a candle stick on the credenza next to the door and lit it. The glow cast a shadow from the harp making her yelp.

She was alone and not a soul passed through those doors. All the windows were locked from the inside. Sansa stepped to the piano and stared at the instrument in wonder. Her nervous hand hovered over the bench for a moment before touching the polished wood.

It was warm. Someone or something was here and disappeared into thin air. Building up her courage, she removed her slipper and felt the heat from the floor. Her heart raced and yet no sound came from the floor and walls as it did last time. Taking the candle as if it yielded some kind of protection, she backed out of the room. She was about to pick up the pieces of the broken vase when the flame extinguished in a breath of air and childish giggle.

Terrified, she turned around and only darkness greeted her.

"Don't be afraid," a sweet little voice said next to her ear making her scream.

The vase forgotten, Sansa quickly ran up the stairs and into her room locking the door. She caught her breath for only a moment when the creak of old hinges turned her head. The metallic tune played as the lid of the music box opened on the table next to her bed and Sansa fainted striking her head, her body blocking her bedroom door.

The Sage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Fists were pounding on the door and a voice cried out, "Sansa! Open the door!"

Sansa could hear but her body was paralyzed. She wanted to open her eyes but they felt as though heavy stones lay upon her eyelids.

Heavy footsteps sprinted away only to return with the sound of a key turning in the lock. With a sharp click, the door opened only a crack, hindered by the unconscious body that lay on the floor behind it.

"Sansa... dear God," the voice rumbled in fear as the door was cautiously pushed harder not to further injure the girl as much as possible.

The man was finally able to slide through the door, entering the room. Pulling the body away, he opened the door fully to the hallway.

"Mrs. Ames!" he yelled as his strained voice echoed back to him in the large house. "Mrs. Ames!"

Gentle hands lifted her torso up just enough to lean into his chest and slip an arm under her legs. She was laid down on the bed just as the old housekeeper, wrapping her dressing gown securely around her frame, ran into the room.

"Yes, my lord.... Oh dear, what has happened?" the old woman gasped at the pale girl on the bed.

"I heard a scream and when I looked out my door, hers slammed shut. It was locked and when I retrieved the key, she was lying on the floor," Lord Petyr said breathlessly.

Withered, old hands touched her face and arms softly. "She's cold and clammy as the dead. I'll fetch spirit of hartshorn," the woman said.

Soft and warm hands caressed her face tenderly, pushing back her hair. Sansa could detect mint and brandy and knew that calming scent. Suddenly, the pungent ammonia filled her nostrils, popping open her eyes as everything came back in a whirl.

Sansa sat up with a gasp, looking wildly around the room. Lord Petyr sat next to her as Mrs. Ames stood by the bedpost with concern written on both their faces. She scrambled to the side of the bed away from them.

"Sansa?" he spoke gingerly but she didn't hear him. Her eyes were wide and fixed on the music box resting behind him with the lid open. Slowly Sansa got off the bed and backed away across the room as her eyes never left the wooden box. The wardrobe halted her retreat and she would have crawled inside if she had half the mind to do so.

Mrs. Ames lit a candelabra that cast an eerie glow on Lord Petyr's face, hiding half in shadow. His dark eyes watched her intensely, worry laced with suspicion but Sansa couldn't tear her eyes away from the music box. It wasn't so much as how it got into her room, but that it opened and played by itself that made her shiver in fear.

A voice, she distinctly heard a voice downstairs... God, she was going mad in this house.

Other voices in nervous chatter filled the hallway looking in, when Mrs. Ames shooed them out. The servants would have much to gossip about come morning as if they didn't have enough questions about the Northern lady staying with them.

"Child, what happened?" the kindly voice asked.

Sansa's eyes flicked to the old woman and didn't know how to answer her. Would they think her mad? Send her away? The maid, Sarah, said there were spirits in this house but did everyone believe such things or was it only something talked about in private or in jest?

"I don't know," she lied stuttering a bit and feeling a terrible ache behind her ear, "I might have tripped in the dark...."

Lord Petyr's eyes narrowed and yet he didn't say a word.

"Lord Baelish said he heard a scream and couldn't open your door. You've never locked your door before," Mrs. Ames countered softly.

Sansa thought quickly. She could lie but his eyes told her he knew enough to see right through her. Somehow he knew it was her that screamed, then slammed and locked her door.

"I - I woke from a bad dream and heard music... *downstairs*," she began. Mrs. Ames was listening and thinking but Sansa couldn't read Lord Petyr at all as he watched her.

"Did you go downstairs?" he pressed lightly but his tone told her not to lie to him.

"Yes," she shivered. "There was nothing. No one in the music room. I broke a vase," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I hope it wasn't too valuable."

"A vase?" the old woman chuckled, "Dear, don't worry yourself..."

"Why did you scream?" he interrupted never taking his eyes off her.

Sansa's mind worked rapidly, "I - I scared myself. Stupid, really. Maybe I wasn't truly awake. It

was a nasty nightmare after all..."

"A *nightmare*. Yet, you woke, heard music, broke a vase, screamed and ran back to your room locking the door?" he asked unconvinced.

Sansa didn't know what to say and her eyes constantly glanced back to that damned music box, then the fear set in. How would she explain *that*? The last time she saw it, that box was in his dressing room. Sansa thought she imagined it when she heard the tune after leaving the room, but there it sat, right on her side table and she did not put it there.

Her heart stopped when suddenly, Lord Petyr's head turned following the direction of her stare over his shoulder. His jaw set and when he glanced back, the look there could have frozen God's Eye lake.

"Mrs. Ames, if you'll leave us please," he commanded quietly.

The housekeeper looked between the two with unease and added timidly, "My lord, if I may, it's not quite proper for her to be alo..."

"I will not ask again," he countered all the while staring at the young woman across the room.

Nervously, Mrs. Ames gave Sansa an apologetic look as she opened and closed the door behind her. Now, the air in the room could be cut with a knife, it was so thick. Lord Petyr had not moved an inch from where he sat and Sansa didn't know what to say or do.

Gracefully, he stood and picked up the box, handling it with care. His dressing gown of black almost touched the floor and hung on his solid frame as he remained motionless in deep thought.

"I'm waiting for an answer," he spoke smoothly, refusing to look at her and knowing he didn't need to ask how one of his belongings came to be in her possession.

"I don't have one," she answered truthfully. What in God's name was she supposed to tell him? A ghost put it there? She very well couldn't tell him she was snooping in his room during his absence.

He traced the delicate carving with his fingertips. "Hm," he huffed softly, "Shall I supply it? I didn't think thievery ran in your family..."

"I haven't stolen *anything*," she defended indignantly.

"Yet something very precious to me is here in your room, right next to your bed. Very curious," he said with dark sarcasm and concern he may have felt for her well-being moments ago was long gone.

"I don't know how that got in here. It wasn't here when I went downstairs," Sansa spluttered.

"Ah. A moment ago you said you didn't think you were fully awake and didn't know what happened... you seem rather lucid *now* in recalling details," Lord Petyr cross-examined with ease.

"I'm telling you the truth. I did not put that there. It was here when I returned and it was playing by itself," she spoke too quickly before she could stop herself.

"My dear, I am not a fool. Let me tell you what I think. I came home early and you did not have time to return this to my room where you have been snooping in my absence," he retorted coldly and Sansa had to admit he had it half right. "So, are you accusing me of putting this here or one of my servants?"

"No!" she exclaimed in frustration. "I don't know how else to tell you I didn't take it. I never took it from your dressing room!"

The moment it spilled out of her mouth, she couldn't take it back. He caught her in a lie and they both knew it. What was she supposed to say now? Someone or a ghost was playing nasty tricks on her. He wouldn't believe her now that he knew she had been spying through his things.

Lord Petyr set the box down and walked around her bed until she was cornered between the wardrobe and window. Even though they were the same height, he seemed much taller as he hovered over her.

"If you wanted to see my bedroom, sweetling," he whispered seductively, "all you had to do was ask." The undercurrent of his tone was menacing. Her pulse raced but it wasn't the flutter she felt in the ballroom when his lips were so close to hers. He knew she was scared and was playing on those fears right now. "Although, the tour would have never left my bed..."

Before she knew it, her hand flew on its own, slapping his cheek and making her gasp from the action. She hit him, actually hit him. Sansa thought he might strike her since Joffrey had hit her many times and Sansa was already wincing in anticipation when she realized he hadn't flinched or even raised his hand in retaliation.

He sighed and took a step back, "I remember telling you that I don't rape women. I should amend that statement to include that I do not beat them either. Count your blessings that you live in this country. The places I've travelled to... they cut your hand off for stealing."

"I didn't..."

"Then who? Are you being mistreated? Are the servants playing games? Tell me and I'll have them dismissed right now," he reprimanded harshly.

Sansa could think of a specific butler that treated like filth since the day she arrived.

"You won't believe me. You'll think I'm mad..." she muttered and could feel the tears building in her eyes.

"I've seen many things in my lifetime. Try me," he said skeptically that didn't give her much confidence.

Sansa fidgeted with her hands and couldn't look him in the eyes. "There was someone or something playing the piano downstairs... it wasn't the first time."

"Something?"

"I heard it my first night," Sansa began anxiously, "When I went out onto the landing a maid told me the house was haunted. I didn't believe and went downstairs anyway to prove her wrong and the music room was empty. The floors were oddly warm as she said. She told me Duncan said they house sits on the gates of hell... I heard a dark laugh and a wail and it scared me so. You mentioned that morning that I looked as if I had not slept. Then there was nothing for days and days, until..."

Lord Petyr sighed in disbelief but listened anyway and Sansa wanted to crawl into that wardrobe forever. She did sound like a mad woman.

"I was in your room," she admitted with her eyes cast down, "I was just curious what it looked like. I didn't touch anything but the box for only a moment. I left it there and when I was leaving..." Sansa took a deep breath, "it started playing. I thought someone, even you, were playing a trick on me, but no one was there. And tonight..."

He had backed away and sat down on her bed, crossing his arms and everything about his posture was pure skepticism.

"If you were so scared the first time, why did you go downstairs again tonight?" he tapped his fingers on his leg.

"I don't know," she whispered, "to prove I wasn't crazy?"

She knew how she must sound to him, but what else was there to say other than admitting to something she didn't do?

"My lord, there was no one down there and I could hear the music playing even when I broke the vase. I lit a candle and there was nothing in that room and no other way out. That piano bench was warm. Someone had to have been playing. I didn't imagine it. And then..." she hesitated. This was it, he was going to think she needed to be put away.

Sansa closed her eyes, "I was going to clean up the vase and something blew out my candle and I heard a child's laugh. I'm telling you there was no one there... and then it spoke."

She glanced at his raised eyebrows in the moonlight.

"It said, 'Don't be afraid'... and that's when I screamed and ran back to my room. I locked the door and then I heard *that*," she pointed at the now harmless looking music box resting on her bed.

"You fainted because you heard this play?" he said with disbelief. "So, someone put this in here and wound the key before you came back upstairs?"

"I don't know how that got in here, I'm telling you the truth. But..." she hesitated. Oh God, was she really going to say it?

"It wasn't playing when I came in. It... opened by itself and began to play," she explained finally looking at him pointedly. "I don't remember anything after that."

Hell, even she didn't believe what she said. Sansa watched him as he mulled it over. Sighing, he stood and walked over to pick up the box and headed towards the door before pausing a moment.

"I must admit, Sansa," he said thoughtfully, "Carefully crafted, however I do not believe in such nonsense. This world is far too complicated as it is to add superstitious rubbish into it. By the way, which maid was it?"

"What?"

"The maid, the first night that told you the house is haunted," he smiled but something hid behind that smile and it wasn't good.

"I don't want her to get in trouble, my lord," she offered graciously. There was no reason to get the girl dismissed.

"Hmph. Of course, you don't," he smirked. In that one statement she could tell he was finished with this nonsense. "Certainly, I can question the staff, however I find that it will be your word against theirs and we'll be right back here."

"I'm not mad. I didn't imagine this," she began to weep. "I'm not mad."

"I don't think you're mad, darling," he said quietly, "I'm rather disappointed you are so easily convinced of... ghosts. Such childish fancies. I believe you were frightened, but let me add to that if I may." He clutched the box, opening the door and paused with his back to her. "If I find you in my bedroom again, there will be consequences."

Sansa waiting until the door was shut when the tears fell and she couldn't stop crying. The side of her head hurt more than ever as she sat on her bed. He did say she wasn't a prisoner here. She could leave anytime she pleased. Granted, it would be a long walk to Riverrun in the cold but she could do it. How in God's name could she live here? Lord Petr didn't believe a word she said. Sansa knew she should not have pried into his private rooms but she did not lie when she told him she never took the box. She was unconscious when she presumed he found her tonight. That didn't seem to phase him at all once he saw the box. Why was a music box so damn important to him? It was only a music box.

Some time passed when a soft knock sounded on her door and the gentle voice of Mrs. Ames called her name, "Lady Sansa, may I come in? I have tea."

Sansa wanted to be alone but she couldn't turn away the old woman after she went through this much trouble.

"Yes, of course," she replied and wiped her tears.

Mrs. Ames shuffled in with the silver tray closing the door behind her. "I waited until his lordship left. He was standing in front of your door for a fair bit. Didn't think he was going to leave and the tea would be cold."

He waited in front of her door? Sansa couldn't fathom why. He was clearly upset with her when he left.

"A quiet one, he is," Mrs. Ames chuckled setting the tray down on the table. "Always deep in thought. I daresay it was the first time I remember him ever smiling since taking over this place... when you arrived, that is."

"It wasn't a smile on his face tonight," Sansa muttered when the woman handed her a teacup.

"Don't think on it, my dear," she smiled pouring herself a cup, "He is all logic and reason, like so many men."

The tea was mellow and had a strange under-taste but the warmth unknotted her stomach a little.

"That's the Bishopswort. Lemon Balm and Chamomile with a bit of honey help the taste," Mrs. Ames explained. "It will help you sleep and relieve some of the pain."

"Thank you," she whispered and the stillness filled the room.

"I've been told I listen very well," the old woman smiled sweetly. "I've heard all manner of problems from the girls. Believe me, no man is worth crying over."

Sansa's head shot up, "It's not what you think. I don't fancy... he doesn't..."

The housekeeper's eyebrows rose slightly with a smile. "Yet the look on his face was pure concern when I came in before you roused to the smelling salts. He was the one to find you, my child. Waking the entire house with his yells, he was."

Mrs. Ames was a kindly woman and she meant well, but Sansa didn't know how much she should say. She enjoyed her company and didn't want her or the rest of the staff to think their new mistress was a madwoman. After tonight, Sansa wasn't quite sure how much longer she was going to be here by the way he spoke to her. She was becoming a bigger burden than he had planned on, she guessed. Strangely, it was a feeling Sansa was getting used to. She never felt truly welcome anywhere since becoming an orphan. Both her aunt and uncle gave her the overwhelming sentiment of being burdensome in their households.

Sansa wiped a stray tear and drank her tea. At least her hands weren't shaking anymore.

"You were ice cold and clammy to the touch. What scared you, my dear? You're not the first to have found fear in this house," she asked sweetly trying to placate her fears. When Sansa didn't answer the woman continued on, "Don't worry, I'm the last woman to think you're mad. I've seen and heard many things in my lifetime. Some that I'll never be able to explain including a few things since I took my position in this household."

Her tea was growing cold and Sansa finally spoke with a sigh. She needed someone to talk to.

"There's something in this house, isn't there?" she asked softly.

"Yes," the woman answered.

"I've heard that piano play twice now. Both times, there was not a soul in that room. But tonight..." she muttered trying to explain herself for the second time. Continuing, she took a deep breath, "Tonight, something blew out my candle and spoke to me. There was no one there. When I ran to my room there was a music box next to my bed," her frightened eyes glanced to the now empty table and Mrs. Ames eyes followed. "It opened by itself and began playing. That's the last thing I remember before waking."

"That's what he was holding," Mrs. Ames said aloud to herself. "Did they touch you?" she inquired next, her eyes stern.

They?

"No," she answered fearfully. "I heard a child's laugh and..."

And what? She couldn't tell if the voice belonged to a girl or a boy.

"It said, 'Don't be afraid'..." she whispered.

Mrs. Ames sipped her tea in thought, "Has this happened before tonight?"

"No," she lied. Sansa didn't want to tell her about Lord Petyr's room just yet.

"Before you came to Harrenhal?" the old woman asked and Sansa was taken off guard.

She had read and heard so many ghost stories and read the faerie tales like many children, but never had she ever experienced anything like this.

"No."

Mrs. Ames set down her tea and motioned for Sansa to come sit by her in the light. "It's all right, child. I won't hurt you."

Sansa sat down placing her tea on the table when the old woman took her hands facing her palms up in the dim light. She watched her nervously as the wrinkled hands traced the lines of her palms

and fingers. Mrs. Ames wasn't from the Riverlands. She was a Northerner, too. The herbarium, teas, and now the old ways of reading the hands were ways of the old clans.

"So much pain for a young woman to bear," she muttered studying the lines as if they were a detailed map. Her deep wrinkled brow crinkled with a frown a few times and Sansa held her breath. Suddenly a small smile crossed her lips, "Don't despair, my girl. You will find some happiness and even love, passionate love. I see a few children for you as well."

Mrs. Ames patted her hands reassuringly but something was hiding behind her eyes.

"We Northerners know each other as if we're family," she smiled sweetly. "They don't understand down here or in the South. They've forgotten the old ways. Sometimes for the better but not always when they can't answer questions with God or modern sciences."

Sansa didn't quite understand. Her mother practiced the new religion and never taught them about the old ways except in history. She wasn't a Northerner though; she was from the Riverlands. Sansa and Arya learned about the old ways from the servants and common folk but anytime they asked questions, their mother always hushed it as nonsense... just as Lord Baelish did earlier.

"I want you to listen to me carefully, child," Mrs. Ames began, "Do not talk to them."

There is was again... them.

"They have taken notice of you. It's better you pretend you don't hear or see them. They are only interested in the ones that they can latch onto," the old woman warned her.

"The ghosts?" Sansa asked, her fear returning.

"Oh, there are plenty of those here too," the woman said glancing around the room. "There are places that are ancient, my lady. Long before the druids of old. Places that remember. Perhaps it is good that new generations are forgetting thus ignoring their signs. They see it as bad luck or maybe the Devil, like Duncan. That man sleeps with the Bible under his pillow, I suspect."

Sansa pulled her hands away. "I don't understand."

"Do what the rest of us do, child. Ignore it, even if it is frightening. Don't listen or talk to them. They are tricksters and liars. Do not take their help... *ever*. They mostly come at night, so don't wander around. If you are scared, you can always come to me or I'll give you a tea at night to make you sleep." Suddenly the woman smiled slyly, "Perhaps once you marry his lordship and spend your nights with him, you won't feel so alone for which they can prey."

Sansa gasped at the thought, "I'm not marrying him."

"Then why did he bring you here and make you mistress of the house?" the woman chuckled lowly at her naivety.

I don't know.

"My uncle... he gambled and lost his estate and me to some men," Sansa started but couldn't look the woman in the eyes as she spoke. "Lord Baelish saved me and brought me here as his ward. He said I wasn't safe at Riverrun."

"And why would he help a young girl that is a stranger to him? His lordship doesn't strike me as the gallant hero. Oh, he's courteous enough and has treated us decently for a titled lord of his stature. However, he seems quite taken with you since your arrival."

"He knew my mother a long time ago... he's kind to me because of her," she mumbled.

"I see," Mrs. Ames said.

"Could someone, I mean, one of the staff be playing tricks on me? To make me leave? I know Duncan hates me," Sansa asked nervously.

"That man is an old, grumbling, pious chamber pot. Don't let him frighten you. I highly doubt his lordship would listen to one word the man says about you. The rest of the staff adores you. I can't think of why any one of them would do such a thing," she smiled and then the smile died. "Why, my lady?"

"Lord Baelish thinks I stole from him and I haven't," she whimpered.

"The music box," Mrs. Ames guessed correctly. "You said it played by itself and was in this room?"

Sansa pointed to the side table and said no more.

"You've seen it before, haven't you?" she queried without judgment.

"Yes. It also played by itself then and I thought someone was playing a nasty trick. I might as well tell you I looked in his room last week. I know I shouldn't have, but I was only curious and nothing more. I swear to you, I took nothing. It frightened me and I ran out and..." she paused anxiously. "I looked back and there was an odd glow, not from a candle and then the door slammed shut. I never went back again."

Sansa waited for the housekeeper to admonish her for prying into the Marquess' things that were none of her business but the woman remained quiet in contemplation.

"It wasn't Duncan or anyone else, I'm afraid," Mrs. Ames finally spoke with trepidation that had Sansa worried as well. "Remember what I told you, ignore them and I believe they will leave you alone in time. Do not listen. They are liars, my lady. Do not do anything they ask of you and never take their help, no matter how dire the circumstance. Be careful of the woods, it's best not to go there alone. They are as ancient as the ruins this house sits upon. It would be best if you did not discuss any of this with his lordship. He will never understand until he sees for himself. I hope that time will never come, for both your sakes."

Sansa felt more confused as ever as the old woman picked up the china, setting them on the tray and looked around the room again and Sansa felt the effects of the tea making her eyes heavy.

“So many tragedies in this house. So much sorrow. It would be nice to see happiness prevail here once again. Be merry, my dear. Do not think on his lordship’s anger. I think he’ll find he cannot hold any anger towards for your long. He could do with a bit of cheerfulness as well, I gather. There is a sadness he keeps buried deep down even though he tries well to hide it,” Mrs. Ames finished tenderly seeing the girl drifting hazily in her chair.

“Come. Let’s get you to bed. You’ll feel better in the morning, I promise,” the housekeeper spoke softly tucking Sansa in. “Find a kindness toward Lord Baelish, child. I think he cares for you... more than you know. I don’t think it was chance that bought you here.”

Sansa drifted off as the old Northern woman’s voice became softer with heavy sleep.

“Men often don’t know what they want. They aren’t as complicated as they pretend to be, nor made of steel. An old woman knows these things... for I have seen so much...”

Chapter End Notes

Spirit of Hartshorn is an old name for smelling salts.

The Letter

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this is a shorty. I kind of wrote this on the plane. Ugh, jetlag hell plus high altitude. My arse is gonna get kicked.

I may not post for about a week or so. The bf and I are at Sundance Film Festival with some local Park City friends. Found out that Sing Street is debuting here, too! BONUS!!!! I highly doubt Aidan is here promoting the film, but I would love to happily be wrong.

I meant for this chapter to be much longer, but thought it was better to break it here. Once I get back, I'll try tying some threads together and get the plot moving along. Hopefully, no one will figure out where it's going. :D

Sansa drank her afternoon tea in the library as the warmth of the fire was little consolation to the dreariness she felt. Days and days had passed since that night as a strange stillness came over the house. She spent her days mainly in the library or playing the piano. She had no fear of this room in the daylight and the music seemed to echo from room to room.

Lord Petyr passed by one afternoon and then the next day she could spy him leaning against the door listening as she played. Today he actually came inside, sitting near the window as rain streamed down. He never spoke a word. He only listened. The few times Sansa glanced up, he was gazing out the window and his eyes were in some faraway place. There was a sadness there, yet she didn't have the courage to speak to him about such a personal thing. Perhaps, he too, had some tragedy in his life. Sansa vaguely remembered Mrs. Ames saying there might be something he was locking away and maybe show him a little kindness.

The man spent most of his day in his study or around the estate. Men would come to the house in regards to business and he would not return until supper most nights and sometimes he would retire to his rooms leaving Sansa to dine alone.

Sansa glanced around the library. With nothing else to do, she read so many books to occupy her time. Her new clothes, beautiful and finely tailored, were a silk and lace prison. Unlike her shabby dresses, Sansa couldn't help in the kitchen or sit with the women and enjoy their presence. She was now a lady again and expected to act like one. However, that meant loneliness as well. No one came to visit the Marquess other than men of the surrounding counties and those he had business matters with.

Earlier after playing in the music room, Sansa made her way up towards her room when she could hear Mrs. Ames arguing down the hallway. It came from the direction of his study and Sansa knew she shouldn't pry but she couldn't help herself after hearing her name mentioned.

"My lord, I have been outspoken and direct ever since I first walked through the doors of this house. Not once, have you ever admonished me for it," Sansa overheard the old woman speak softly but surely. "I worry about that child. Could she not visit her family or leave with me to Lord Holloway's Town for when I go to the market? Day in and day out she is alone with no visitors and does nothing but play music on that piano like a caged bird singing a sad tune..."

"She plays beautifully. This house needs a little music," he countered in a tired tone.

"Then you should have hired a musician, m'lord," Mrs. Ames told him pointedly and even Sansa was surprised at her candor. Servants did not speak to lords and ladies in this manner and Sansa waited for Baelish to reprimand her.

"She is safe here and that's all you need know. I wasn't about to leave her in that squalor. I admire your protectiveness, Mrs. Ames," he said nonchalantly and Sansa could picture him writing at his desk hardly paying attention to his outspoken housekeeper.

"Should I be worried about protecting her?" the woman voiced with a sharp undertone.

"I have not nor do I have intentions of taking advantage of her, if that is what you're implying. I've dismissed servants for less than the imprudent questions you're asking me right now. Count your blessings I have respect for your honesty and your role in my employ," he countered softly and Sansa felt he held some of the same respect for the woman as he seemed to with Mrs. Cole. However, there was a line that Mrs. Ames knew not to cross.

"She is unhappy, m'lord. Surely you must see that. She dines alone, spends the day alone and bolts her door every night in fear," she continued.

"Is that why you're drugging her with that tea of yours?" he asked and it shocked Sansa as well as the housekeeper.

"It helps her sleep, that is all," she defended herself and then there was a long pause. "Forgive me, I just don't seem to understand why you have brought her here."

At least I'm not the only one that wonders why I'm here.

"If I take her back, she will be cleaning, cooking and tending to her drunken and incompetent uncle until she's an old woman. She is meant for finer things. She has everything she needs here," he growled telling the woman he was long finished discussing this topic.

The chair scuffed back and Sansa knew Mrs. Ames was about to leave his study. She did not

want to be caught eavesdropping.

"Not *everything*, my lord," Mrs. Ames quipped as Sansa ducked into a dark alcove behind a marble bench.

"Mrs. Ames," he called out just when Sansa could see her about to pass by.

"My lord?"

"Take her with you tomorrow. Perhaps find some embroidery or something she'll enjoy. Whatever it is, have it billed to me. Anything she desires," he said abruptly and Sansa heard his door close.

Sansa smiled to herself as the hot liquid warmed her stomach. Finally, she would be able to get away from here, even if only for a few hours. She could send a letter to Uncle Edmure or Mrs. Cole. Running away was not an option after the unwise attempt she made from the inn in what like felt ages ago. Even if Mrs. Ames let her go, where would she go? Lord Petyr was paying all of her uncle's mounting bills and he would probably not be pleased at her return in fear the money would stop. Uncle Edmure hated Lord Baelish and refused to let the man take his niece, at first. Since her arrival at Harrenhal, not one word, letter or an attempt to come to for her. Nothing.

Perhaps it was enough to just go to the market with Mrs. Ames without their prying eyes of the Marquess. If the man was to be believed, she could buy whatever she wanted. If there was an art dealer, she could start painting again. She was no master, but she remembered spending hours in the garden back home sketching and painting. Sansa did not have the gift for poetry and her musical skills were decent enough but she always loved art. Had she married Joffrey, she could have spent all her days in the royal gallery.

She finished her tea setting the china aside. At least it would be something different, she mused. There was only so much music to play and reading all the time was becoming tedious. Sansa didn't know how Lord Petyr spent so much of his time in his study. She would go mad.

Sansa was surprised when he came down for dinner. Oddly, she felt as if he was purposefully avoiding her the past week. A little porcelain doll, that's what she was. A pretty doll dressed in pretty clothes but never meant to leave the shelf where she had been placed and forgotten.

"How was your day?" he asked as the footman placed soup before him. Lord Petyr laid his serviette on his lap and poured a glass of wine.

"Stimulating," she quipped with heavy sarcasm and drank from her glass.

"Do the books bore you?" he inquired lightly and Sansa tried not to roll her eyes. She read more books in the past couple of weeks than her entire life.

"No, my lord. You have quite the library. How ever could I be bored?" she answered in false politeness and continued to eat her soup.

It was quiet for a time as another course was set before them and Sansa could feel a tension growing.

"Mrs. Ames tells me you're unhappy here," he said and Sansa almost choked on her wine.

She had never told the old housekeeper that and Sansa didn't recall Mrs. Ames specifically saying it in such a way to him in his study.

Sansa honestly did not know what to say to that.

"Is your room not satisfactory?" he asked with that unblinking stare of his. "The gowns... not to your liking?"

Sansa could not meet his gaze. "They're lovely, my lord."

"Do you miss working as a servant so much that you're now dissatisfied with going back to your ladylike activities? You'd rather work in the kitchen, is that it?" he smirked as a plate of roasted duck was set in front of her.

At least I would feel welcome and have someone to talk to that doesn't chastise me for every little thing.

"You forget, my lord. I am still only a servant in this house. A pretty gown doesn't change that," she tossed back quickly.

God, she wanted to drink that entire decanter of wine right now.

"Hardly. You're the lady of the house, my dear. A station befitting you," he remarked and poured another glass for both of them.

"Clearly, I should be grateful for my cage and meaningless title," Sansa shot back.

"Cage? Yet you have stayed all this time. I said you could leave whenever you wished," he smiled and Sansa wanted to toss her wine in his face.

"Oh, it's a very beautiful and gilded cage, my lord, but a cage all the same," she grumbled. "You know very well; I don't have a choice. My uncle would never take me back now."

Sansa had tried to convince herself so many times that this wasn't true but her uncle never wrote nor came to see if she was treated well. Holding out a shred of hope seemed more senseless with each passing day.

"True. I'm sure he believes I've ruined you the first night," he grinned, hitting every one of her nerves. "Ah, but you truly are limiting yourself. You could have an exhilarating life as a governess to some horrible children. Of course, convents are sorely lacking in beautiful nuns. Or maybe a

shopkeepers wife?"

Sansa had enough of his banter and insults. She stood up from the table almost knocking over her chair in the process and strode out of the dining room into the grand foyer. He barely acknowledged her existence as it was, but now she couldn't handle his sarcastic line of questioning. What did he expect? Was she supposed to be thrilled at being torn away from her family and thrown into a new home filled with strangers. Granted, the house was grander than anything she had ever lived in and the clothing the finest she had ever owned but nothing was hers. Everything belonged to him. She belonged to him and Sansa hated him for it.

Sansa practically ran out onto the stone terrace overlooking the lake. It was a cold night and soon the snows would come and trap her here for the winter. At least he would leave, she thought. During his absence, Sansa could think straight and ever since his return and that night in the ballroom... the man confounded her. She rather liked his companionship when he was in a pleasant mood but his mood changed on a whim.

The man was an enigma. He expected her to stay. He wanted her to have fine clothing and live in his home, yet he rarely spent any time with her. Lord Petyr hadn't touched her. Only twice did he give any semblance of affection or desire for her. Not knowing his mind was a strange peace and discomfort. She wouldn't know what to do if he ever attempted to woo or seduce her. What on earth did a bachelor want with a ward if it wasn't to take advantage of her?

Her dinner was threatening to come up from the sheer anger that churned inside. Sansa took in deep breaths and walked to the stone balustrade leaning into it.

"If you fall, you'll tear your dress," he quipped from the doorway. "Not quite the long drop as the Eyrie."

Sansa remembered that night. She could hardly believe she was contemplating it when he came to her. He was kind and tender with her that evening of the ball. Sansa was so desperate for anyone to show her some compassion after living under her aunt's thumb for so long. Now, Sansa wondered what the Duchess would think if she knew her niece was living with the same man she fancied. By her letter, she was still infatuated, it seemed. Aunt Lysa did invite him for the winter. For all Sansa knew, Lord Petyr going to Kings Landing was a lie.

"I was... unforgivably rude at dinner," he admitted slowly. "I'm afraid I am not the most congenial of companions for a young lady. Mrs. Ames is going to Lord Holloway's Town on the morrow and I thought you would like to accompany her. Perhaps, you might find something you like. Music from the capital, canvas and paints, sewing. I apologize that I haven't come to know your talents other than the piano... but there are a few shops that may cater to something you fancy."

"Happiness cannot be bought," she retorted coldly.

"The poor would beg to differ," he replied smoothly.

"*I cannot be bought*," she rephrased. "You think you can shower and placate me with things... I refuse to be a kept woman. That's what everyone believes I am."

He was silent for the longest time and Sansa thought he might have left her alone finally.

"Come inside, you'll freeze out here," his gentle voice spoke behind her ear startling her.

He was closer than she realized when his warm hands touched her shoulders. Refusing to look at him, she held her rigid stance looking across the icy waters. The full moon mirrored on the still, black lake. If it were any other time, she would have thought it beautiful.

"Why am I here?" she said more to herself than him.

Lord Petyr sighed deeply as he stepped closer to her feeling his body heat.

"I don't know," he murmured. "I thought I knew."

"I want to go home," she whispered.

She could feel the warmth of his breath tickling her neck making the fine hairs stand on end.

"This is your home," he said regretfully.

"No. I want to go back to Riverrun. Please my lord. Please take me there," she begged softly and one hand left her shoulder. He fumbled in his coat pocket pulling a letter out, handing it to her.

"I know you won't believe me, so read it for yourself," he told her. "I sent a letter to him the day after I returned about bringing you home."

Her stomach knotted as she opened it, the Tully seal broken. Indeed, it was her uncle's handwriting and the words were a knife through her heart. She was ruined in his eyes and now an orphan in every sense of the word. The animosity between these two men was evident but Sansa never dreamed the last of her family would disown her completely. She hated being a woman. Men did not even require proof of debauchery, only the mere hint of it and a woman's reputation was ruined forever.

"As of now, you are officially and legally my ward, Sansa," he sighed. "I will do what I can to make you comfortable here."

Sansa's knees buckled and a strong arm wrapped around her waist from behind. Her uncle's lazy signature crumpled in her hand as the letter fell from her grasp onto the stone.

"I'm going to be ill," she grimaced feeling her stomach lurch. Sansa scrambled to the balustrade leaning over and all too quickly the contents from dinner came up. She felt soothing circles on her back and wished he would stop this newfound sympathy.

Other than her father, Sansa had never been ill in front of a man and hated every second of it. On

the other hand, if this didn't exhort at how she truly felt about having to stay here, he was not a bright man.

Sansa reluctantly took the soft handkerchief he calmly handed her. This was the second time on a terrace that he was kind and gentle but now she actually belonged to this man. She was more or less his property now and the thought of what that could mean made her stomach churn again.

"Let's get you inside. I'll have Mrs. Ames make some tea," he offered kindly.

He sat her down on the cozy chaise lounge in the library and called from Mrs. Ames. He drank his brandy as he watched her intently and Sansa was grateful when the housekeeper brought her wonderful tea. She didn't even mind the strange taste anymore as she almost gulped the hot liquid down. The herbs worked quickly and she couldn't wait to go to bed and forget everything.

Lord Petyr walked her up the stairs to her room against Mrs. Ames objections of propriety. Sansa didn't care anymore. She was sure the entire house believed she was most likely his mistress or would become his mistress. A woman of her age wasn't so much a ward but a kept woman of sorts to a man not of her family.

She hazily held onto his arm as he opened the door and led her into the bedroom. The tea combined with the wine made her head light and her feet heavy. She doubted she would be able to undress after he left and was content with falling asleep in her gown.

In her ear she heard a slight giggle and froze in her tracks.

"Tell me you heard that," she whispered.

He turned to her when her arm pulled on his and narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Heard what?" he asked lowly.

Her heart pounded and a cold sheen was upon her skin when her eyes landed upon the table next to her bed. Even in her addled state, she saw the music box as clear as day.

Sansa tore her arm from his and backed away in fear. "No. No, no, no. I'm not mad," she mumbled, feeling the hysteria building.

Lord Petyr followed her line of sight and frowned deeply. He strode over to the table and picked up the box. "I thought we were past this," he growled.

He held it out as he walked towards her making Sansa cower. "What elaborate excuse do you have for me this time?" he spat.

"Get that thing away from me. I'm not mad, I tell you," she cried and moved away afraid the box would touch her. "I can't stay in this room. I'll sleep in the servant's quarters, I don't care. I won't sleep here. I won't."

The tea was fogging her vision and thinking but Sansa could hear herself and she sounded every bit a mad woman wailing. She couldn't make out what he was saying as he lay the box on her bed. He came towards her pulling her up and she instantly winced.

"God woman, I'm not hurting you," she heard him say.

"I want to go home," she heard herself cry into his arm. "I'm not mad. I'm not."

The box forgotten, Lord Petyr picked her up and her knees gave out. She didn't care where she slept, she would be fine with hay and horses just as long as it was not in this room. She felt him pick her up into his arms and instead of carrying her to her bed, he walked out into the hallway.

It was pitch black when she felt something soft beneath her. The flick of a match, and a pale light glowed upon the silvery walls. Arms pulled her up as she leaned against a broad chest and her head swam with wine and herbs. Skilled fingers unlaced the back of her gown and Sansa could care less. She could barely move let alone defend herself. If he was going to take her, she wouldn't be able to stop him.

One by one her sleeves were pulled down and felt the heavy skirt trail down her legs. Her slippers were gently removed before tucking her legs under the soft linens. Sansa could smell the mint and brandy as he pulled her up again and began unlacing her corset. Her limp hands weakly pushed him as she tried to voice one word, "No."

"Sssh, sweetling. Sssh. It's all right," he crooned pulling the constricting garment away and laying her down onto a billowy cloud of silk.

Warm linens and the heavy duvet covered her in softness as the soft candlelight erased the lines on his face and he looked years younger. He leaned down and kissed her forehead as the words left her lips. "I want to go home."

She was falling down, deeper and deeper into that dreamless sleep feeling the world fall away.

"You *are* home," his soft voice uttered in the darkness. Warm breath caressed her skin as she entered the void. She couldn't tell if it was a dream when tender lips closed over hers taking her breath away.

Black & Grey

Chapter Notes

So here I am sitting on a LOOOOOONG flight and wide bloody awake. I love that my bf can sleep through anything. Well, at least it gives me writing time while he's snoring. This chapter's been rolling around in my head for days with no time to write it. I have so much planned and I can't wait to get more chapters out for you guys. You've been great! Thanks sooooo much.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

She was wrapped in a silken balminess and curled into its embrace. This is what heaven's clouds warmed by the sun must feel like as Sansa began to wake. But she did not want to awaken just yet even though she could sense the morning light streaming in the room.

The room. Where was she?

Her eyes opened and took in her surroundings. Light filtered softly through the champagne colored curtains and lace that left delicate shadows upon the bed. The bed she lay in was the one she wondered weeks ago about its softness.

On a nearby chair lay her dress and corset, neatly folded and awaiting its mistress. A splash of water turned her head towards the door she knew led to the adjoining wash room. Lord Petyr brought her to *this* room? Why?

She lifted the bedcovers and discovered she was dressed in her chemise and stockings. He hadn't touched her. Sansa tried to remember the previous night in vain. He saw the box just as she did and Sansa saw the anger in his eyes, and yet he brought her to his future wife's bedroom.

"How are you feeling?" his voice sounded from the doorway startling her.

His tone was gentle without a hint of anger, suspicion or even sarcasm from last night. Lord Petyr was dressed in his shirt sleeves and waistcoat as he toweled his freshly shaven face, readying for the day.

"I have a headache," she answered truthfully. Honesty was most likely the best option right now.

"Undoubtedly," he smiled thinly and Sansa unconsciously pulled up the covers. "Shall I inform Mrs. Ames that you shan't be joining her today?"

Sansa had to admit she truly did not feel up to going to the market but when would be her next chance to leave the estate?

"No, my lord," she replied softly, "I would like to go. That is, if you haven't changed your mind."

"Why would you think that?" he chuckled as he tied her cravat with practiced ease.

Was he really this obtuse or was he just playing with her.

Without meeting his eyes, she tucked her hair behind her ear and hugged the duvet to her chest. "I just assumed you would be angry with me," she whispered.

The words he uttered next shocked her.

"Do you really want the music box, my dear? If so –"

"No!" she breathed in horror that he would even suggest such a thing.

"I see," he said deep in thought. Sansa could feel his eyes studying her and couldn't meet his stare. "You *are* truly frightened of it, aren't you?"

"Yes," she whispered, pulling the duvet closer.

He tossed the towel aside and sat on the opposite side of the bed facing away from her.

"So, it comes down to – do you really believe in these ghosts or that someone in the house is playing a nasty game with you?" he spoke softly with no note of sarcasm.

"I don't know anymore," she admitted and felt hot tears welling up in her eyes. Sansa knew what she saw and heard but no one believed her but Mrs. Ames. Maybe she was going mad after all. "What does it matter? You – no one believes me anyway."

Lord Petyr sighed and laid back onto the mattress sinking in the silk duvet. He stared at the ceiling for a few minutes in silence and the glanced back at her teary eyes and smiled sadly.

"Had I known this bed was so soft, I would have taken this room instead," he grinned trying to lighten the mood. Sansa wiped her eyes and looked away. She knew he was trying to be kind but the fact remained he did not believe a word she said and it hurt. Sansa did not know why she wanted him to believe her so badly or why his opinion was important at all.

He sat up and gently turned her chin to face him.

"No more tears," he murmured. "I'll sort this out. When I find who is doing this, I'll dismiss them immediately. Now, dry your eyes and I'll send for Sarah to help you dress. The bath is yours. You

can bolt the doors even though I wouldn't dream of violating your privacy. Perhaps a hot soak will help and I'll tell Mrs. Ames to wait for you. Perhaps an afternoon away from here will better your disposition."

Lord Petyr gave her his handkerchief and smiled but his eyes were forlorn and despondent. He pushed himself up off the bed and returned to the washroom and moments later, Sansa heard the adjoining door to his room shut.

Several minutes drifted by before she could even muster the will to remove herself from the soft bed. At first she thought about gathering her clothes and scurrying back to her own room but the offer of hot bath was too tempting. She tip-toed into the washroom finding it empty and made her way to his door. She could hear him inside and slid the bolt in place securing the door.

The porcelain and copper tub was warm and Sansa wondered if he had used it this morning already. The idea of a naked man bathing in this room found its way into her mind and Sansa blushed. She glanced back to his door and it was still locked. He wouldn't encroach on her, he said and she believed him. She bolted the other door just to be doubly safe before exploring the pump handle next to the tub. She accidentally touched the copper pipe until the handle and hissed. It was hot!

A few primed pumps after playing with the handle and the hot water flowed into the tub. Sansa had never seen anything like it. Water had always been heated by the fire and it took ages it seemed to have a full bath, hence why sponging was more effective routine.

She tested the water and it was hot but not scalding. Pressing the handle down, the flow stopped. Steam filled the marble room and Sansa glanced both doors once again. Satisfied she was not to be disturbed, did she finally disrobe and step gingerly into the tub. The back was high enough that her head rested against the porcelain and almost instantly her stress began to ebb away. Sansa wished Winterfell had a bath such as this. She never would have left it.

Sansa breathed in the heavy steam letting it relax her further. It had a strange scent she couldn't place. It reminded her a bit of the scent of salt air when her father had taken them to White Harbor. The smell of the sea, that's what it was. Strange to sense that so far inland and in a wash room no less. A small table next to the bath held oils and soaps. A piece of soap had been freshly used and Sansa left it where it lay. He had used that on himself, she thought. An image came to mind and she quickly pushed it away grabbing a wrapped piece in paper and twine. It smelled of lemons and Sansa smiled. She loved lemons but rarely ever had them so far north. Lemon cakes were always her favorite and the memory made her heart lighten.

She didn't lather her hair not wanting to make Mrs. Ames wait longer than needed for her to change. Unfortunately, the heat of water became tepid as baths never retained heat for long. As expected, a soft knock sounded on the door from the Marchioness' room and Sansa knew it was the maid to help her dress.

Mrs. Ames smiled as Sansa descended the stairs in her pale green dress and traveling cloak. She didn't see the Marquess anywhere and assumed he was in his study or going about his normal business. She noticed Duncan's raised eyebrow and Sansa held her head high, ignoring the old butler completely, walking past him. She wouldn't let his man ruin her outing. Oddly, it was warmer than usual today in late autumn but Sansa was grateful for it. The young footman, William, helped her into the carriage she remembered arriving in over a month ago.

Strangely, the carriage ride to Lord Holloway's Town seemed shorter than she remembered. Mrs. Ames was quieter than usual but if she had heard of what happened last night, Sansa was happy they didn't talk about it. She was certain there was gossip already that she had spent the night in the room meant for his wife and not a ward. Hopefully, when they returned, she could find another suitable bedroom to call her own. Regardless of what Lord Petyr had said or what he might be thinking, Sansa wasn't going to spend another night in that bedroom. Certainly, he did not intend for her to move into the bedroom of his future wife. That was just where he took her in the spur of the moment, nothing more.

The carriage came to a stop near the market and Sansa looked out the window and smiled. Yes, this would be a welcome distraction, she thought. County farmers, fishmongers, bakers were selling their autumn harvest.

"Come on, dear. There's much to do today," the old woman grinned patting her hand. "His lordship will be leaving soon, I should think. I want to make sure to get as much to store for the winter. I hate the idea of those poor horses trudging heavy sleighs back in deep snow. Lord Baelish kept the old store rooms beyond the kitchens intact from the original castle. Being out of the way as we are, they come in handy during a harsh winter."

Sansa followed her and spent a better part of the morning buying dry goods, and plenty of fresh produce and meats to cure. The small folk were kind and bowed before her as if she were a lady of breeding. Sansa was glad she wore her bonnet today for the sun was rather bright making her squint slightly. She hadn't seen this much sunshine in weeks. Even though the late autumn chill in was ever present in the air, the sun's rays graced her face and many times she felt her head tilting up feeling it's warmth.

Mrs. Ames handed Sansa the purse of coins Lord Baelish had given her earlier. She remembered Mrs. Cole's frugality when they went to the market but Lord Petyr, by the weight in her hand, had given them quite a sum. More than what was surely necessary. Uncertain of whether to haggle or not, Sansa looked at the faces of the local children playing and the families selling their harvests. The Marquess said himself that the harvests were not as plentiful this season and knew Aunt Lysa was sending supplies from The Vale.

She paid the man and his expression was of surprise and attempted to hand her back some of the coins.

"No," she smiled and closed his fingers over the coins. "Take care of your family this winter."

Each vendor was paid handsomely as they went along gathering their needs and two footman

loaded the supplies in the waiting wagon. The people smiled and thanked the young woman for her generosity and it made Sansa angry that her own uncle had not been taking care of his small folk. Lord Petyr spent a good fortnight collecting taxes as he had said but with each person she bought from, they thanked her and his lordship for being so good to them when times were hard. She and Mrs. Ames learned that Lord Petyr had not collected one coin of taxes from the people of the Riverlands. One particular farmer said he paid to have several sick cows looked at. The man gleamed when he handed her a young calf as payment.

"No, no," Sansa told the proud man. "Keep her with her mother." Harrenhal had plenty of healthy livestock and she couldn't bear to separate the calf from its mother. These people needed the milk and meat more than they did.

Occasionally, she could see the old housekeeper smile with pride as Sansa emptied his bag of coins to the local people. The heaviness she felt for weeks was lifted as she smiled more in one morning than she had in years. After a couple of hours, the wagon was full and Sansa walked with Mrs. Ames around the part of the town that was paved in cobblestone with small shops on either side of the street. All of the money spent except a few guineas, she bought the servants and her old companion a well-deserved lunch by a small patisserie. Children were playing with a few goats nearby and Sansa thought she could sit and watch them all day.

Well-dressed gentlemen tipped their hat or bowed as they passed by and Sansa almost forgot what it was like to feel like a young lady. Lord Holloway's Town was a cry different than the towns near The Eyrie or even the small villages close to Riverrun. No one called her a dirty northerner, whore or gave her a look of disgust. Here, she was treated like a well-bread lady and Sansa wondered how much influence Lord Petyr had among the people. He had shown them generosity and kindness and Sansa could see the respect they had for their new lord. It was beginning to remind her of home and the way her father and mother treated their small folk. Father had told them you can gain loyalty and respect if you give it out before you expect to receive it. Perhaps Lord Petyr was not the man she imagined him to be after all.

Their money spent, Sansa wandered around a few shops with no intention of buying at all for herself. She passed Mr. Wiltshire and let him gush over how lovely the clothing turned out. As much as he tried to get her to come into his shop, she politely declined as she saw a textile shop and wanted to look at the lovely fabrics and colorful threads for embroidery. Another door down and she sighed but not in disappointment. Paints, brushes, canvases and a small easel is what she intended to purchase for herself today. The smiling, happy faces of the locals were worth so much more than her selfish desires. The shopkeeper asked what she would like and Sansa was about to decline when a soft voice sounded behind her.

"My lady is expanding her talents in the arts. What would she require?" Lord Petyr asked the man.

The clerk's eyes widened in excitement, "Why, my lord, it would be best to start... small, perhaps? Is the young lady a novice?"

"I'm not greatly skilled but I do love to paint," Sansa began timidly waiting for Lord Petyr's lead. He only smiled and nodded for her to continue.

"Well, I had an easel about this size back home and used oils similar to this..." she spoke softly glancing back to her benefactor unsure of how to proceed.

The clerk grinned, "Well, my lord, the lady seems to know what she wants..." The man waited as they both watched the Marquess mull it over as if he were going to haggle as most men tended to do.

"Whatever my lady wishes," he teased lightly. He was only pretending to play difficult and for an odd reason it made Sansa blush. Who was this man, and what happened to the cynical, quiet one that rarely paid her any mind?

The clerk gleefully packed up several items as Sansa picked out colors, oils and brushes she would need. Sansa caught him from the corner of her eye as he watched her from a distance. Where did he come from? Perhaps he just arrived in town or he could have left before she came down from her bath.

In no time, everything was paid and one of his footmen was packing it in the wagon with all the other goods.

Sansa followed him out to the street when he waited and held out his elbow in gesture. This was a far cry from the first time she was here in this town with him. She wasn't wearing an old wedding dress, there was no anger between them or any awkwardness at all. Sansa took his arm as they crossed the street to the textile shop she passed earlier. How long had he been watching her?

"Did you just arrive?" she asked, hoping not to sound anxious.

"Oh, I've been here all morning. A few matters to attend to," he spoke casually as if walking with her in town was completely natural. "I didn't realize you were going to take a swim in my bath."

Sansa flushed scarlet as he chuckled lightly. He opened the door allowing her to enter the shop first and she took the moment to recover.

"I don't want to assume all women love a needle and thread but you stood outside for a few minutes... anything here you might like as well?" he teased slightly and Sansa willed herself not to blush again.

"Oh, I'm fine really, my lord. The paints are more than enough. You don't need to buy me anything," she uttered bashfully.

"Frugal, are you?" he smiled knowingly and Sansa's stomach clenched. "Well, considering how much you spent at the market, I'm betting my purse is quite empty."

Sansa was speechless. Was he angry that she was overly generous? Of course he would want to know now much she spent today, she chastised herself silently.

She must have looked like a fish out of water the way her mouth was open and not a single word could be formed. He laughed loudly this time taking her gloved hand and kissing it gently.

"Come, my dear. One would think that you expected me to reprimand you like a child in public," he chuckled softly and Sansa wasn't sure she liked this side to him. He was completely different. This was not the man that used her as a gambling wager in Riverrun, or the one that practically insulted her at dinner or the man that was livid because of a little wooden box.

The man in front of her now was playful, flirtatious and not a tiny bit angry that she had spent all his money, not just on supplies but literally giving it away to his small folk.

He leaned in close to her ear and whispered, "I knew you were very smart, sweetling. Such acts of generosity and kindness do not go unforgotten when one governs over their lands. It's not buying loyalty, but treating your people well gains a respect instead of having to endure tyrant. If your people can feed their families, take care of their homes, they will only work that much harder knowing they have a lord that treats them with a fair-minded hand. The people here haven't seen that in many generations, I'm betting. And when the time comes that you need the backing of the people, you will find that you shall have it almost voluntarily."

"Is that why you did not collect taxes while you were away?" Sansa asked before stopping herself.

"Very clever, indeed," he smiled. "Such intelligence and observation deserves a little gift, I think. Pick out whatever you like."

"Trying to win my loyalty and respect as well?" she teased back fingering a few brightly colored threads.

"Perhaps, one day," he mused. "For now, I wish for you to pick out what you would like that may give you more comfort at home."

Not his home... *just home*. He was constantly telling her Harrenhal was *her* home now. He wanted her to be happy or at least content. Sansa made her selections and decided to let it go. He was going to leave soon, Mrs. Ames said. She might as well have something to occupy her time in the coming lonely months of winter. At least, during his absence, she could spend more time with Mrs. Ames and the other women. No one would be calling while he was away. Certainly there wasn't a soul that wanted to call on his ward.

Once again Sansa took his arm as she strolled with him down the street. Locals greeted him as they passed and it was as if Lord Petyr were more than just a county lord. He was Marquess and Lord Paramount, but it was as if they were royalty walking around the small town.

The afternoon was growing late and Sansa knew they would have to head back to Harrenhal. She saw the carriage ahead and one of the footman holding the reins of two stunning horses next to the wagon.

"I have one more small gift," he said with a grin as they neared.

"Please, my lord, you have given me enough today," she said trying not to sound ungrateful.

Lord Petyr took the reins of a beautiful grey mare bringing her to Sansa.

"You asked me once if you could go riding," he began, "and I realized that we didn't have a proper saddle for a lady. I certainly cannot have you riding astride like men. So, I had this made for you." He ran his gloved hand over the shiny leather. He handed her the reins of the gentle mare. "What good is a saddle without a horse fitting for a lady?"

Sansa was stunned. This lovely, sweet creature was hers. Her own horse. Sansa had to leave her own behind after her family was killed. Her gloved hand ran down the smoky face and Sansa couldn't stop smiling. She had black stockings, mane and tail and took to her immediately.

"They're Arabian. Very gentle and *loyal*. A gift from a good friend of mine, in hopes of breeding them here," he explained.

"Hello," she whispered, petting the mare softly around the muzzle.

"Do you wish to ride her home? Unless you're tired and would rather take the carriage," he offered and Sansa didn't need to think twice.

She flashed him a brilliant smile that she had no intention of hiding. Gathering her skirts, Sansa let him lift her onto the saddle. It took a couple of minutes to get used to the side saddle again and let the mare adjust to her commands. In no time, the horse took to her new mistress and Sansa guided her around.

Lord Petyr mounted his black stallion and instructed the men to take Mrs. Ames and the goods home as he would ride back to Harrenhal with Sansa.

"Ready?" he asked with a grin.

"After you, my lord," she smiled back.

She eased the horse to trot alongside him as they eventually passed the carriage and wagon and soon enough they were alone on the road back home.

"Did you enjoy the day?" he finally broke the silence.

Sansa smiled to herself, "Yes," she answered truthfully. Since her arrival, this was the best day she had. Actually, it was the best day she had in a very long time. Today, she felt as if nothing horrible had ever happened to her.

"Good," he replied staring at her. "I prefer seeing you smile."

"You didn't really buy her for me, did you?" she asked already knowing the answer.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise but didn't lie to her.

"No," he admitted honestly. "But, I can't see her with anyone but you. She belongs with you."

"Is she really mine?" she asked and couldn't stop the litany of questions. Why couldn't she just be happy in the moment?

"Will you believe me if I say yes?" he chided playfully but a tone a seriousness underscored his meaning.

"I believe you," Sansa half smiled and started into a gentle canter gaining ahead of him.

Catching up, he came closer alongside her. "No, you don't," he pressed.

"You don't believe me when I tell you the truth," she tossed back at him wondering why she was baiting him for an argument.

"Sweetling, trust me when I say you don't want to know the truth," he laughed sarcastically.

"You know nothing about me or what I want," she said with a layer indifference.

"Don't play coy with me," he warned.

"I'm not playing. In all this time, have you bothered to learn anything about me? You have barely spoken to me since you brought me here," she shrugged not looking at him but could feel his penetrating stare.

"This is not a game you want to start with me, my dear," he retorted coolly and was silent for a long while. "Regretfully, it was not my intention to be so aloof. Clearly, my attempt to make amends today is failingly dismally."

Ah, so that's what this is. He is feeling sorry for you because he thinks you're probably going mad and doesn't want to put you in a sanitarium... yet.

"So buying me things to keep me occupied and out of your hair is 'making amends'," she laughed bitterly.

"God, woman... why do you have to make everything so bloody difficult," he huffed in annoyance. "Is so terrible to let this day be enjoyable? We were doing well earlier, why did you have to go and ruin it?"

"I was doing quite well, until you showed up, thank you," she said haughtily.

"Ah, so you don't want my company and yet a moment ago you just admonished me for ignoring you all the time. I'm not a mind-reader, which is it?" he tried to laugh but Sansa could feel the underlying tension in his tone.

It had been a lovely day, she admitted to herself and had enjoyed his company. In fact, she liked very much how he treated her today. It wasn't the gifts, it was that he approved of the way she handled the locals and used the money for others and not herself. There was something that made her stomach giddy knowing he was observing her the entire time in town before making his presence known.

Sansa had to concede the notion that she did like this side to him. The mare was not intended for her and yet he decided to make it hers anyway. Perhaps he was worried that she was too close to losing her mind back at the house and that's why he was here riding with her now.

"If you insist on giving me the silent treatment, then you'll forgive me if I ride ahead. There are matters that require my attention before supper," he said abruptly and before waiting for her reply, commanded his horse into a fast canter leaving her behind.

Perhaps, she had been the rude one just now. Perhaps he was genuinely trying to be kind and Sansa just threw it back ungraciously in his face. Stubbornness ran deep in her family; she knew all too well. Harrenhal was her home now, whether she liked it or not and Lord Baelish was her benefactor.

Find a kindness...

She heard Mrs. Ames voice in her head.

Sansa took off in a full gallop to catch him up. The cold air nipped her face as the mare was faster than any horse she had ever ridden. She had read about their strength and endurance and it wasn't a lie. For a moment she was lost in it as the mare closed the distance. Sansa missed riding very much and instead of slowing down, she passed Lord Petyr.

"I thought you were in a hurry to get home," she called back with a smile before focusing on the road ahead.

She heard a "Ha!" and looked back to see him gaining on her. She felt her bonnet fall off, with only the green ribbon keeping it about her neck as her neatly pinned hair whipped in the breeze.

"If you fall off, don't cry and blame me," he chuckled coming alongside her again.

"I've been riding since I was a child, catch me if you can," she challenged.

"Yet, I ride a thoroughbred stallion. Meant for speed. Lesson one, sweetling, never bet against what you know you cannot win," he teased and started pulling ahead.

"Just like all men, underestimating females until we leave you in the dust," she needled him.

"Come on girl, let's show these boys up," she leaned down whispering to the smoky mare.

A quick jab and her mare charged forward at breakneck speed. Sansa held on tight and could see Harrenhal just ahead. She grinned back at the Marquess as she pulled away and then he gained again. The stone bridge was nearing and Sansa guided her to the left instead.

"Sansa, no!" he yelled right before she squeezed her thighs and leaned down as her mare jumped the brook.

Baelish followed as his stallion leapt across and closed the distance once again. She veered towards the stables instead of the front of the house. Only barely did she beat him but beat him she did. Out of breath and bringing her mare to a stop, Sansa couldn't stop laughing.

"You reckless woman," Sansa heard him chuckle behind her.

"I knew she could do it," she smiled and leaned down to the mare's ear patting her neck, "*Couldn't you, mo chailín deas?*"

Lord Petyr dismounted and handed the reins to the stable boy before coming to her side smiling. "Yes, she is."

That surprised Sansa. Not many that she knew of understood the old tongue. Her mother wished against it, but father insisted the children learn it for the Northerners still used the language frequently. He helped her down and there was something in his eyes that made her tummy flutter. He was referring the horse a moment ago, wasn't he?

Sansa cleared her throat and untied her bonnet, stepping away. "I think I'll bring her some carrots later. She deserves it," she said avoiding his eyes.

"After making her run all this way, I think so," he chuckled as they walked from the stables towards the back terrace of the house.

"Sore, that I beat you?" she laughed taking off her gloves.

"Perhaps I only let you win?" he countered lightly.

"Oh no, I walloped you easily..."

But she didn't get to finish that sentence when he whipped her around behind a tree and before she knew it, his mouth was on hers. For a moment she struggled but it only caused him to tighten his embrace. Lord Petyr's lips were soft and this time she could taste the mint that always seemed to scent his breath. He shouldn't be kissing her and she shouldn't be letting him, her mind raced.

Sansa couldn't remember the last time she was kissed and forgotten how nice it could be when the man knew how. She was lost in him and yielded to him for a heartbeat until a nagging voice in her head told her this wasn't right. He shouldn't be intimate with her. She was his ward after all and he wasn't courting her.

She pulled away breathless and blushed a deep shade of red. Sansa could not meet his eyes as suddenly the moment was gone and she didn't know what to do or say to the man standing with his hands still resting on her waist.

"It's getting cold," she said stupidly trying to find her voice.

Finally, he released her and stepped away.

"Yes, we should go in," he acquiesced. Lord Petyr offered his arm once again but this time Sansa didn't take it instead fidgeting with her gloves as they walked up the terrace steps. "I told the maids that you decided on another room. You have your pick of any in the house, of course. They will move your belongings whenever you please," he offered trying to deflect from what just happened between them.

"Thank you," she replied but still couldn't think of what else to say to him. Should she tell him that what he did wasn't proper and shouldn't do it again? Should she ask him why? Her stomach fluttered again putting her nerves on edge. It was probably best she didn't know his mind. Perhaps it was just a spur of the moment fancy and nothing more.

Unconsciously, Sansa licked her lips still feeling that light tingle as he opened the door for her. She followed him down the gallery to the stairs when he suddenly stopped and cleared his throat.

"I have much to do, my dear," he said formally and whatever happened between them outside was a distant memory it seemed. "I will see you at dinner."

He took her now cold and trembling hand to his lips although his eyes never left hers for a second. Sansa felt her lips tingle again and could only nod as her voice was bottled up completely. She watched him ascend the stairs and disappear around the corner when a cough sounded behind her.

Duncan's disapproving glare made her anxious and wondered now what everyone must be thinking today. Lord Petyr had taken her to his future wife's bedroom for the night. She bathed in his washroom. And certainly they probably saw the two of them racing towards the stables.... But she couldn't help wonder if that kiss was also observed.

Sansa walked up the stairs and wandered around the other empty rooms. She could hear a few giggles from the upstairs maids and the idea that they thought she was either trying to seduce the Marquess or he was making her his mistress was making her feel ill. It wasn't as if she had to keep up appearances to appease her family or the ton. They were servants, and she shouldn't care what they thought of her. However, whispers of wantonness, impropriety or that she was simply out to have a wealthy man take care of her...

A room dressed in shades of blue on the south end of the house and much further from his rooms seemed fitting enough. Perhaps choosing this room and putting some distance between them was a good idea.

Chapter End Notes

mo chailín deas = my lovely girl

Little Mistress

Chapter Summary

This chapter just spilled out of me and we're getting into some plot thickening now.
Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

After breaking her fast alone, Sansa joined Mrs. Ames in the greenhouse looking over freshly dried herbs and medicinals for the winter. She wanted to learn more about the tinctures and recipes the old woman brought down from the North. Mrs. Ames had plans for spring gardens and expanding the varieties and it made Sansa long for winter to be over before it even began.

The less she had to go into town, the better, she told Sansa. Somehow, Sansa felt it was more to avoid questions about her purchases than the journey. Duncan seemed overly critical of her apothecary ways and insisted the local doctor and priest be summoned instead of the old woman's remedies. Sansa had to laugh because the butler was more archaic than anyone. Duncan didn't appear to approve of anything in this house and Sansa wondered why Lord Petyr kept him as majordomo.

"You seemed to enjoy yourself yesterday, my dear," Mrs. Ames smiled as she stored away seeds.

"Yes," Sansa answered in kind, "It felt wonderful to be outside and away from here for a spell."

"I didn't expect to see his lordship. Lovely gifts he bought for you, especially the mare," the old housekeeper teased.

"He shouldn't have," Sansa blushed remembering the race and a stolen kiss behind the oak tree.

"Why ever not? Perhaps he wishes you to be happy," she asked pulling out a mortar and pestle.

"He's probably praying he doesn't have to lock up a mad woman and add to more gossip," Sansa laughed cynically and opened the recipe book. She knew Mrs. Ames had pestered him to let her go into town.

"Do you wish to talk about it?" Mrs. Ames asked slowly.

An uneasy silence permeated the cold greenhouse and Sansa didn't know if she wanted relive it or not. She was more concerned about the kiss yesterday and how to act around him than anything else.

"It must have been serious enough that you slept in the mistress' chamber. The maids were all a chatter yesterday morning," she pressed lightly and Sansa could say she did not wish to discuss it, but she had so few people to talk to as it was.

"I can only imagine the sordid gossip from the whispers I heard upstairs last night," Sansa muttered angrily. "Lord Petyr was... a complete gentleman. Nothing improper happened. Perhaps I should have been more careful. Your tea and wine made me ill. That is all."

"So ill that he ordered them to move you to another room?" the woman asked knowingly.

"I asked to be moved. I don't care for that room," Sansa whispered feeling she could not lie convincingly to her old confidant.

"It's alright, child. You don't have to explain why. I understand," she smiled crushing a mixture of seeds. "Which room did you choose? I suppose he let you have your choice."

"The blue room," Sansa answered.

Mrs. Ames froze in her task, "The one on the southern end?"

"Yes, why do you ask?" Sansa's stomach clenched.

"Why did you choose that room? Did he show it to you specifically?" the woman continued her strange inquiry.

"No, I wandered through the rooms and it seemed nice enough," she replied.

And it's a good distance from my old room and him.

"The door was open?" the old woman frowned making Sansa anxious.

"Should it not have been?" she wondered with a growing unease.

"Only two people have the skeleton keys. Myself and Lord Baelish," Mrs. Ames paused with a fearful look that made Sansa shiver. "That door has been locked for months."

Sansa's breath was shallow and fast as she closed her eyes. "Why?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"It's the most haunted room in the house, child," the Northern woman mumbled. "It's her room, hence why I keep it locked."

“Who?”

“The burning girl.”

Sansa opened the door and tentatively stepped inside the blue bedroom. The afternoon sun streamed through the lace curtains filling it with light and the cherry stained wood contrasted against the pale and dusky blues with hints of cream and gold making it inviting.

She slept perfectly last night and Sansa couldn't understand it. The bed wasn't as cozy as her previous room but it was more than suitable. She wished she could have the mattress from the Marchioness' room. That was the equivalent of sleeping on a cloud. Most importantly, there was no pesky music box making its magical appearance. No childlike voice giggling in her ear. In fact, just as the lavender room, nothing seemed amiss in this one either.

The burning girl. A ghost, spirit. Something took ownership of this room and frightening enough that even Mrs. Ames chose to keep it locked. Sansa was about to call the maids and move her belongings once again when that deep, masculine voice spoke from behind her.

“I suppose I should have let you choose what room you preferred from the beginning. I almost forgot about this one. Feels more suited for a man, but if it's what you like, then it's yours of course,” he mused looking around the room.

Damn. What was she supposed to do now? Tell him she didn't want it after all because it was haunted? He would send her to a mad house for sure if she told him the truth.

“The bed isn't very comfortable,” she said. It wasn't exactly a lie. Perhaps it would be enough to move once again.

“Oh?”

Lord Petyr sat on the bed and laid back. Sansa thought he was certainly going to chide her for being so fussy. It was better to be thought of as too demanding than crazy.

“I'll have the mattress switched for you,” he offered without a thought.

“Oh no, I don't wish to be a bother. I can just move rooms. I'll move my things, myself,” she rushed her words making him raise an eyebrow.

“You picked this room. Moving the mattress is not an issue. It will be done today,” he said with a tone of finality. “I'll not have you feeling that the servants are being burdened with your comfort.”

“Perhaps I was a little hasty because I was tired from the market,” she muttered trying another tactic. “I'm not positive I like all the blue. You're right, it is a little masculine.”

Lord Petyr stood up and gestured to follow him across the hallway to another door. Inside, it was almost a mirror image of the room they just left, but instead of blue, dusky rose damask gave it a warmth. Sansa didn't quite remember this room, maybe she *was* overly tired last night.

The mattress was the same and Sansa wasn't about to say one word in complaint. She might be across from a room that scared even Mrs. Ames but at least it would return to being locked. Sansa cringed inwardly. If she pressed the issue any more, surely he would suspect something else was wrong. After the other night and then how kind he was yesterday – Sansa felt between a rock and a hard place.

Sansa smiled sincerely sitting on the bed. “This will be perfect,” she thanked him.

There was a sculpture on the table depicting Venus entangled with Mars in a lovers embrace but that wasn't what made her blush. The painting behind Lord Baelish above the mantel was that of a nude woman laying prone on a lounge with her legs parted widely. His eyes followed hers and he stood silent for a moment.

“It's Boucher. *Petite maitresse*,” he explained before sitting next to her on the edge of the bed observing the work of art. “Marie-Louise O'Murphy, one of King Louis XV's mistresses. The rumor is this painting roused the king to have the virgin girl brought to him as a courtesan. She also carried a family name that was reviled by those in court. Bore him a child, which was taken away from her. A few years later she made the mistake of trying to unseat his favorite mistress, Madame de Pompadour, was quickly exiled from the court of Versailles and was forced to marry several times over including, at the age of close to sixty I believe, a husband eight and twenty years her junior.”

Sansa stared at the young girl with her delicate, porcelain skin. She had no idea what posing for this painting meant for her life. The old woman, if still alive, probably wondered what her life would have been had it not been for the lust of a king or the jealousy of a favored lover.

A family name that was reviled...

Sansa felt for the young woman. She knew how it felt. It seemed anyone with a Northern name or history was an outcast to the rest of the aristocracy no matter which kingdom they lived.

“She is so innocent,” Sansa whispered in despair, “Frozen in time. She will never know how ugly the world can be. I wonder if she could go back to this moment, with full knowing, would she still have chosen to pose for the artist?”

Lord Petyr crooked his head and stared at Sansa with a slight crease between his brows. He tipped her chin turning her to face him.

“We don't always know where our decisions will take us,” he said and there was that sadness again in his eyes he always tried to hide.

“Or if our choices are stolen from us?” she replied serenely. Sansa wasn’t accusing him, not really.

He smiled thinly but his answer surprised her.

“And if it could be given back to you? The power over your life?”

The sincerity in his voice was unmistakable in the charged air between them.

“Given, *how*? I have nothing and no one,” she frowned.

Petyr leaned forward as Sansa held her breath and her stomach fluttered even when his lips met her forehead. There was something in the way he smelled. It was the soap from his bath yesterday that reminded her of sandlewood and it was intoxicating.

He leaned back and stood from the bed leaving her flustered. Lord Petyr stopped at her door and turned slightly.

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” he said before disappearing around the corner.

A tranquility came over the house that day. She embroidered as he read by the fire and at dinner they discussed music and art. His knowledge was extensive as he spoke of the pieces he had collected at his townhouse in Kings Landing. New music was all the rage in the capital coming from across the sea from other countries. Sansa had never seen an opera or a play and it was one of the few things that excited her about moving to the royal palace. The royal family attended many galas as composers and playwrights sought them out to finance their works.

Sansa wondered what it would have been like to explore the city with a man like Lord Petyr. She couldn’t imagine him being boring at all. There was a definite change in him the past two days and Sansa wasn’t sure if it was out of pity or fear of her mental state that had him so pleasant and warm in her company.

The days passed as they fell into a comfortable routine. He spent most of his mornings on business needs and in the afternoon they would walk, ride; she would sketch or embroider while the light was good and some days he would sit and listen to her play. They didn’t always talk and sometimes enjoyed the silence. It was nice just having someone there even if they were both reading in the library after dinner. He was kind, warm and funny she discovered and wondered where this man had been hiding all this time. Sansa could barely remember what he was like before and hoped that side of him had no intention of returning.

That afternoon, he had fallen asleep listening to her play and Sansa couldn’t help but observe him so unawares. She quietly fetched her drawing paper and sat down on the edge of chaise lounge that he was dozing on. It was a cloudy day but bright enough to sketch. He had a straight and aristocratic nose and sharp features. She hadn’t noticed before how long and dark his eyelashes were as she added depth to his eyes and brow. Lord Petyr’s hair was thick with just a slight curl even where his temples were beginning to grey. His lips were slightly parted and they weren’t too thin but were not full and pouty either. He had a very masculine mouth with the late afternoon shadow that was growing. Lord Baelish could grow a moustache and probably look older and more distinguished if he wanted but Sansa preferred him as he was now. Despite his age, he still had smooth skin and sometimes a quality that made him appear younger than his years.

Sansa had been so focused on getting his mouth right, that she didn’t notice him watching her intently.

“Oh!” she laughed nervously, “You scared me.”

“Have you drawn horns and hooves on me yet?” he grinned and Sansa felt a little flutter.

She hugged the drawing to her chest not wanting him to see. It wasn’t nearly as good a likeness yet since she hadn’t added much shadow and details.

“It’s the tail I’m having trouble with, actually,” she teased with a blush.

Lord Petyr sat up and stretched a bit.

“Give us a look,” he smiled reaching for the drawing.

“No! It’s not good,” she tensed standing up from the lounge and retreating away.

“Come now,” he jested moving towards her as she backed up slowly, “It can’t be that bad. I’m not the most handsome fellow. So unless you’ve made me a gargoyle, I shan’t be offended.”

“An artist doesn’t show her work until it is finished,” she protested as she neared the fireplace holding the drawing behind her back.

“Ah,” he grinned cornering her until she could feel the fire’s heat on her backside. “And when shall you be finished, Mademoiselle *Giroust*?”

He was harmlessly flirting, she knew, but it made her anxious all the same as he came so close that she could smell that sandlewood soap of his.

“I – I don’t know, my lord,” she stammered.

“*Must* we be so formal with each other,” he taunted. “I’ve been calling you by your given name for some time.”

And you call me Sweetling and my darling which is far beyond even informal decorum.

“But it still isn’t proper, my lord –” Sansa weakly protested as she could almost taste that mint again and felt a heat near her hand.

“Call me, Petyr...” he whispered lowering his head.

Sansa wailed almost colliding her head with his as the paper had caught fire in her grasp. The drawing was engulfed in flames as it fluttered down to the floor and Petyr stomped on it before patting down a part of her silk skirt that had caught fire as well.

The commotion drew the attention of Duncan and one of the young footman to the room.

“Is everything all right, my lord? We heard the lady scream,” the old butler asked in mild concern and Sansa tried not to scowl.

“Everything is fine. Lady Sansa was a bit too close to the fireplace is all,” Petyr waved them off impatiently.

The men dismissed, Petyr bent down and picked up the remains of the drawing and smirked.

“A cyclops?” he chuckled. “And I was so anticipating a gargoyle.”

Sansa reached for the burnt paper but he was quick and tucked it away in his breast pocket.

“Oh no, I should like to keep this, my dear,” he smiled and Sansa blushed.

She inspected her skirt and saw where a bit of lace and silk were burned, leaving a hole in the fine material.

“Oh! Look what I’ve done. It’s ruined,” she cried in dismay. This was one of her favourite afternoon dresses with the light green and rose flowers.

Petyr bent down inspecting the garment with an air of nonchalance.

“If you wish, I’ll have another made,” he said standing up. “Perhaps she’ll have some of the same fabric.”

“It’s my fault it’s ruined. You shouldn’t need to buy another. I have plenty of beautiful dresses,” she protested. “I suppose I can wear this when helping Mrs. Ames.”

“As you wish, my dear,” Petyr smiled and cleared his throat putting distance between them again. “Ahem, I suppose you’ll want to change for dinner and I have some letters to write.”

“Of course,” she mumbled. “I think I’ll rest for a bit myself, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” he answered picking up her hand and bringing to his lips. He glanced at her fingers wiping away a smudge of soot. “Did you burn yourself?”

“It’s nothing, really,” she trembled.

“Have Mrs. Ames see to it,” he instructed kissing her fingers tenderly and just as quickly he let go of her hand and left her in the music room.

What was happening between them? Sansa was so conflicted about their relationship. Was she allowed to like him and enjoy his company? She was doing a terrible job at holding a grudge to the man that essentially bought her from her uncle and kept her here, making her his legal ward. He kissed her days ago and he would have kissed her again if fate had not intervened.

Mrs. Ames applied a balm, wrapping two fingers with a soft cloth before Sansa retired to her new room. Dressed in only her corset and chemise, Sansa laid on the bed and stared at the painting over the fireplace. She had judged it too quickly at first but now found her story had some similarities. It was so easy for men to discard a woman as if she were nothing. All women were good for was pleasure and bearing children. Nothing had changed in so many years it appeared.

She understood why a painting as erotic as this wasn’t hanging downstairs. Father would have never allowed such artwork in the house and Mother had a taste for Italian artists especially with work depicting religion.

Petyr wasn’t a prude and knew the history of it, but had enough sense that it should be displayed somewhere more private. Each of the guest bedrooms had beautiful paintings on the walls and they complimented the décor. The golds and pastel hues of this painting were perfect for the rose tones of her new room, Sansa thought.

It wasn’t like the nudes Sansa had seen before in Greek or Roman sculptures or paintings. The girl wasn’t just lying there with material draped artistically to cover certain bits or in the traditional languorous poses like some goddess.

What Sansa couldn’t tear her eyes away from was the way her legs were parted as if waiting for a lover and understood why it instilled such a desire for the king wishing to have her. It looked as if you could just tilt your head a certain way and see between those milky thighs. Sansa wondered what it must be like to lie there naked for days while a man painted you. Was he a gentleman or did he take advantage of her in her exposed state?

What sounded like a knock on her door made Sansa get up quickly putting on her dressing gown before answering. She looked at the clock on the table. It was growing late and Sarah had probably come to help her dress for dinner.

“Yes?”

Sansa waited and yet the door didn’t open. Frowning, she opened the door and no one was there. It was dark outside and only a few sconces were lit in the dank hallway. Perhaps she imagined it while daydreaming about the painting. Sansa closed the door and pulled out a dress from her wardrobe for dinner when someone knocked on the door and she heard it clearly this time.

“Come in,” she told the maid and heard the door open. “I’ll most likely retire early tonight after supper, so if you could warm the bed, I would be grateful.”

Sarah didn’t answer and Sansa turned around in annoyance only to find herself alone with the

door ajar.

“Sarah?” her voice faltered.

Sansa crept to the door and peered into the hallway again finding it empty as before. Not since her last night in the lavender room had anything strange happened at all in the house. Even when she slept in the blue room and Mrs. Ames told her it was haunted, Sansa had expected it and yet nothing happened. She glanced across the hallway and the door to the blue room was locked.

“*He lies to you,*” a sweet voice sounded in her head and it froze Sansa to the spot.

Do not listen to them. They are liars, tricksters...

Mrs. Ames’ steady warning echoed in her mind and Sansa immediately closed the door, bolting it firmly.

“*He deceives you,*” it spoke again.

“Go away,” Sansa whispered and willed herself to tune it out.

Ignore it and it will go away. I’ll start drinking the tea again and it will all disappear. It’s all in my head. It’s all in my head.

Another knock sounded loudly and a fiery, amber glow emanated from under her door from the hallway. The same glow she saw in Petyr’s room the first day she saw the music box.

It’s her room... the burning girl.

Sansa closed her eyes and refused to let anything more frighten her. She would not be weak. She would not let whatever it was run her out of another bedroom. Her mother was right. There’s no such things as ghosts or spirits. It’s all in her head. Perhaps she was a mad woman after all because the voice didn’t stop.

“*To the underworld he’ll go, when the somber music dies. So Persephone must follow, to find her God of lies.*”

Another knock on the door and Sansa mustered whatever courage she had left to open the door still seeing the glow from underneath.

No! I’ll prove it. There’s nothing there. You’ll see.

Sansa slid the bolt back and opened the door, yelling loudly, “Leave me alone!”

“I’m so sorry, m’lady,” the maid, Sarah, shrank back in fear. “You – you asked me to come dress you before dinner...”

Chapter End Notes

Marie-Suzanne Giroust is an 18th century French artist

Marie-Louise O’Murphy posed for “Jeune Fille Allongée” (the lying Girl), painted by François Boucher in 1752. She was mistress to King Louis XV, bore him a daughter and was ousted by his favorite mistress, the famous, Madame de Pompadour. The girl married several times then died in 1814, at the age of 77. Her family was Irish and did have a terrible reputation.

Lady

Chapter Notes

And another chapter just poured out of me... sheesh.

Do you ever hate those moments when you know you have to sleep or go to work but you'd rather stay home and write? Damnit, this ship is killing me.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sansa kept her troubling thoughts to herself at dinner, read quietly while drinking Mrs. Ames' tea in the library and let Petyr, as he wished to be called, escort her to her new room. The tea must have been stronger than usual because Sansa didn't recall much of what Petyr said to her. He said something about going riding tomorrow while the weather was still mild before kissing her hand and walking towards the east wing.

She lay in bed and let the tea work its magic. There was no knocking on her door, no ghostly voice singing riddles in her ear and finally Sansa felt herself relax. The flicker of the candle danced on the wall as the embers died in the fireplace. The soft glow created a shadow of the sculpture on the rosy damask as Sansa stared at it with heavy lidded eyes. She could have sworn Mars moved dipping back the head of Venus but it was just an illusion created by the sputter of the flame as she drifted off.

Sansa woke with a blush already stinging her cheeks and a strange ache in her belly. The tea had left her groggy but felt she had dreamt of kissing. The music room was bathed in the moon's light as Petyr laid her down on the chaise lounge. His mouth was hot and intoxicating as she wrapped her arms around his neck. There was no nervousness feeling the hard planes of his body on hers. It was when she felt his lips travel down her neck, did she wake breathless.

Sarah dressed her for riding with her warm wool and fur after breaking her fast. Petyr said he would meet her at the stables when a man from town came to speak with him. She walked to the stables alone finding the horse waiting patiently. Sansa ran her gloved hands across the smoky mare she named Misty. Petyr was right when he said Arabian's forged a loyal bond, but it surprised Sansa how quickly it happened. It seemed she always knew when Sansa was coming to the stables.

It had been some time and Sansa wondered if Petyr had changed his mind or was too busy for her once again. Both horses were already saddled and Misty was getting anxious. Her mare wanted out, she wanted to run and Sansa felt that same desire. Fed up, she mounted her horse and took her out along the banks of the lake where she could still see the terrace and stables. Misty was impatient with her mistress' command of a slow trot and itched to run.

Sansa glanced back to the house expecting to see Petyr, at any moment, come out the back terrace but the anxious whinny of her mare cemented her decision. Not looking back, she jabbed Misty and let the mare have her way, galloping around the northwest bank of the lake. As she rode, Sansa felt a level of freedom hadn't experienced in years. Even after racing Petyr home, she had not ridden out on her own. He was always with her, not that Sansa minded. Letting Misty run free, Sansa felt one with the animal and everything around her. As much as her mother desperately tried to instill midland and southern teachings, she would always be a Northerner in her heart. Sansa felt no connection to her roots in the Riverlands. She was just as foreign here as in the South.

She rode past the watermills pushing fresh water towards house and waved at two men fixing a cog. She could see the woods ahead and slowed Misty to a canter. Sansa and Arya played in the woods as children and never once did anything bad happen. Sansa would disappear for hours in the deep thickets and let the peace wash over her. There were few places she could be alone and enjoy listening to the birds and the whistle of the breeze through the trees.

Sansa halted her mare just at the tree line and looked back at the house. Petyr couldn't be seen anywhere. She would just go a little further, no harm done, and be back before anyone noticed. It wasn't dense pines as around Winterfell, but the trees were tall and their branches aimed for the grey sky above. Small brooks bubbled nearby and winter birds chirped all around. She would like to come back here in the spring, Sansa thought. She could only close her eyes and imagine how beautiful it would be.

A rifle shot rang out in the distance and it startled both Sansa and Misty. A blur of grey and white ran past low lying shrubs and only for a moment was Sansa nervous. It was a wolf, but they were in no danger, for the animal was running away from what was surely a hunter. A second later, another shot fired and a painful yelp pierced Sansa's ears.

Without a thought to the danger, Sansa rode quickly towards the direction of the sound. Near a massive oak tree cresting a small hill overlooking the lake, she saw the poor creature limping a few painful steps before collapsing.

Sansa tethered Misty and cautiously made her way to the injured wolf. Only steps away, she could see it was a fatal wound and it broke Sansa's heart. She leaned down and the animal growled helplessly.

"Shhhhh.... Socair – *be still* –,“ she murmured softly, “Socair...”

The wolf snapped at her hand breaking the skin on the corner of her palm. Sansa could hear a small yelping close to the trunk as she leaned closer.

“Ní bheidh mé dochar a dhéanamh duit – *I will not harm you* – .”

The wolf relaxed and laid her head in the direction of a small burrow. Inside were two pups. The white one was the one yelping for its mother and the other, looked to have died from exposure. Their mother must have been hunting for food, Sansa thought with a heavy heart, and now she was dying.

“Girl, get away from there,” a burly voice yelled from a distance and the mother wolf growled in defense but Sansa placed a gentle hand on her head.

The man walking towards them was reloading his rifle with gun powder and Sansa stood up quickly blocking the wolf with her body.

“Din’t ye hear what I said? Get away from that wolf,” the man spat and Sansa did not move a muscle wondering what to do.

“You’ve shot her, now be on your way, sir,” Sansa commanded with as much courage as she could, considering she was defenseless with only her horse nearby.

“That damned beast has been killing my chickens for weeks. Step aside, you stupid girl,” he yelled again and the wolf whimpered in pain trying to reach her pup to protect it even though she was dying.

“I will not,” Sansa held her ground as he approached pointing the rifle at her. Any sane person would just move away. It was only a wolf and the pup would surely die without its mother, but Sansa wouldn’t let this man kill them. She couldn’t.

“That fucking thing has pups, eh? I said move!” he shouted and tried to push Sansa and she shoved him back as hard as she could.

The pup was trying to crawl out of the burrow and Sansa quickly scooped it up looking at the dying mother.

“Beidh mé a chosaint léi – *I will protect her* – ,” she told her and the man whipped her around.

“What is that, some kind of faerie talk?” the foul smelling man roared and it gave Sansa an idea.

“Scared of the *Tuatha Dé Danaan*, are you? You should be after killing one of our children. Do you not know where you stand?” Sansa lowered her voice to a deathly tone. The tree was on a small hill near the lake, it couldn’t have been a more perfect place.

“*Daoine sidhe*,” she spoke softly and her eyes gleamed a bit. “I should take you for what you have done.”

“Witch,” the man breathed in horror.

“I am no witch. I am *The Mórrígan*,” Sansa growled ominously and Sansa wanted to laugh at using such old legends to scare a man thrice her size. She thought only superstitious people lived in the North, apparently she was wrong.

The man raised his rifle in her direction and Sansa was terrified as she held the pup to her chest. This was no longer a game. He was going to shoot her.

Sansa raised her hand and screamed when suddenly leaves caught fire at her feet and the image of a young girl put a hand to his rifle making it glow a deep red. The man wailed in pain dropping it to the ground and backing away. Just as quickly as she appeared, the girl was gone and Sansa was stunned at what just happened.

“Bleedin’ faerie witch...” he muttered in fear and ran to her horse, grabbing the reins.

“Hold there, fellow!” a welcome voice yelled from the distance and couldn’t have been more relieved to see Petyr riding towards them. “You are stealing my horse.”

“The – the witch, m’lord... cursed me, she did,” the man backed up and pointed towards Sansa when Petyr withdrew a small musket.

“Witch? What witch?” he smirked in confusion looking in her direction.

“There! She’s there, don’t you see her?” the man yelled in panic. Petyr stared at her and raised a knowing eyebrow in amusement. Sansa shook her head slightly holding the pup closer.

“I see a dead wolf,” Petyr answered, playing along.

“Spirit of the wolf, she is... killed my chickens and now she’s cursed me,” he rambled like a madman showing his burned palms to the Marquess. “Cursed, faerie folk. Should burn these woods down...”

“I see, well, I’ll take it into consideration. Go home and do not return to these woods,” Petyr warned the man watching him scurry away. “If I see your witch, I’ll be sure to kill her with holy water.”

Once the man was long, out of sight, Petyr climbed down from his horse walked to the man’s abandoned rifle. Sansa set the pup down and sat next to the mother as she caressed her fur matted with blood. She heard Petyr curse and the thud of the rifle hitting the ground. She hadn’t dreamed it after all. A girl appeared and made the rifle hotter than forged metal.

The wolf’s breathing was labored and Sansa knew it wouldn’t be long. She didn’t want her to be in pain any longer and there was no way of saving her.

“Dul a chodladh – *go to sleep* –,” she murmured lovingly, petting her neck. “Beidh mé chosaint do ghrá – *I will protect your love* –,”

She felt Petyr stand behind her, but to his credit, he said nothing and simply watched in silence.

Sansa picked up the pup as its mother drew her last few breaths.

"Beidh mé grá di mar mo chuid féin – *I will love her as my own* –,” she whispered as the wolf’s eyes grew distant and still. “Dul a chodladh, máthair – *Go to sleep, mother* –.”

The pup howled and Sansa couldn’t help the tears that rolled down her face. This pup watched its mother gunned down and now it was all alone in the world, just like her, as Sansa cried softly.

She felt Petyr’s gentle gloved hand grasp her shoulder. Whatever else he might be thinking, at least he wasn’t teasing or reprimanding her. Without a single word, he picked up the mother wolf and placed her inside the small burrow with the other pup. Sansa watched in awe as he took a piece of rotten bark and used it as a spade to cover the makeshift grave with earth. She didn’t know why he did it. Even if it was only to placate her mawkishness, Sansa didn’t care. It was a tender gesture regardless of his motives.

Petyr helped her up and walked her to Misty. He took the pup so she could mount the mare and it growled playfully chewing on his finger.

“Here, take her before she eats my hand,” he chuckled softly.

“She?” Sansa raised an eyebrow taking the pup and securing her in her pelisse.

“Appears so,” Petyr answered mounting his horse. “Do want to tell me what just happened?”

As they rode back to the house, Sansa explained everything. He laughed loudly when she said she pretended to be a faerie goddess to scare the man. However, she left out the part about a fiery girl. She would let him make his own conclusion about the rifle and didn’t mention anything more.

“The wolf is your father’s old sigil, isn’t it?” he asked sincerely.

“Yes,” she whispered in remembrance. “My brother raised a wolf from a pup. Beautiful thing, he was.”

They reached the stables and Petyr lifted her down from the mare. She flinched when her grabbed her hand a little too tightly. Frowning, Petyr removed her glove discovering a shallow bite mark marring her palm, the same hand she burned in the fire.

“We’ll need to fix that up,” he frowned slightly shaking his head. “For heaven’s sake, don’t drown or fall down a flight of stairs next.”

She couldn’t help but smile as the pup squirmed and clawed inside her wool pelisse. They reached the house and Petyr opened the door to find Duncan waiting with two footmen.

“Ah, so she is found,” the butler scowled but Petyr paid him no mind.

“She was down by the watermills near the woods,” he winked at Sansa.

The pup barked and Duncan frowned in disgust at the animal poking its furry head out.

“She’s brings a wild wolf, into this house, my lord?” the butler protested.

“My lady found a little orphan,” Petyr explained, “And it will be welcome in *my* house. I best not hear of any mistreatment.”

Sansa smiled at the small victory and held the restless wolf as Petyr turned to her taking off his coat, handing it to the footman.

“No more exploring the woods alone, my little witch,” he grinned, wiping a bit of dirt from her cheek. “If you’re going to curse the locals, brew a potion that cures silly superstitions and dogmas.”

Duncan stared at her suspiciously as Sansa removed her pelisse and retreated upstairs.

To hell with him, she thought as she placed the pup on the floor in her room. Immediately the wolf started exploring her new home. Sansa called the maid to bring her a basin of fresh water and a little soap. Her new little foundling was covered in dirt and smelled terrible. Before long, a few maids gathered in Sansa’s room fawning over the new addition to the house. Once cleaned and dried, her fur was pristine white as her ice blue eyes stared at her new mother.

“She looks like a proper little lady now, doesn’t she?” Sarah sighed cuddling the little wolf pup.

Sansa smiled, “That’s it, I’ll call her Lady.”

When Sansa sat down for dinner, it wasn’t long before long, high pitched howls could be heard echoing through the house. Lady certainly didn’t like being left alone, she grinned. Suddenly, the grin fell remembering she had just lost her mother and everything she knew earlier today. Lady wasn’t a domesticated animal and now Sansa felt terrible leaving her all alone in her room.

Another howl, and Sansa glanced at Petyr drinking his wine worried that he would be annoyed with the animal and admit it was a mistake bringing her home. A single eyebrow raised at yet another howl and Sansa cringed waiting for the inevitable. Instead, he chuckled shaking his head in defeat.

“Go fetch her,” he said eyeing Sansa with a smirk.

She flashed him a brilliant smile and left to retrieve her new pet. The little wolf wandered around the dining room sniffing at everything she could get at. The smell of the food on the table was tempting as she decided that Petyr was the alpha male and waited patiently next to his chair. Occasionally, he would look down when Lady would make her presence known.

Sansa stifled a giggle at the whole thing. Lady wanted his attention, and his alone. Men rarely showed affection as it was, and here Petyr was, gently shoeing the pup but she proved to be as

stubborn as her new mistress. After several minutes, Sansa heard him sigh, and began cutting up small pieces on his plate. Scraping the food onto a saucer, he bent over and set it on the floor next to his chair. The pup wasted no time and devoured the morsels. When Petyr sat back up, she couldn't help the silly grin on her face. He gave her a mock glare as if daring her to say something but Sansa shrugged tucking into the rest of her supper.

In the library, Petyr read by the fire as he usually did but Sansa sat on the floor and played endlessly with Lady. The pup found a ball of yarn that must of fallen from her sewing basket. Before long, a long string of yarn had wound its way around the sofa and Sansa laughed trying to wind it all as the ball became smaller and smaller.

Exhausted, Sansa leaned against Petyr's chair by his leg and let the warmth of the fire envelop her. Lady curled up into her lap, letting the folds of her skirt partially cover her.

Strange, Sansa thought, how this pup had taken to her so quickly just as the mare did. Did the animals back at Winterfell do the same? It was as if Lady had accepted that Sansa was her new mother and fell into contentment. The thought of Lady pestering Petyr at the dinner table made her smile. Whether he admitted it or not, Sansa could tell he would probably spoil her rotten.

"No book for you tonight?" his soft voice asked.

"No, I'm perfectly fine right here," she answered truthfully. "What are you reading?"

"Poetry," he replied.

Poetry? That surprised Sansa. He tended to read the news periodicals when the post arrived, but tonight he chose poetry.

"Goethe? Blake?" she wondered leaning against his chair petting Lady.

"Byron," he answered. "He seems to have progressed from meter and rhyme."

Sansa chuckled, "You don't care for love sonnets that bemoan of his lady's hair and bosom?"

"No, do you?" she could hear the smile in his voice.

"Read one to me," she asked wondering what kind of poetry had his veiled admiration.

He sighed and for a moment, Sansa thought he was going to decline. Perhaps he was not a man that enjoyed reciting poetry. She used to laugh at her brothers when their mother forced them to do so in the parlor. Robb, was particularly terrible and Sansa and Arya teased him that he would never be able to woo a girl with such muddled words.

Petyr's voice, however, was smooth and glided over the words as if he were a poet himself and Sansa felt herself becoming lost in his storytelling of an ever changing dream. Her fingers caressed Lady as she slept peacefully and Sansa relaxed so much that she did not realize she was leaning more and more against his outstretched leg. His voice was like a drug, as his soft dulcet tone would rise and fall with a word or phrase anchoring the meaning with thoughtful ease.

Sleepily, she sank against him, as he was softer than the hardwood and leather of his chair. Sansa didn't know when her cheek rested against where his thigh met his knee and did not care. She was tired and listening to him recite the poem in its novel-like length was as calming as Mrs. Ames' tea.

His graceful fingers traced a curl from where her hair was loosely pinned. Today she hadn't bothered with her hair being perfectly coiffed as playing with a baby wolf all evening had her curls falling down from the jeweled combs trying in vain to hold them up.

His voice ebbed and flowed, painting a picture in her head as detailed as the most delicate brush stroke on a canvas and those soothing fingers unconsciously played a silent tune dragging gently through her hair.

A change came o'er the spirit of my dream.
The Lady of his love;—Oh! she was changed,
As by the sickness of the soul; her mind
Had wandered from its dwelling, and her eyes,
They had not their own lustre, but the look
Which is not of the earth; she was become
The queen of a fantastic realm; her thoughts
Were combinations of disjointed things;
And forms impalpable and unperceived
Of others' sight familiar were to hers.
And this the world calls frenzy; but the wise
Have a far deeper madness, and the glance
Of melancholy is a fearful gift;
What is it but the telescope of truth?
Which strips the distance of its fantasies,
And brings life near in utter nakedness,
Making the cold reality too real!

Sansa had no concept of time as she drifted deeper into hazy sleep. At some point, those tender fingers stopped and instead closed the book, setting it on the table. Gently, he woke her moving to stand up.

"Come, my little witch," his voice teased, "Even the evil spirits of the forest have to go to bed."

Sleepily, she held onto Lady as he helped her off the floor. He took her arm, linking it with his and guided her up the stairs. Once in her room, Sansa set Lady on the bed and immediately she curled up fast asleep.

"I'll call the maid to help you undress," she heard him say stoking the fire a bit.

"No, no, let them sleep," she muttered and glanced blearily at the clock. It was very late. "I can manage."

"Of that, I'm am sure," he chuckled but his eyes were dark and something else entirely resided there.

It seemed that he wanted to say something more but decided against it. Petyr closed the distance and Sansa held her breath thinking he was going to kiss her. Instead, he left a dry kiss on her fingers once again, smiled, and left the room with a soft "goodnight".

Sansa couldn't describe the strange feeling in her stomach as she undressed. Was it disappointment? She couldn't understand what was happening. This man that she loathed in the beginning was slowly turning her topsy turvy. Is that what happened to people when they were thrown together in a remote place with no one else to really socialize with?

She crawled into bed and blew out the candle. Lady yawned and snuggled closer to her new mother under the warm linens and Sansa felt sorry for this little thing. She probably didn't fully understand what had happened to her today.

All those concerns and strange feelings drifted away as Sansa let herself finally fall into deep sleep.

She wasn't sure what was a dream or reality when her door opened and Lady gave a little growl. Soft music was playing in the distance and cool hands touched her shoulder.

"You must wake, Persephone."

Chapter End Notes

daoine sídhe or sídhe - faerie folk and also used to describe faerie mounds. Places that humans could enter this enchanted place called the otherworld through burial mounds called sídhe, through caves or lakes, or after completing a perilous journey. After reaching the otherworld, they would live happily for all time or even time could stand still.

The Mórrígan – the phantom queen/great queen or known as a goddess of war, sovereignty and protection. Is known to take a few forms, including the wolf. Linked to the banshee whom when seen was a premonition to a person's death.

Tuatha Dé Danaan – children of the fertility goddess, Dana or Danu. A legendary race of people who overthrew the Irish in ancient times. When the Tuatha de Danann was overthrown themselves by the Milesians they took shelter in earth barrows (sidhe).

The Dream (VII) – Lord Byron

Deception

Chapter Notes

Okay, busted out a few chapters in a few days, it may be a week before I get another out... but there's a ton happening really soon that's gonna throw a wrench in things but not before some serious heat. :D

Comments always appreciated :D

Sansa heard Lady growl again and then someone using her own voice, "*Socair, mo cheann beag – be still, my little one – ...*"

Lady whined a little and crawled back under the covers and Sansa dared not move. Something or someone was in her room. The piano echoed upstairs and all her fears bubbled up while thunder softly rolled across the sky and the rain began to pour down, beating against her window.

"Who are you?" she finally asked the darkness.

"A friend," the sweet little voice replied, "*Don't be frightened.*"

"What do you want from me?" Sansa whispered fearfully burying her head under the covers.

"To help you," it said with sincerity.

"Why?" she inquired. Why would this spirit, this other-worldly thing want to help her?

"He lies to you. You are not mad," it said not answering her question.

"Why me?" Sansa wondered aloud peering over her blankets finding only darkness.

"You are special," the sweet voice said. "*You can see and hear me. It's been a long time since I had a friend.*"

"What are you?" Sansa's eyes scanned the room fearfully.

"I don't know," it answered sadly and was quiet for a time before adding, "*You must go now before the music ends and he disappears.*"

Whatever it was, had left, Sansa felt and all she could hear was the music emanating from below. The last two times she ventured downstairs, Sansa had her wits scared out of her and promised herself she'd never go down again. Yet, this seemingly friendly spirit said that it was all a lie, that perhaps Sansa was right, that *someone* was down there playing after all.

Her heart beating fast, Sansa put on her dressing gown and stepped into the hallway. Glancing to the blue room's door, she found it was still closed and hopefully locked. Was the spirit talking to her from that room? The girl Mrs. Ame's was scared of? A burning spirit of a girl would be enough to frighten anyone if they saw it, but Sansa remembered what happened today at the tree. A girl in flames protected her from the man and then disappeared. Perhaps, Mrs. Ame's was wrong.

Reaching the banister, the music continued in its somber tone and Sansa remembered the strange riddle.

"*To the underworld he'll go, when the somber music dies. So Persephone must follow, to find her God of lies.*"

Sansa struggled with what to do. Persephone was kidnapped by Hades and taken to the Underworld. Petyr had essentially kidnapped her from her home and brought her here, to this ghostly place. Why would he lie to her, scare her? It didn't make sense. The only person that didn't seem to want her here was Duncan. That man seemed more evil in nature and apt to frighten her away or worse turn her mad. Sansa couldn't understand why the man seemed to hate her so much. If it was Duncan downstairs, she could prove it once and for all to Petyr and he would believe her this time. Then there was the music box. Petyr seemed angry that it was in her possession both times. Why would *he* place it in her room? Sansa couldn't puzzle it out. Duncan, however, might do something like that to make the Marquess get rid of her. Make her appear a thief, in Petyr's eyes.

Sure of herself, Sansa crept down the staircase once again and made her way silently to the music room. The music was still playing as she came to the door and couldn't look inside just yet. She tried desperately to bottle up the fear she felt as she stood there listening to this sad song. Whoever it was on the piano, they always played with sadness.

Holding her breath, Sansa steeled her resolve and peered around the edge of the partially opened double doors.

Her eyes widened at the sight before her. Petyr was the ghostly pianist and anger welled up inside like a bonfire. He sat there in her bedroom and listened to her tell him about the piano and he had the audacity to act as if he knew nothing. All this time he let her believe....

Sansa's grip on the door was so tight, she could have pulled it from its hinges. A small creak

sounded and she ducked behind the door as the music suddenly stopped. Sansa didn't know what she wanted to do. Did she just barge in there and rail at the man that had pretended he wasn't making her crazy all this time? Would he even care?

Unexpectedly, the piano began again and this time the tempo changed quickly. Even as furious as Sansa was, she had to listen at how beautifully he did play. She peered around again and watched him for a moment as his long, graceful fingers traversed the ivory keys with practiced ease. His eyes were closed and he was completely absorbed in the music. It was a song she had never heard before. It wasn't polished or sounded as though a composer had written it and Sansa pondered if it was of his own making. No sheets of music lay in front of him but instead only a glass of what looked like whiskey. He was dressed for bed, in his dark dressing robe and Sansa wondered why in hell he chose to play at this hour of the night.

The tempo slowed again and then he stopped, finishing his drink. Slowly he stood up and the bench screeched a little against the polished marble floor making Sansa shrink back. He was going to bed and would find her out here waiting for him.

Good, she thought with a satisfied smile, he'll know I caught him red-handed. I don't care if the entire household hears me yelling at him for such a cruel joke.

Sansa waited, but he didn't come. Deciding to confront him all the same, she straightened her posture and marched into the music room finding it completely empty. He was just here! She saw him and there was no other way out of this room except to pass her.

She went to the piano and touched the bench. It was warm. Good, that meant she didn't imagine it and knew he wasn't a ghost. He had been here.

Walking around the room, Sansa found all the windows locked and couldn't imagine him going outside in the rain. She stood at the piano once again frustrated and furious.

"Where did you go, you lying bastard?" she whispered to herself.

To the underworld he'll go... So Persephone must follow...

Maybe he *was* the Devil himself, she thought bitterly. Duncan did say the gates of hell were under this house.

Under the house...

Yes, this place was built upon an older castle. The gossip was about a torture chamber or something underneath and Sansa shuddered. What in God's name was going on in this house of Petyr's?

She inspected around the walls, touching around two bookcases looking for a lever of sorts. Winterfell had two secret rooms and a passage in which to hide if needed and this house was much older than her Northern home. Irritated, Sansa leaned against the wall and felt a bit of wood paneling give to the pressure.

Feeling around the wood edges, Sansa found a small notch and pressed it hard. The panel moved a little and Sansa stood with apprehension. Was this really a good idea? She didn't know where this path would lead. Nervous hands pushed the door open a little more and she peeked inside. It was damp and pitch black but Sansa could see stone steps leading down a curved staircase. She saw a candle on the bookcase but it would surely signal her following him. Glancing back inside the passageway, she could see a bare hint of light and Sansa felt like she was on a precipice. If she chose to follow this path, part of her knew she could never return.

Sansa exhaled and stepped inside the cramped passage closing the door behind her. The air was heavy and she had to refrain from coughing. After a few moments her eyes adjusted to the darkness and the pale light below crept up from the bottom curve of the stairs. To her right, the passage curved and saw another set of steps going up but it was pitch black. It seemed clear, that he had gone down under the house and Sansa's heart quickened again.

Picking up her dressing gown, Sansa made her decision and took the first tentative step down. There was a condensation on the stone wall and no hand rail to hold onto. Sansa worried she would slip and treaded carefully downward, one step at a time.

The light grew a little brighter but it was still very dim. A familiar scent that she remembered from the bathroom filled her nostrils along with the heavy dampness in the air. However, that wasn't what made her anxious. The further she followed the stairs down, the warmer it grew. In fact, it was more than warm, it was fairly hot. The stone structure had trapped the heat in and with fear, Sansa guessed that's why the marble floors were warm to the touch from above.

She frowned at that remembering how scared she was when her bare foot touched the floor in the music room. The music. It was all a lie.

Well, *almost*.

The last stair was in sight and Sansa stopped. She could hear him moving around and suddenly she could see the light from his candle. From her position, it seemed that wherever they were, it was cavernous.

She listened intently and waited before moving down the last two steps keeping herself hidden by the stone wall. What she saw, was nothing she ever expected at all.

Under the house lay a great hot spring, from where it came, Sansa couldn't fathom. By the looks of the stone columns, it had to be as old as the original castle itself or older. Petyr had lit a few torches on the columns and didn't seem to notice her presence at all as she watched. At one end, the carved stones gave way to large boulders where it seemed the spring welled from. At some point in time, the stone around the pool had been carved giving it the appearance of an ancient Roman bath, from drawings that Sansa had seen in books. The only difference was a copper pipe in one corner of the pool that led up to the ceiling and a strange, soft humming that seemed to be on the other side of the stone wall. This had to be where his hot water for the bath was coming

from. Petyr had his very own hot spring in his home, she shook her head in amazement.

Stream rose up from the pool and filled the space, making her wonder how hot the water was. If this is where he disappeared to each time, obviously it was cool enough to bathe in.

Immediately, that thought made her freeze; as wide, blue eyes stared at the man who began undressing by the edge of the pool. Sansa knew she should leave and not watch from the shadows in secret but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight. Sansa had never seen a naked man before and watching him undress, unbeknownst to him, was most decidedly not proper. It was downright scandalous.

He placed his dressing robe over a broken column that lay on its side and lifted the muslin dress shirt over his head. Petyr was lean but by no means skinny. His shoulders and chest were defined as a bit of dark hair travelled down to his stomach. For a man nearing forty, he did not have the body Sansa assumed older men had – flabby, fat, and wrinkled.

Why was she still standing here? She couldn't very well stride in and confront him about everything while he was half naked. Sansa kept telling herself she should go back to her room but her feet refused to move.

When his fingers unbuttoned and shifted his trousers down, Sansa sharply inhaled. He paused for a moment and she thought for sure he heard her, but he didn't turn towards or acknowledge her at all and continued pushing the clothing down his legs tossing the garment to the growing pile.

She watched Petyr move down one step into the steaming water and he waited for a moment as if gauging the temperature. Sansa saw every bit of him and couldn't stop staring at what made men different from women. This appendage that a woman was never meant to see until her wedding night, was intriguing. Is that what all the fuss was about?

Sansa had heard Miranda on so many occasions talk about her experience with men and how wonderful it was, what made men good lovers and so forth. She said well-endowed men were her favorite. Was Petyr well-endowed? Sansa did not know the difference as most well-bred ladies probably didn't.

Petyr sank into the water to his waist and sighed deeply as his voice reverberated throughout the chamber. He disappeared under the water for a moment before rising up again and running his hands through his wet hair and scrubbing his face. Finding a spot near the carved edge, Petyr sat down until only his shoulders were visible as his head lay back against the stone in relaxation. The torches did not give much light but enough to see him in the dark water.

Sansa gazed in lascivious fascination at Petyr in a bath, completely unaware of the girl that examined his every move. An arm lifted from the water resting behind his neck as he arched his back a little. She knew she must leave, watching him like this was more than wrong.

When a moan escaped his lungs, Sansa felt her breath quicken and an odd sensation below her navel. His brows furrowed slightly and she could see his arm move beneath the water. Oh God, he wasn't – no, she wasn't watching him *do that*. Miranda said men took their own pleasure any time and as often as they could. His breathing was labored as another moan escaped his lips echoing in the cavern and Sansa was transfixed at him bringing about his own pleasure.

The sensation in her belly turned to burning and then a pool of pure sinful aching between her legs as his moans grew louder and murmured incoherent words. She was so lost in watching him, that her foot slipped on the wet stone making her presence known.

"Who's there?" his voice bellowed from the pool. It echoed up and back again and Sansa knew it was his voice that she heard through the floors and walls that first night.

Sansa did not waste any time and scurried up the steps to the landing behind the music room. Damn it, she couldn't let him catch her spying on him. She tried desperately to find a latch to open the door and cursed herself for not taking the opportunity to do so before. The damned panel would not open and Sansa could hear him coming.

Finally, it opened and Sansa ran out not bothering to close it behind her. She barely made it up the staircase when she could hear him in the music room and knew she would be caught.

Suddenly, a loud clang came from down the foyer and instead of running up the stairs, Petyr turned the other direction giving Sansa a chance to get back to her room, bolting the door. She was breathless as she sat down on the bed making Lady bark in excitement for her return and Sansa quietly hushed her.

Quickly she took off her dressing gown that was filthy around the bottom and set it aside with her equally dirty slippers. Sansa crawled into bed and prayed that he didn't know it was her. It could have been a maid or anyone else unless he saw her. Hopefully, he believed after the last two times, she would be too frightened to venture downstairs again. *She hoped.*

What was she supposed to do now? She couldn't very well confront him about pretending to be a ghost because then he would know she spied on him while he was...

Sansa screamed into her pillow out of frustration. How in God's name was she going to explain watching him pleasure himself after discovering his lie? Her mind burned with the image of him, and her ears echoed with the sounds his voice made in the throes of desire. Worse, was the desire she felt seeing him in such a state.

She heard a sharp click from her door, but the bolt prevented the intruder from entering. It had to be him, she thought and kept Lady from barking. If she was lucky, he would assume she was asleep. She half expected him to knock and confront her about tonight, but it never came and he apparently decided not say anything now.

Coming to her door, Sansa sighed, had to be only because he thought it was her. Sansa snuggled down in the bed and knew she wouldn't get a wink of sleep tonight. Tomorrow they would have to face one another and she dreaded it more than anything ...even the little spirit of a girl that, for reasons unknown, befriended her with this new found truth.

Sanctuary of Secrets

Chapter Notes

A little trash for my dumpster babies :D

With trepidation, Sansa walked down the stairs in the morning to break her fast. She barely slept last night and all she worried about was what she could possibly say to him knowing the truth.

Lady trotted quickly behind, nipping at her skirts until coming to the small dining room. Taking a deep breath, Sansa walked in with her head held high only to find his seat empty. A footman pulled out her chair as she sat, asking her if she preferred coffee or tea this morning. Anxiously, Sansa kept glancing at the doorway waiting for him to walk in but Petyr did not come.

Coward, she thought smugly, tucking into her porridge as Lady gobbled up some meat Mrs. Ames had prepared.

Sansa changed into her ruined dress and spent the remainder of the morning with the servants and Mrs. Ames. The scent of fresh bread filled the air and it gave her a bit of peace. One of the footmen made a knotted toy of old rags and Lady tugged on it, growling with never-ending enjoyment.

The servants went about their daily routine and Sansa sat drinking her tea as Lady finally fell asleep at her feet in the kitchen.

"Let's take a look at that hand, my dear," Mrs. Ames smiled as she unwrapped the soft bandages around her fingers and palm. "The salve seems to be helping. Wrap it again tonight and tomorrow," she said examining the bite mark. Sansa had explained what she told Petyr about the incident in the woods and the old woman listened with mild interest.

"In her own way, the mother chose you, bonding you forever."

Mrs. Ames reached down petting Lady behind her ears.

"Took to you quickly, did she?" she asked kindly.

"Yes," Sansa answered watching the woman caress the animal tenderly. "As if I were her mother all along. She doesn't seem to feel loss or separation at all."

"You are her mother now, Sansa," Mrs. Ames said. "She will be loyal to you all her life."

They were quiet for a time as Sansa finished her tea, wondering if she should tell the old woman about her new acquaintance.

"Do you know where Lord Baelish went today? He wasn't here for breakfast," Sansa inquired instead.

"Oh, I don't, dear. He left early this morning and said he would not return until tomorrow," Mrs. Ames said as she started cleaning up the china. "What's troubling you, child?"

Sansa raised her head and smiled. "Oh nothing," she lied. "There was only something I wished to discuss with him today. It's not important."

"He seems to have found a fondness for you," the kindly woman smiled. "and enjoying your company, I might add."

Sansa blushed a little, but couldn't fault the woman. It was more than obvious Petyr had made a point of spending more of his time with her the last few days.

"Since that day at the market, you appear to be happier, my dear," Mrs. Ames gave a knowing grin and Sansa blushed bright red. "It's a good thing," she patted her hand sincerely. "I was beginning to worry about you. I'm glad you moved out the blue room. Nothing good would have come from that. We lost too many young maids due to that room. I tried and tried to tell his lordship that the girls were scared of spirits in the house, but he only shrugged it off as silly superstition."

He would, Sansa rolled her eyes. *How long had this game of his been going on?*

Sansa thought about the little spirit and wondered if she should tell Mrs. Ames. She saved her life in the woods and told her about Petyr, but Mrs. Ames said never to listen to *'them'*. This sad spirit of a girl was far from malevolent. Maybe she was just lonely for too long and Sansa felt sorry for her. Mrs. Ames said herself, this house had seen too much sorrow. Plus, the ghostly girl said Sansa was special. It appeared more likely that no one gave this girl a chance outside of fear. Possibly Sansa was the one to really see her for the first time while everyone else ran frightfully away. It seemed Mrs. Ames thought it best to ignore everything that wasn't rooted in the physical world in order to keep the peace. More and more, Sansa was betting the old housekeeper told the maids to not wander the house at night as well and that's why the blue room had been kept locked. Petyr playing the piano downstairs and his ghostly secret had them believing anything he and Mrs. Ames said. Sansa just did not understand why.

Did Mrs. Ames know about the Marquess fooling everyone with his midnight concertos? If she

did, then she was a liar too. She told Sansa that discussing these ghostly things with Petyr was a bad idea for he would not understand, yet he, himself was one of those ghosts. Sansa puzzled over whether to tell the woman what she knew about Lord Baelish but in the end thought best to keep it to herself... for now.

Later in the day, Sansa took Lady outside letting her run about the grounds. She was the funniest thing to watch as she was all paws and clumsy and it gave Sansa some joy. Lady set out exploring her new world without a care. Her little white ears would perk up at any sound just as her eyes were sharp and went chasing after a squirrel near the labyrinth. Getting too close to the maze's entrance, Sansa rushed over and scooped her up. The weather was turning fast and it would probably snow before the week was out. Sansa stood staring at the massive hedges in wonder. Taking a few nervous steps inside the entrance, she glanced down three separate pathways. The hedges were overgrown and two paths were almost completely blocked by years of growth. Petyr had warned it was dangerous, and by looking at it, one would have a difficult time just moving past the weeds and branches.

Lady growled and barked but it wasn't at the dreary maze but the man that marched full stride towards them.

"Lord Baelish told you not to go inside that labyrinth, did he not?" Duncan yelled from across the gardens. "You may be the lady of the house, but he is still the master and his wishes will be obeyed."

"Why? What is he hiding in there?" Sansa smirked defying the old butler and stood just inside the archway.

"Hiding?" Duncan frowned as he reached, "Girl, you Northerners may not be the most educated but I'm assuming your mother taught you *some* history. The old king built the original castle and *that* damned thing," he said pointing to the labyrinth. "Completely mad he was. Loved to torture people for amusement. You haven't any idea how many people have died in there."

Sansa stood defiant before the butler. He was only trying to scare her. How could a maze kill anyone? Duncan was probably just as proficient a liar as his master. He clearly did not like Mrs. Ames or her.

"I'm not afraid of *ghosts*, Duncan," Sansa challenged and strode past him.

"You and that old woman..." he breathed in disgust. "You're a curse upon this place bringing back the old pagan spirits. God will watch and judge you, wicked women."

Sansa whisked around in anger. She was tired of this man and his grumblings, no matter what Mrs. Ames and Petyr said.

"If this place sits on the gates of hell, as you've said," she began harshly, "Then why are you still here?"

Duncan walked up to her and Sansa held her ground.

"God puts His faithful servants where they are needed most," he growled, "even to protect those who do not believe they need it."

Sansa laughed heartily, "When was the last time God protected anyone that truly needed it? Where were His servants when innocent children were executed for nothing?" she spat viciously and walked up only inches from Duncan's face. "I don't need the protection of a God that let's children die by firing squad in the mud and rain by a vengeful and hateful brat of a king," Sansa breathed, the venom dripping from her mouth. Taking a few steps back, she glanced at the labyrinth, gardens and then towards the house. "This place is dead, it nor I need your protection, Duncan."

Not waiting for a retort, Sansa turned on her heel and left the butler standing with a look of fury on his face. She smiled as she reached the terrace steps. The last thing she needed was a zealot preaching to her. She was sick of his frowns, disapproving glares and comments and wanted for weeks to speak her mind. She may not be the lady of the house after she confronted Petyr on his treachery, so Sansa might as well take what little victories should could and enjoy it.

There was no point in having the staff prepare the dining room just for her, so Sansa insisted on taking her supper in her bedroom. She didn't feel like reading in the library or playing music today either.

Lady stretched out upon the duvet, her eyes drifting closed yet Sansa was wide awake. Mrs. Ames tea sat untouched on the table as Sansa felt that she did not require it. Her false ghost wasn't here and the real one wasn't frightening any longer. Sansa wondered if and when her little girl would appear again. Perhaps, she could help get rid of Duncan and that idea made her smile.

Knowing that Petyr would not be returning until tomorrow, Sansa desperately wanted to use his bath again. There would be no one to worry about and she could take her time. Slipping on her dressing gown, Sansa ducked out into dark hallway with just her single candle to light her way.

Before leaving, she glanced at the blue room's door and pondered why that was *her* room. Walking to the door, Sansa paused for a few moments before rapping softly but there was no answer. Shaking her head, Sansa wasn't sure what she would have done if something answered back. She placed her palm on the wood and whispered a simple "*thank you*" before making her way towards Petyr's rooms.

It was later than Sansa realized as the house was dark and quiet. She stood before Petyr's bedroom door and debated. He did say that if he caught her in here again, there would be consequences. The latch, however, did not budge telling her the room was locked and Sansa frowned in disappointment. Remembering the Marchioness' room, she walked over and placed her hand on the latch. It was locked as well and Sansa huffed in annoyance. Clearly, he did not trust her at all while he was away now.

Nor should he, she smirked, I did snoop through his room and now wished to use his tub and fine soaps.

Sansa walked back towards her room and stopped at the staircase looking down at the sleeping house. How strange it was, that she no longer had any more fear at night. How quickly things could change with new knowledge. She was never mad as she had feared before. No, this house was filled with liars in one way or another and the one she was warned against was the only one with hint of truth.

She glanced down the landing towards her room and then down the stairs. He wouldn't be back till tomorrow morning at least. With a wicked gleam, Sansa picked up her gown and walked down the stairs and into the music room. Pressing the wood, the little door opened and Sansa felt the same hot, damp air as last night. Checking to make sure no one was watching, she stepped inside and closed the panel behind her not realizing that a well-concealed thread had pulled a potted plant from its place on the marble leaving a visible ring of dirt.

It was much easier to see with a candle in the dank corridor than last night. The stairs heading down to the pool were to her left and another, larger passage to her right. Out of curiosity, Sansa walked to the right for a bit. As before, a set of stone stairs curved up the side heading up to at least the second floor but there was also a heavy oak door on the other wall. It was fixed with a massive padlock, and Sansa entertained wild notions of what could be behind it. Perhaps it was the dreaded torture chamber the servants whispered about. In a way, if that's what was behind that door, Sansa was glad it was locked.

Moving back towards the music room, Sansa started down the stone steps to the hot spring that quietly awaited. She didn't know why, but tonight she wasn't scared or timid at all being down here. There were numerous hot springs at home in the woods that the children loved playing in. This was nothing different except it was inside and completely private. Sansa could soak down here as long as she liked tonight, she thought with a huge smile.

She lit the same torches as Petyr did the night before and the room began to warm in the soft glow of the fire. There was something very sinful about being down here unbeknownst to anyone. Upstairs, servants were sleeping as their young mistress was bathing in a mysterious pool under their feet.

Sansa walked around the cavernous room. On one side, it looked as though the walls had caved in on themselves from the old castle and on the adjacent side was where the spring seemed to be bubbling up from. Around the outer side of the pool is where it had been carved many years ago, with its columns, and steps down into the dark, hot water.

On the wall, where the stairs led up, there was another door just like the one padlocked in the upper corridor. This one was locked as well and Sansa couldn't help but wonder what Petyr was hiding down here. The doors were very old, but the padlocks were new.

Unable to solve the mystery, Sansa went back to the pool and sat on the broken column, setting her candlestick on the floor. Was she really going to bathe down here in the dark in the middle of the night? Dipping her toes, the water was hot but not scalding and the idea of soaking in water that wouldn't turn cold like a bathing tub, was too much to resist. Taking off her dressing gown, she paused halfway at the laces on her chemise. Sansa knew she was alone, and it wasn't so much the idea of a little girl's spirit spying on her but all the same, Sansa decided to keep on the sheer material just in case. It wasn't as if she was going to use soap or anything to cleanse, this was just to soak and relax for a little while before heading to bed.

Tentative steps lead down into the water until Sansa was waist deep. It took a few minutes for her body to acclimate to the temperature making her skin tingle. Wading around the pool, it was much deeper and hotter towards the old wall. Yes, that must be the source of the spring, she thought. Finding the carved stone near one lit column, Sansa sat fairly near where she spied on Petyr last night. It was just large enough to sit and lean back in relaxation.

Sansa wondered how many people from the past had sat in this very spot enjoying this moment. Just as Petyr had, she dipped down under letting the heat sting her face before quickly coming back up. It was far too hot to submerge for more than a few seconds as she wrung the excess water from her hair, pushing it back.

She didn't know how much time passed, and she didn't really care. It was the first time Sansa felt truly relaxed without a care in the world. Every ache, soreness, tension, worry... it was all washed away as the encompassing heat worked magic on her tired body. Sansa closed her eyes and hoped she did not fall asleep. What titillating gossip *that* would be, to find her dead and floating in a pool under the house! How would Petyr explain that, she giggled to herself?

Her thoughts turned to him and the image of him last night still burned in her psyche. He was practically sitting where Sansa was now. That first rush of heat to her cheeks when he disrobed made her blush at the image. Petyr was handsome in his own way and Sansa tried to picture what he must have looked like when he was her age. He was still a man in his prime that age had not yet taken its toll despite a hint of grey hair.

Once, Sansa would never had thought a man his age would have been appealing to her in the least. If her parents had betrothed her to someone older than thirty, she would have been devastated. Sansa's greatest fear, being the eldest daughter and one that was required to marry well, was that she would be wed to title and money and never love or attraction.

She did find Joffrey young and attractive at first, and couldn't deny the idea of being queen one day didn't fill her with excitement, but that rosy dream came crashing down as fast as she conjured it up. Even the faintest hope of marrying a lower lord that wasn't hideous in looks and nature died as time dragged on. Making light of Myranda's pathetic attempt to marry for money and power back at the Vale was now a sour note in Sansa's mind.

Would Sansa have ever given Petyr a second look once upon a time? Probably not. He was below her in reputation and even his given title was pointless as far as her father would have been concerned. Had he asked for her hand, even before she discovered his lie, would she have accepted it? Sansa just didn't know. He might have been kind, given his current generosity and at

least bedding him would not have been too terrible a deed.

That kiss behind the tree, a tingly memory on her lips and the way he danced and held her... yes, she could have done worse, Sansa supposed.

"This vision is what I dreamed about last night," his deep voice echoed, "did *you* sleep well also?"

Sansa's scream echoed around the room as she fell off the stone ledge and into the deeper part of the pool. Dipping so low that the water line came to her chin, Sansa watched Petyr casually stroll from the stairs to the broken column and candlestick that was almost burnt out. He sat down and fingered her dressing gown with a little smirk.

"I gather you didn't expect me any time soon or I doubt you would have ever come down here," he smiled wickedly. "Even so, I'm rather surprised. You're more courageous than I thought."

Sansa waded to the other side of the pool, trying to put as much distance as possible between them. Her eyes scanned the edges around the spring and didn't know how she was supposed to get past him. The water was getting too deep as she backed towards the rocky wall.

"I would exercise caution if I were you," he warned lightly, bringing her dressing gown to his nose. "There is a dropoff right where you're standing. I'm not sure how deep it goes and I rather think we both don't want to find out."

Sansa paused in fear and looked behind her. The water was much hotter and a deep black. She didn't know how to swim well and did not want to test his truthfulness with her life. She moved along the carved edge and tried to pull herself up, but each time her chemise kept getting in the way of her escape.

"Would you like me to help you? Or I can continue to admire the view of your backside, if you like," Sansa heard him chuckle from behind her on the opposite side of the pool.

Horror filled Sansa at the knowledge that her now wet and sheer chemise clinging to her skin did nothing to shield her body from him. She dunked back down in the water making sure to keep everything below her shoulders from view.

"Mrs. Ames said you would not return until the morrow," she said nervously. "I only wanted some time alone... some privacy."

"Oh? Like the privacy you gave me last night?" he chided taking off his suede slippers and Sansa turned bright red.

Petyr removed his own dressing gown and paused in his shirt sleeves and trousers as Sansa stood speechless. Instead of removing his shirt, Petyr removed his trousers and set them aside before taking two steps into the water.

"What are you doing? You can't come in here!" she squeaked pressing herself against the stone.

"The last time I checked, everything here belongs to me. I can do as I wish," he smiled and began unbuttoning his shirt.

"Don't you dare. A gentleman..."

"Would keep his shirt on even though the lady has seen every inch of him? Fine, I concede..." Petyr chuckled making his way, waist deep.

"A *gentleman*, would turn his back and let me cover myself so I..."

"Can scurry like a scared rabbit back to your room?" he teased finishing her sentence again. "We both know I am no gentleman."

"You're a lying rake," Sansa seethed. "Go bathe in your modern washroom... or anywhere else."

"This is my house, go be sanctimonious somewhere else," he laughed. "Besides, I may be a rake, but I did not lie. Not directly."

"You think guilt by omission is any better?" she fumed. "You made me believe I was crazy. You knew – I tried to tell you and you pretended... why?"

Petyr moved towards her and Sansa slowly retreated along the side of the pool until he completely blocked her path.

"I didn't know it was you at first," he said barring her way around him. "I assumed it was one of the maids again."

Sansa burned with anger. It didn't make it any better than he was scaring the daylights out of his servants too. "Enjoy it, do you? Scaring women into believing in ghosts?"

Petyr moved in closer and when Sansa tried to dodge him, he pinned her against the warm granite. "Them? Perhaps once or twice knowing how bloody superstitious they all are. They scare so easily and it keeps prying eyes away from down here," he said with control. "But you? *No*. I did not enjoy it at all. I was going to say something that night in your room until I found out you had been rummaging in *my* room..."

"You stubborn bastard, I told you I didn't take it," Sansa interrupted hotly, "For all I know now, you put it there to make me look like a madwoman in front of everyone."

Petyr frowned but didn't let her move.

"And why would I do that?" he smirked. "I told you it was precious to me. Why would I..."

"I don't know, you didn't seem to be bothered that I was scared to death and yet you didn't say a thing the second time," Sansa began to ramble incoherently out of anger and frustration. "You're bloody hiding something down here and using these scare tactics to keep anyone from..."

His mouth cut her off in a fury, swallowing her words instantly. Sansa was spun back to that day behind the tree when he took her off guard with his kiss. It was all consuming but that resentment fought back making her push him away. Petyr wrapped his arms around her, trapping her hands against his chest as she struggled. When her mouth opened in protest, his tongue delved in touching hers, making Sansa gasp.

Petyr's tongue dipped and sensually teased her slowly coaxing her mouth to play with his. Sansa felt herself yielding slightly and drummed up that frustration and rage pushing against his chest seeing the desire pool in his eyes.

"Why did you let me follow you last night?" she spat trying to slip out of his hold.

"I did not think you would come down again to be honest," Petyr eyed cautiously.

"You? Honest? Now there's a joke," she squirmed feeling his hard body against hers. Two layers of thin, wet clothing was all that separated them and Sansa was more than aware of how bad a situation this could turn into.

"You would have found out, I realized, sooner or later. You are stubborn and nosy to a fault," he said tightening his grip. "Once I saw that you really believed, I was worried I had pushed you to a breaking point."

"Did you put that damned music box in my room?" she demanded.

"No," he answered pointedly, "and I still haven't found out who is playing tricks on you."

"Besides you," she breathed viciously.

Sansa studied his eyes looking for truth and couldn't tell anymore. Why should she even consider trusting him after all of this? He was hiding something important enough, that making the servants believe in ghosts, keeping them from prying into his affairs or looking into areas of the house was a priority.

"Why didn't you say something last night," she asked anxiously. "You knew it was me."

"You could have left at any time," he cooed seductively. "Why did you stay... *and watch?*"

Sansa's stomach clenched and her heart beat rapidly. What could she say to that? He was right, she could have left but she watched him pleasure himself and the whole time he knew she was there. He let her watch.

"Have you ever seen a naked man before, Sansa?" he whispered in her ear, his lips brushing the sensitive skin there. "Do you know what happens when he fantasizes about a young woman watching from shadows as he touches himself?"

Petyr pressed his body pinning hers to the stone, feeling a hardness against her thigh. The thin layers of muslin did nothing to safeguard her from the sensation of his warm and sturdy body. His arms had loosened their hold as his hand ghosted up her waist.

"If you didn't want anyone to know what you're doing down here, why play that damned piano and raise suspicions?" she inquired trying not to feel his lips under her ear.

"Because I like to play," those soft lips whispered down her jaw making Sansa shiver involuntarily. "Just... *not for an audience.*"

Sansa's chest heaved and felt an ache begin between her legs where his hip pressed gently. She needed to get out of here, needed to get a hold of herself. She couldn't let him have this intimacy. She shouldn't be letting him touch her like this.

"What are you hiding?" she asked again and he pulled back just a breath away from her lips. "What keeps me from telling everyone what you're doing?"

Petyr smiled roguishly as his eyes darkened, gazing at her mouth.

"Trust," he whispered closely and Sansa felt her breasts graze his chest with every heavy breath. "...*and treason.*"

Before she could utter another word, his mouth devoured hers completely. Petyr's hand wound its way in her wet hair cupping the back of her neck and held her mouth to him. Sansa protested weakly falling to his kiss. It wasn't just provocative way he kissed her, but the feel of his naked body under the wet shirt that left her wanting to touch him.

There was no one but her conscious to tell her this was wrong but the way he made her feel was so good. Watching Petyr pleasure himself last night as he was lost in thoughts of her made Sansa's core burn with need. He wanted her to know he was fantasizing about her and now that desire flowed through her completely.

The hand that rested on her waist traveled up so slowly, that when he cupped her breast, it made her hiss in shock. Petyr pulled away slightly watching her intensely when his thumb circled a nipple making it harden quickly. She knew she needed to make him stop but the look in his eyes was her undoing. The sheer torturous and sinful way his body pressed against hers was chipping away at her will. It was all wrong but this yearning was too much push aside.

Sansa liked it when he kissed her behind that damned tree. She longed to kiss him again as those days passed. Even now, she wanted to taste his mouth regardless of how furious she was at him. She wanted to feel something... anything.

Petyr must have sensed it too, for when he lowered his mouth to hers, she let him in. Without a thought, her fingers found their way into his damp hair and the other pressed around his lower back as Petyr deepened his kiss. Her nerves were on fire as his hand kneading her breast and felt him groan along her jaw. Petyr found a pulse point at the base of her neck and suckled it roughly making a moan finally escape her lips and spurring him on.

His hips ground into hers and Sansa felt his desire growing harder as he pushed one of her legs aside stepping between them. His cock pressed against her core and the soft material caused a rough friction in the hot water. Knowing that he was aroused and that it was touching her, made her turn scarlet. She had let the stable boy touch her breast once but never had anything gone beyond kissing. Sansa was so focused on the ache between her legs, that when his mouth took a nipple ravenously, it sent a jolt right to her core, lighting it on fire.

Unconsciously, her back arched that only caused her apex to thrust into him making Petyr groan as he lapped at her breast. His arm wrapped around her waist as he opened up her legs wider but the material was obstructing his way. A devilish hand drifted down grasping her bum and Sansa gasped at the contact, clutching onto him. Her breasts abandoned, Petyr returned to her mouth and it was all Sansa could do to keep up with him. His tongue played and danced with hers and suddenly she couldn't stop the whimpers and moans echoing in the dark and hot chamber.

Fingers gathered the wet chemise under her bum as the other hand slid under her thigh, hiking it up by his narrow hips. His mouth begged her to kiss him back and finally Sansa gave in wrapping her arms around his neck. She couldn't get enough of kissing him, the hand that caressed her thigh, their sexes that teased each other through their thin muslin barriers, that when his fingers grazed the bare skin of her bum, she froze in fear breathing into his open mouth.

This was all too real as those long fingers dipped low and brushed the edge of her sex making her hips jolt and rub against him. Petyr's eyes were filled with lust as he gathered the rest of her chemise up and both of his hands were so close to where she was aching to be touched. This was the point of no return and they both knew it.

Holding her thigh, he gently eased forward letting her feel his cock slide against her folds. Petyr's breath was hot and heavy as he let her discover him. He pressed a little harder and that bundle of nerves pulsed with need. The hot water had relaxed her muscles and yet lit up her desire in every way that they touched. His cock was hard but silky as it slid along where she was burning with desire. Petyr tried to angle himself, when suddenly Sansa stopped him.

She wanted him. Sansa knew there was no denying that, but this, giving herself to him completely was a line in the sand she couldn't cross. He had no intention of marrying her or anything of the sort. If she let him have her, she would forever be a whore and Sansa did not want to be any man's mistress.

"No," she whispered and waited for him to be like any other man and take her anyway.

Sansa was already open and ready the way he had her spayed against him and even now it was hard for her to say no. She was aching with desire and her body demanded a release from this torture.

"Yes, you're right," he murmured along her jaw which did not help the situation. "But what kind of gentleman would I be if I left you in such a state of dissatisfaction?"

Before Sansa could render his meaning, he pushed her against the stone with a hard splash and in place of his cock, Petyr's hand cupped her mound roughly. The other hiked her knee up around his waist as his mouth descended on her with ferocity. Those fingers that Sansa thought were so graceful as they played the piano were anything but as they played between her folds. Rough, but skilled as they found that swollen bud making her cry out in pleasure.

A finger dipped inside and Sansa shuddered holding onto him. Petyr was still grinding against her as she felt his cock slide between his hand and the inside of her thigh. The friction in the way he manipulated and teased had Sansa gasping. Did all men know this? She could not have told him to stop even if she wanted to because something was building inside her and building fast. That slow ache, turned to burning and the image of Petyr touching himself flashed in her mind.

"Do you want to know what I was thinking last night?" he purred while his fingers never stopped for a second. She was on fire and felt the pressure getting stronger. She needed something and she needed it badly as she breathed heavy near his ear holding onto him.

"It wasn't even about fucking you," he began while suckling on her neck. "I wanted to lay you on top of this ledge and spread your legs wide as my mouth sucked on your little rosebud. I wanted to hear you moan and feel your fingers in my hair as I made you come."

His fingers worked tirelessly and Sansa could feel the damn about to burst. She was trying not let those desperate moans come out and bit her lip. A part of her didn't want it to happen and yet she couldn't handle much more. Sansa's hips were thrusting instinctively against his hand and abdomen demanding more of their own accord. Her body was telling her what it needed and chased the sensation he was giving.

"Ever had a man feast on your cunt, sweetling?"

Sansa was shocked at the image it painted in her mind. She could see Petyr's face buried between her legs. Did men really want to taste a woman down there? His fingers rubbed her harder and Sansa felt it coming. Oh God, she couldn't stop it and her snapped her eyes shut.

"Feel his tongue dip inside you..." his voice whispered but Sansa couldn't hear him anymore. She cried out and thought surely if anyone were upstairs they would hear her moans of ecstasy. Maybe it was a good thing that Petyr had them all believing in ghosts.

Sansa was trembling and shaking in his arms despite the hot water surrounding them. He pulled back and studied her face for a moment. Petyr was still hard and she didn't know what was going to happen next. All too quickly, shame and anxiety ran through her veins and she couldn't look him in the eyes. She let him touch her like some wanton in a brothel. Petyr all but took her virginity tonight and it was wonderful and horrible at the same time. She had turned into what she despised in Myranda.

Petyr sensed her change immediately and pushed her away leaning his arms against the pool's edge. There was something in his eyes that Sansa couldn't quite place. Was it guilt? Displeasure? Disgust? Whatever it was, he wanted nothing more to do with her.

“Go, for God’s sake,” he groaned as if in pain.

He made Sansa fall apart with his touch and now it was as if he couldn’t stand the sight of her. The tears welled up and the pang of hurt stabbed through her like a sharp knife. This is what he thought of her after all, Sansa sniffed. She was a whore, already bought and paid with gowns and gifts.

“Did you hear me? *Go!*” he yelled and Sansa lumbered out of the water in her wet chemise grabbing her dressing gown.

She tied it quickly and glanced at the man that had not moved an inch, facing away from her. Petyr couldn’t even look at her and Sansa had never felt so cheap and used in her entire life. Who seduced who tonight? Now she wasn’t so sure what had just happened between them. They both wanted it, didn’t they?

“Must I tell you again? *Get out...* and don’t come back down here again,” he growled avoiding eye contact.

Sansa made for the stairs when she heard his voice clearly as she ascended quickly.

“Bolt your door tonight.”

It wasn’t until she was inside her room and slid the bolt on the door as he commanded, when the tears fell and Sansa cried hopelessly next to her bed. Lady wagged her tail nervously as she pawed her mistress’ wet chemise, whimpering in confusion. Sansa sobbed loudly and never heard the soft steps that stood in front of her door listening as she fell into deep despair.

The pup crawled into her mistress’ lap and attempted to comfort her in the only way it knew how. Sansa didn’t know what was happening anymore. She could still feel the soft ache between her legs and his mouth on hers. Is this what it felt like to fall for someone who did not want you in return? In all fairness, she did stop him... but that look in his eyes at the end. It was a far cry from the desire she had seen residing in those deep green orbs.

If she had let Petyr take her tonight, what then? He would have his pleasures on his terms and when it came time to marry, he would choose a proper lady and not the whore he turned her into. Sansa wiped her tears. She couldn’t be falling for him, she just couldn’t. What did she know about this man? Nothing. He was a liar, a cad and a cheat. What kind of woman falls for a man like that? But there were also those moments in the music room when she drew him while asleep, when he read poetry and caressed her hair or when they had lovely conversations about art, music and history. That man, she grew to like a little more each day. Was that all it took for her to spread her legs wantonly for him? In the end, he didn’t take her to sate his own pleasure. He pushed her away and Sansa hated that rejection even though she wasn’t ready.

What was worse, is that now she knew that side to him. One kiss behind a tree left her wanting more. Now, she knew what real desire was and how he made her burn with pleasure. That knowledge, like Eve’s apple, was tempting, delicious and irreversible. How in heaven was she supposed to interact with Petyr after such intimacies? The sooner he left, the better.

Sansa lifted Lady onto the bed and peeled off her wet garments leaving them in a dirty heap on the floor. Slipping into a clean nightgown, she crawled into bed with a heavy heart. Lady curled up beside her and Sansa felt fingers running through her damp hair. For a heartbeat, she thought it might be Petyr but the little voice echoed her sadness.

“Ssshh, I’m here,” it said as childlike fingers combed her hair from behind. “Don’t cry.”

Tears dried on her cheeks as the little spirit was of some comfort. This ghostly girl, as Sansa would have never suspected, was the one that cared for her and Lady. She understood without a word being spoken. Sansa could never tell Mrs. Ames that she let Petyr fondle her in passion. He wasn’t hers to claim.

“He is lost on another,” it said serenely. “It will come to pass and you will see the truth. Her name is carved in music and must be broken.”

Sansa sniffed and her head was pounding from a terrible headache.

“I don’t understand,” she whimpered tiredly.

“You will,” the sweet voice breathed. “You must be strong now, for on the morrow *she* comes.”

Virtuoso

Chapter Notes

Sorry of the wait, my dears. Life gets in the way. So, on we go!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sansa sipped her tea as she took her breakfast in bed. It was a cowardly move after what transpired last night, she knew, but Sansa wasn't ready to face Petyr just yet. She told Mrs. Ames she didn't feel well and asked to break her fast in her room. Sleep was practically impossible for her mind and senses twisted and turned around the man plagued her thoughts. She could still feel his mouth and the way their wet and virtually naked bodies touched in the steaming water. Petyr left an ache long after his tantalizing caresses stopped. Sansa could feel the way she gripped him tightly as he brought her to that peak of pleasure. She didn't know a man could do such a thing. God in heaven, she didn't know a woman could feel something like that.

Technically, she wasn't raped, she moaned and writhed at his ministrations but afterwards, Sansa couldn't stop the shame that seeped from every pore. She wanted him, perhaps even wanton enough to let him take her the way men were supposed to. In the moment, she didn't care he wasn't her husband or that he would be forced to marry her. In the moment all she desired was the feeling of being wanted, that someone wanted to please her. In the end, he told her to go and never return to the lagoon hiding underneath the house of lies he built.

A soft knock sounded on her door, and Sansa suspected Sarah had come to remove the tray and help her dress for the day. Instead, a very weary Petyr entered, dressed in charcoal grey and cream. Lady barked playfully wagging her tail at Sansa's feet but Petyr ignored her.

"Good morning," he spoke formally and paused for a moment before adding, "I heard you were ill..."

Petyr stared at a spot over her shoulder, avoiding her eyes and a small pang of hurt ached in her chest. His face was painted with guilt and regret and Sansa didn't understand why she didn't feel happy that he knew he did something wrong. She should be thrilled that he feel guilty about what he did. It seemed as though Petyr was struggling to find something to say just as Sansa remained quiet. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, he finally looked directly at her, his eyes unreadable.

"I – ahem, I would like to apologize for my conduct last night," he began softly. "My sense of enacting a little revenge... well, went rather too far."

That hurt turned to bitterness. "*Revenge?* After everything that you have done to me, you're the one feeling slighted because I figured out your lies?" Sansa seethed. "Your *conduct* last night is not the only thing for which an apology is owed, my lord."

"As I said last night, it was never my intention to truly frighten you, but moreso to keep people away from certain areas of the house. A place as old and ripe with stories as this, there are bound to be prying eyes. Once I realized you actually believed to the point of hysteria, I knew I would have to be truthful with you very soon," Petyr explained that even though he meant to sound sincere, it still felt forced.

"Is that why you were going to send me back to my uncle or is there something else you're not telling me? Clearly, you have no intention of trusting me," Sansa retorted coldly.

Petyr pressed his lips into a thin line and Sansa thought he would leave, refusing to answer her.

"Partly," he said quietly, "Bringing you here was... not something I had planned on. I'm not exactly prone to flights of fancy and you'll find that I'm rarely trusting of people. I could have simply driven you completely mad and sent you away for safe keeping, so count yourself lucky my dear."

"Thank you *so* much," she spat, "You could have saved yourself the bloody trouble and just left me in Riverrun."

"Yes," he drawled with a smile, "You appeared exhilarated staying under Edmure's roof."

"I wouldn't have been living there had Aunt Lysa not cast me out... all because of you," Sansa growled wanting to throw her teacup at his smug face.

"Me?" he questioned with a raised eyebrow. "Well, that does explain quite a bit, doesn't it?" he muttered in thought. "I never wanted to go to that damned ball but did so for reasons that did not involve Lysa. I suppose I owe you an apology for that as well. However, I can't imagine for the life of me, that you actually enjoyed being under Lysa's thumb. How much longer until you ran away or leapt from that balcony?"

Petyr leaned against the door frame and his unwavering gaze ultimately made Sansa look away. She hated the way his eyes seemed to see what she was thinking. The awkward silence again became unbearable and Sansa drank the last of her cold tea to keep her hands busy.

"So, is that it? That's your apology?" she asked wishing he would leave her room.

"Yes, I think so. You didn't think I was going to tell you my deepest secrets did you?" Petyr grinned and Sansa wanted to smack him hard across the face.

"Even ones that hint at *treason*?" she countered. Two could play this game.

Petyr took a deep breath but didn't move from his stance. "Secrets that will get us both killed. Remember, you have no favor within the court and Joffrey would love a reason to hang you out of sheer spitefulness. Trust me, that you will benefit from keeping quiet and living with me. As I promised, no harm will come to you. You will not find such a gracious and honest offer from anyone else, including the remains of your family," he offered coolly.

"And if I don't care that we're both hanging just for the sake of seeing you caught in your own game..." Sansa bravely continued before being interrupted.

"Then I'll kill you right now," he said coldly, not flinching in the slightest. "No one will doubt my word and frankly no one will question the death of traitor."

Sansa froze in fear staring at his stone face. Would he really do it? Could he kill her so easily? Who was she to him? He said so himself that bringing her here was not planned and everything since then screamed that he seemed to second guess that decision weeks ago. The man that was funny and kind was either a ruse or his true self. The rumors that surrounded him before they first met at the Vale were of a different man entirely. He had a reputation for ruthlessness in his trade business that benefitted the crown immensely, not to mention that of a notorious rake in the capital. Sansa wasn't completely naïve, she knew of the gaming hells, brothels and clubs gentlemen of the ton frequented. Her mother had warned her particularly when her betrothal to Joffrey was confirmed. Her mother knew what kind of city Kings Landing was and the people that thrived there, especially at court. It was a far cry of the provincial life at Winterfell.

"Or you could learn to trust me and play along for these plans have nothing that bear you harm," he continued. "I can't apologize for Lysa's or Edmure's actions. I have learned the hard way that even family is not always honorable and deserving of trust *or* loyalty. However, I will promise you that I will not frighten you again and will give you safety and kindness. We are both creatures hurt by betrayal and loss. Trust does not come easy to either of us." Petyr paused for a moment in thought. "You're very intelligent, savvy, kind and... you deserve better than what life has given you."

Sansa's fury still raged in her belly but in all honesty she did not know what to say to that. She didn't know how he did it, this harsh truthfulness mixed with praise and kindness. Sansa had difficulty imagining him being this candor with anyone. He knew she could expose him even to her own peril, but somehow his veiled threat did not ring true. Petyr was asking for her trust in him although she could not fathom why. He plainly felt some level of guilt and not just for taking advantage of her last night.

What options were really left to her? Was winning one hand over him worth dying for? She honestly did not know what he was hiding but if it put both of them at risk, it certainly wasn't going to favor anyone in the ton, she gathered. That made her smile a little. Maybe Petyr hated Joffrey and the Lannisters just as much as she did. Who would she even tell? No one, not even her aunt and uncle would probably believe her now. Even if Uncle Edmure did, it may not save her from the firing squad a second time. Whatever Petyr was involved in; people would assume Sansa was as well. What had she gotten herself into coming here? As if she had a choice.

A loud ruckus from downstairs had both of them glancing at the doorway. His attention completely diverted, Petyr walked out into the hallway as Sansa could hear a loud laugh that sounded ominously familiar. When he returned, a grim expression was on his face and Sansa knew it couldn't be good.

"Get dressed," he ordered softly. "We have... guests."

Without another word of explanation, Petyr closed her door leaving Sansa to wonder about the guests. Minutes later, Sarah arrived and dressed Sansa in her lavender and lace afternoon gown. The color flattered her complexion and hair as the girl pinned up Sansa's hair with pearl combs letting a few tendrils fall gracefully around her neck.

Sansa made her way to the staircase and paused with her hands on the banister overlooking the foyer. The laughter echoed up and Sansa closed her eyes. She knew that voice, knew it too well. The woman's coquettish giggle was well-prepared to charm gentlemen and Sansa felt sick. She almost wanted to go back to her room and tell the maid to extend her excuses to Petyr for not meeting his guests.

She knew she would have to face them sooner or later and surely Petyr would know her sudden illness was a lie. It was unavoidable, for Sansa had no idea how long they would stay at Harrenhal. If she was tremendously lucky, they were only stopping to rest their horses and soon would be on their way, presumably to Kings Landing for the winter.

Taking a deep breath Sansa descended to the main floor just as a flirty brunette came out of the blue sitting room with her father and Petyr in tow. Her rose dress was pretty but terribly wrinkled from travel.

"Petyr," Miranda cooed in delight. *Petyr?* Not Lord Baelish or even Lord Petyr. Lady Miranda was already at acceptable terms to call him by his given name? "The house is beautiful. Father told me what Harrenhal looked like when the duke took residence here but this doesn't do it justice at all."

"It never looked like this years ago under the Duke of StormsEnd, Miranda," Lord Royce said with a bored expression on his face. "A considerable amount of work has been done here, Baelish. Must have cost you a small fortune. Even Stannis didn't have the funds to really restore the estate. Makes living out all the way out here somewhat bearable."

"Oh Father, Petyr could host the most exquisite parties here and even the King himself would come," Miranda tutted taking Petyr's arm before her eyes caught Sansa at the bottom of the stairs. Sansa wasn't sure what to expect but the excited delight and smile from the brunette was far from anything her mind came up with. "Lady Sansa!" Miranda rushed over giving her a friendly embrace that made Sansa wonder if the girl would plunge a knife into her back.

"Lady Miranda," Sansa greeting politely catching Petyr's bemused glance and Lord Royce's

confused one. "Lord Royce, it's good to see you again. I hope you're well."

"Oh Sansa, I've missed you terribly since the Duchess sent you away. I never believed the slander against you. Such nasty gossip. All they could talk about was how you threw yourself at the gentlemen in the Vale trying to pressure them into marriage," the brunette's sing-song voice rambled on making Sansa blush. Is that what they were saying? Sansa knew Myranda was a cool liar and no friend of hers but she wondered if that was the gossip spread around the Vale. Certainly, there was no mention of Petyr and Sansa knew now why. "It must have been wonderful to go and live with Lord Edmure here in the Riverlands, your mother's home. Where is your uncle? Is he here visiting as well?"

Sansa stood speechless and glanced at Petyr for help.

"Lord Edmure is at Riverrun, Lady Myranda," Petyr said and then cleared his throat. "Sansa... is now my ward. Legally, of course."

Myranda pulled away with a strange look on her face. Sansa knew this feigned friendliness was all an act but she wondered if Petyr knew it as well.

"Oh? We heard that you had taken a ward but I never would have guessed it was Lady Sansa," Myranda smiled sweetly but her eyes told a differently story. "I rather expected to see a young child running around here..."

"Come now, Myranda, you really believe that Baelish would take on a small child?" Lord Royce chuckled and then caught Petyr's smirk. "Sorry, Baelish, no offense to you."

"Don't think on it," Petyr smiled as it never reached his eyes. "I'm not quite the fatherly type as of yet," he gave Sansa a little wink. "Give it time."

"Yes, well," Lord Royce muttered looking Sansa over. "Would I be wrong that Tully is back to drinking and gaming hells like his father? I can't see why you would give roof to his niece otherwise."

Sansa clenched her jaw so tightly, surely she might break a tooth. Of course they would believe that. Why in God's name would anyone be kind to her?

Myranda smirked and Sansa wanted nothing more than to flog them both. It was as if she never left the Vale. Perhaps living alone out here in the countryside was better for Sansa had almost forgotten how much she despised the lords and ladies of the ton. If she never had to see one of their horrid faces again, it would be too soon.

"Oh Father, be nice," Myranda cooed again sliding up to Petyr's side. "I think it's very kind and generous of Petyr to help those who are unfortunate. See, I told you all those rumors about him were rubbish. Anyone willing to take in a traitor, such a terrible term don't you agree, has a heart of gold? Her Grace said Petyr has really turned around the people in the Riverlands and expect good fortune for next season."

"Daughter, quit mooning over Lord Baelish," Royce admonished her irritably. "Everyone is well aware of the Marquess' financial management miracles. I don't need to hear it every time. Say, Baelish, I'm parched. I assume you only have the best for your guests."

Even Sansa was appalled at Lord Royce's rudeness. It was still clear that he was disapproving of Petyr's rise, higher title and fortune. However, the man had no trouble demanding the very best from a wealthy man as if Royce were a king. The Royce family was old and distinguished but they were far from rich as it had been recklessly spent, as Aunt Lysa had always said. It seemed more plausible now why Lord Royce wanted desperately to find his daughter a prosperous match.

Then it dawned on Sansa. That's why they were here. Myranda made a point that her father was trying to secure a wealthy husband for her that fateful night. Sansa tried to recall what Petyr had mentioned in her room just this morning.

I never wanted to go to that damned ball but did so for reasons that did not involve Lysa.

Oh God. Petyr was the intended in Lord Royce's matchmaking. He had a grand title, lands, estates, wealth... everything the Royce's desperately needed regardless of Petyr's sordid reputation. Lord Royce seemed to have no issue with selling his only daughter to a man that needed acceptance within the ton. An old family name such as Royce was perfect for him.

Sansa followed the trio into the parlor where the footman had made ready some refreshments for his lordship's guests. She sat on a settee across from Myranda, who cooed up to Petyr as Lord Royce planted his round body into one of the leather chairs.

"I wasn't expecting anyone before I left for Kings Landing," Petyr attempted at conversation and avoiding looking at Sansa all together.

"Oh, the horses needed rest and we were going to stop at Lord Holloway's Town, but Myranda insisted that we come a little further to Harrenhal. She rather hoped that you would be here. I'm sure we would have received gracious hospitality regardless in your absence," Lord Royce said glancing at Sansa as he drank his scotch.

Petyr certainly caught the man's meaning just as Sansa did.

"Lady Sansa is more than accommodating as far as a gracious hostess need be. Had you arrived during my absence, I have no doubt she would have taken care of your every need," Petyr offered politely.

Petyr wasn't expecting any guests before winter, that was clear enough. Perhaps he did not want anyone to know she was his ward, that he was keeping a traitorous girl in his house. It certainly would have been shocking to the Royces' arriving at Harrenhal only to find the Duchess' cast out as lady of the house.

Was this the reason why he wrote to Uncle Edmure trying to send her back to Riverrun? He had plans to marry Myranda and Sansa could be a complication? How could Petyr know the animosity

between the two women? Perhaps it didn't matter. She was just a prize he had won and then didn't know what to do with afterwards. Myranda certainly put on a good show pretending to be long, lost friends from the Vale.

Sansa couldn't help but watch how uncomfortable Petyr was in this moment and it made her smile inwardly. He was a good actor as well for the Royce's bought into his graciousness and pleasantries. Oh, how would they love to know that just last night, he was in the throes of passion with the dreaded, unwanted traitor. Would that be enough to ruin this potential engagement? Sansa wondered just how desperate Royce and Petyr were for a marriage between their houses. Or would he throw Sansa out just to save his own skin by denouncing him as the lecher he was?

She glanced at Myranda's hand and did not see a ring or anything signifying that she was engaged or betrothed. Perhaps, after a year since that night in the Vale, matters still had not been solidified. Myranda seemed awfully familiar with Petyr but then again, she was more than familiar with most men she had eyes for. She was older than Sansa and far from virtuous. Sansa had to concede a little for she did let Petyr get away with more than a chaste kiss.

"Petyr, when do you leave for the capital? Surely, it must be soon for the weather is about to turn. You mustn't leave me alone in court, *darling*. I would be absolutely bored with all those little boys," Myranda laid it on thick and Sansa had to refrain from rolling her eyes. She really had this coy act to an art. Yet, Petyr himself seemed to dislike coquettish attributes in women and Sansa wondered if Myranda was over-playing her hand.

"Ah, well, I have some business to attend to before I leave. I can't say exactly when I'll travel south," Petyr hedged.

"Oh dear, I rather hoped you would leave with us," she said eyeing Sansa. "I imagine winter here will be quite lonely being so far away from cities. Poor Sansa, just what will you do with all your time?"

Sansa smiled serenely, "I'm actually looking forward to the peace and quiet here. I have plenty to fill my time."

"Of course, you're from the North, I almost forgot. Your kind seems to flourish in the freezing cold in the middle of nowhere," Myranda spoke with a sweetened vitriol. She then turned to Petyr, "I, however, would need extra warmth on such cold nights."

"Myranda!" her father chastised immediately as Sansa wanted to gag.

Was this the kind of woman Petyr wanted? He may have superb taste as far as art and music, but curiously his choice in female company was abysmal. The type of loose women he was rumored to cohort with in Kings Landing wasn't much better. A cad, a rake... that's all he really was. A man that loved wealth, power and wanton women. Well, if that's what he wanted, he was more than welcome to it, Sansa thought.

"Father, it's only us and Sansa couldn't care less," Myranda shot back.

Petyr's body language strangely did not match that of Myranda's as he stood suddenly.

"My dear, would you like a tour?" he inquired courteously.

"Yes, indeed. I've been dying to see this house for ages it seems," she drawled seductively and Sansa thought this could be her moment to get away.

"Lady Sansa, if you be so kind to escort Lord Royce," Petyr ordered and Sansa tried not to sigh in disappointment. She didn't know how long she could be gracious under pressure for she couldn't stand the daughter or the father.

"Of course, my lord, if you wish it," she replied as the foursome strolled to the grand gallery.

Lord Royce apparently didn't want a tour any more than Sansa wanted to play hostess. Petyr spoke about his beautiful paintings and Sansa watched as Myranda pretended to be interested but had no clue what he was talking about and Lord Royce didn't pretend at all to his boredom. They wandered from room to room as Myranda linked her arm with Petyr's while he talked about architecture and the history of Harrenhal. Once they entered the ballroom, did Myranda's face finally light up.

"Can you imagine the grand balls you could host in this room? Just think of it, kings and queens, all of the ton. By then, surely the king will make you a duke, don't you agree?" Myranda twirled and giggled as she tried to pull Petyr with her but he resisted gently.

"I'm afraid I'm not an accomplished dancer, my dear," he insisted but Sansa had to hold back the laughter that was threatening to bubble up. He was a very good dancer if Myranda had paid any attention at Robert's ball.

"Then I will most happily teach you, *my darling lord*," she wooed seductively. "I'd rather you step on my toes than all those young boys at every ball."

"Perhaps, I will call on your instruction someday, just not today," he answered cordially and took a few steps back. "Come, let me show you the music room and perhaps you may take your rest. I'll have a lovely dinner prepared."

In the music room, Lord Royce plopped down on the chaise lounge obviously wishing he could just retire for the afternoon. Someone had to play chaperone to his daughter and keep up appearances. Myranda sat down at the piano and attempted to play a simple sonata that Sansa mastered by the age of ten. Petyr stood next to the brunette and painted a false smile as she slowly destroyed a favored song. Sansa contemplated never playing that piano again after Myranda defiled it.

A soft applause was given when she finished and Sansa glanced at the stairs just outside the doorway. She could skip out if Myranda played another tune.

"Oh no, I'm not very good," the brunette said with false modesty. "Sansa is far more

accomplished. Any girl would be raised up North. What else is there to do but practice every day?"

"Yes, of course. Mother insisted at least four hours a day. Otherwise I would have spent the remaining daylight running with the wolves and playing with trolls," Sansa retorted with glee. If Myranda was going to insist on using sweetness to lace her insults than Sansa would sarcasm.

Petyr coughed to hide what Sansa thought was a laugh. "Lady Sansa plays beautifully. Perhaps she would like to entertain you both while I – . . ." Petyr began and Sansa interrupted immediately. There was not a chance in hell he was going to leave her alone with these two toads.

"But Lord Baelish, you play handsomely," she grinned and saw Petyr's eyes harden. "Lady Myranda, you simply must hear him play. I've heard him, oh let me think, at least a few times. I should not be the only one to listen to such beauty."

Myranda's face was filled with excitement and begged him to play for her and all Sansa could do was stand back and watch the Marquess squirm in disquiet. He glared at Sansa for revealing his hidden talent. Reluctantly, he sat down as Myranda moved to stand next to him.

Sansa was next to the door and this would have been the perfect opportunity to escape but now she just had to watch him perform against his wishes and it was marvelous.

Petyr took a moment and finally placed hands above the keys and Sansa waited to hear which solemn melody he would play for his future fiancée. His fingers stuck the keys in what surprised Sansa completely. This wasn't a little unpolished tune that novice fingers played. It was a sonata Sansa had never heard before but a rather difficult composition and well-rehearsed at that. As his skilled fingers drifted across the keys effortlessly, the complexity of the music was astounding not only that he played from memory but that she never anticipated such a talent from this man. Petyr was by far, a very accomplished pianist, even better than her, Sansa thought in shock.

The music's quick and bright majesty saturated the room as Myranda just smiled warmly and Sansa would normally have closed her eyes and let the music fill her senses but watching him was entrancing. Petyr was completely absorbed as if he weren't aware of his audience. In fact, he practically ignored the two women watching him intensely.

Sansa remembered that first night the *ghost* played a more aggressive and passionate Moonlight Sonata. It was that quiet fury in which he played a most melancholy tune that was coming out now in this decidedly more complicated piece of music.

All too quickly, it was over and Sansa caught his eyes flick suddenly towards her and Sansa detected the anger there. He was not pleased in having to play but smiled at the brunette that endlessly praised him nonetheless. Petyr had suggested that Myranda and her father rest from their long travels before supper, excusing himself under the guise of business that needed attending to. Sansa didn't know if it was a lie just to escape but she couldn't blame him entirely. One could only take so much of Myranda at any given time.

Duncan ordered the footmen to bring up some of their luggage and Sansa had the terrible feeling that the Royce's were likely to spend the night. A handsome, dark-haired footman followed Petyr and Myranda as he guided her to the lavender room Sansa had vacated not too long ago. The suggestion for some reason made her blood boil. That was her room, the one he chose before all the ghostly scares. Now, he was giving it to Myranda.

Lord Royce did not even wait, as he followed Duncan to a room down the east wing. Sansa thought it would have been proper to have father and daughter near each other and not a lady alone so near to a bachelor.

"It's lovely, just lovely," Myranda extolled taking Petyr's hands. "Do you really have to leave me?"

Sansa took a few steps back and tried to silently make her way to her room when Petyr raised her hand to his lips. She couldn't watch this as her stomach threatened to purge her breakfast.

"My apologies, pet, I do have quite a bit to do. I'll see you at supper," he smiled but Sansa noticed that not once did it reach his eyes today. He slipped away down the hallway into his study closing the door just as Sansa turned the corner towards her own room.

Dear Lord, if she had to watch this horrid display all night, she would rather spend the evening in the stables. Sansa didn't realize she was pacing her bedroom when someone rapped on her door and entered before she could say a word. The brunette practically twirled in with a smile. Lady growled on her bed and Sansa shushed her before picking the little wolf up.

"Why do come in," Sansa muttered in annoyance. "How did you know this was my room?"

"Oh, one of those silly little maids told me," Myranda said inspecting Sansa's bedroom with a smirk. "This is pretty, isn't it? Not as lovely as mine though. Strange, he gave you this entire wing to yourself and far away from his side of the house."

Sansa sat down holding Lady on her lap as the pup growled at barked at the intruder.

"Is that... a wolf?" Myranda grimaced.

"Yes. What of it?" Sansa asked not caring to know the answer.

"Hmph. Figures," she muttered and sat down. "Enough of this charade. Why are you here Sansa?"

"I might ask the same about you," Sansa smiled petting Lady. "I see you found yourself a wealthy husband."

"Jealous?" Myranda smirked.

"Not in the least," Sansa replied not sure if it was a lie or not. "He's a hand full."

The brunette smiled wickedly, "Oh, is he?"

Sansa blushed knowing what the girl meant with that implied innuendo. She couldn't exactly throw this malicious chit from her room without getting an earful from Petyr. This brat could be his new wife and mistress of the house and that placed Sansa in a very precarious position that she just couldn't stand.

"I don't know what you mean," Sansa answered with feigned innocence.

"Of course you wouldn't, little virgin," Miranda chuckled. "Well, that at least answers one of my questions. Clearly, he hasn't touched you. I just assumed that's why you were here. A man has needs that must be satisfied... even way out here. Which leads me to ask again. Why are you here?"

"Why don't you ask him? I wasn't given a choice," Sansa grumbled, not wanting to talk to her at all.

Suddenly, Lady leapt down before Sansa could grab her. The little wolf charged over to the brunette and grabbed a mouthful of her rose skirt tugging back hard enough to tear a long strip away.

"Lady, no!"

"You little beast!" Miranda wailed pulling on her ruined skirt. She went to kick at the little wolf, when Lady took off out into the hallway and Miranda chased after her.

Lady had made it all the way down towards Petyr's study when Miranda grabbed her by the scuff of her neck, making the pup yelp in pain.

"No! Give her to me," Sansa pleaded softly.

"I could break her neck right now," the girl sneered.

"Don't! She didn't hurt you, she's just a pup," Sansa cried in vain.

"What in the hell is going on out here?" Petyr barged out of his study glaring at the two women.

Myranda grinned nastily at Sansa and suddenly turned to Petyr with the most beautiful smile.

"Darling, we were only playing. Sansa's little dog got loose and I was only trying to catch her. Silly me, she snagged my dress by accident. I just love little dogs," she beamed holding Lady tightly against her chest.

Petyr's eyes suspiciously looked between the smiling woman and the one breathless with worry. Slowly, he walked up to Myranda and took Lady out of her hands. The pup cuddled into him for protection as he strode over to Sansa giving her the little wolf.

"Sansa, will you do your best to keep her in your room today?" Petyr asked coolly before going back to Myranda. "I can have one of the maids mend your dress, if you like."

Sansa's heart burned. Was he really going to believe her? Had he not come out when he did, Sansa thought for sure Myranda would have hurt Lady.

"No need, this is one of my old dresses that I only use for travelling so I don't ruin the others," she smiled prettily.

"If you wish," he replied and gazed at Sansa again. "Ladies, the last thing I want do is appear rude, but I have a mountain of work and need some peace and quiet. If you could... *play* elsewhere, please."

"You could never be rude, my lord," Myranda said sweetly. "It's my fault. I haven't seen Sansa for ages and I've missed her so much. It was like losing a sister, really. We'll be more quiet, I promise... *darling*."

Petyr didn't say a word and retreated back into his study closing the door. Sansa turned to go back to her room when Myranda didn't follow but instead opened the door leading to the Marchioness' bedroom.

"What are you doing?" Sansa whispered harshly looking to Petyr's study door. "You'll get us both in trouble."

"Just looking..." Myranda grinned and without a second thought, stepped into the room. Sansa crept over to the open door looking inside and glancing back to Petyr's door.

Myranda ran her hands across the gilded furniture and like a spoiled child, plopped onto the bed, sinking in. She acted as if the room were hers.

"Have you ever seen such a beautiful room?" she murmured to herself. "And it's mine. All of this is mine."

The audacity of this woman was astounding, Sansa thought. Sadly, if it were true, it would belong to her soon enough. Sansa clutched Lady to her bosom and felt sick. No, she could not live with Myranda as the lady of the house. Not in a million years. She would rather suffer her aunt's bouts of madness before the smug cruelty that Myranda surely would bring not only to her but the servants.

"I will have the finest clothes, gowns and jewels," the brunette sang to herself on the bed. "We will host the most splendid parties." Myranda giggled to herself and turned to look at Sansa. "Perhaps if you're lucky, and I can persuade him, we'll give you a little cottage somewhere. Or you could be governess to our children? Wouldn't that be lovely?"

Sansa couldn't dream up anything worse right now. Myranda pushed herself off the bed and sashayed towards Sansa out the door, closing it behind her.

“Of course, I will have to insist he not buy you beautiful dresses. Servants don’t wear such finery as this,” she smirked as Lady shrank into her mistress’ arms. “And the first thing I will do is tie that little beast in a sack and drown it in the lake. See you at supper, Lady Sansa.”

Sansa barely made it to her room, as the tears streamed down her face. She bolted her door and never wanted to leave again. How could he want to marry a woman like that? It was just getting worse and worse. Sansa wished she had never come to this place.

She set Lady on the bed and the pup snuggled into her as Sansa lay back on the mattress. Had she not come here, Lady would be dead already with her mother, she sighed. Sansa glanced at the porcelain clock on the mantle. It would be a few hours before supper and she dreaded having to go downstairs and pretend to be courteous. Sansa curled into her pillow and closed her teary eyes. There had to be a way out of this.

When she woke, it was dark outside her window, much darker than it should be. Sansa sat up at looked at the clock. It was well past midnight! How did she sleep all this time and no one bothered to wake her for dinner? Sansa stood up and caught her reflection in the mirror and sighed. Dear God, she looked terrible. She must have tossed and turned the entire time. Her hair was a mess and the dark circles under her eyes were practically black. She stoked the fire a little a spied a piece of paper just under her door which was bolted just as she left it.

Sansa bent down and picked up the folded parchment. It was Petyr’s handwriting.

I never took you for a coward.

If you wish to hide in your room, so be it.

The paper crumpled in her hand before landing in the fire. Why should she care what he does? Let Myranda have him, they deserve each other, Sansa frowned. After he leaves for Kings Landing, she could take Lady, Misty and whatever she could carry and runaway. It would take days before he would even be able to do anything about it, even if Duncan sent a raven. Myranda was right on one thing, Sansa was from the North and Northerners knew how to handle the snow and cold. She would find a way. Nothing would keep her here to play servant to that wretched woman come spring.

Her stomach growled, and Lady whined a little. They were both hungry since missing supper. Still dressed in her lavender dress, Sansa left Lady in her room with a single candle as she crept downstairs into the kitchens. Surely, Mrs. Ames would have something that would satisfy. The embers were low as she rummaged around plating some fruits, cheese, bread and some scraps for Lady. There was a little wine left in the decanter on the sideboard and Sansa left her candle to take it with her. The moon was bright tonight and she wouldn’t really need it to go back upstairs.

Taking a short cut through the grand dining hall instead of the gallery and foyer, Sansa heard noises coming from the direction of the music room. Judging by the time, it was certainly Petyr’s witching hour and wondered who he was going to scare away tonight. To hell with him, she thought bitterly. It didn’t involve her as she made her way silently towards the staircase.

As she neared, the noises grew a bit louder but sounded restrained at the same time. When a woman’s moan echoed softly, Sansa’s foot stalled on the first step. After the other nights, Sansa knew what kind of moan that was. The feeling and image of Petyr doing pleasurable things to her flashed in her mind and made her stomach clench.

Against all better judgment, Sansa crept to the double doors which were only open a crack. The grunts and moans were more distinct and Sansa knew she shouldn’t be here.

“Oh *darling*, that’s it,” Myranda’s voice drawled in pleasure. “Right there.”

Sansa’s stomach dropped as the seductive words left Myranda’s mouth. Peering through the thin space between the doors, Sansa saw the brunette with her shift gathered around her waist as a man was thrusting between her spread legs on the chaise lounge. The piano was partially blocking them, but when the man’s head came up, it was pitch black hair with a little bit of curl at the back.

“Yes, you feel so good, my darling,” she moaned bucking against him and Sansa felt somehow betrayed. “We won’t have to hide from father anymore and you will be fucking a great and respected lady of the court.”

Sansa heard his grunts and moans accompanied by the slapping of skin and remembered how Petyr’s fingers felt on her bum and stroking between her legs in the pool. She felt how hard he was and imagined how it would feel to have Petyr make her his. Now, he was rutting with a woman she despised on the same lounge where she drew his portrait what felt like ages ago.

She couldn’t listen anymore and scurried to the staircase when she heard Myranda’s cry of pleasure. She bolted her door and set down the make shift dinner on the table as Lady wagged her tail with excitement of her return.

Sansa poured a glass of wine and downed it all. No, this wasn’t hurt. This wasn’t jealousy. One can’t be jealous of a man such as him. He was nothing to her and she was clearly nothing to him. Petyr did say he was going to send her back to Riverrun until her uncle refused on the basis that she was now ruined. She was just some sordid little game until she became a burden. He needed to marry into a family name in good standing with the ton and having Sansa around was obviously going to be problematic.

Perhaps the Royce’s were in on his secret plans in which something was hidden below this house. Maybe everyone in this house knew what was going on except her. Mrs. Ames probably didn’t want to hurt her feelings and Duncan seemed to know that Sansa’s time here would be short lived.

Oh, Sansa wished Petyr would leave with them tomorrow and she wouldn’t have to deal with any of it at least until the end of winter. She unlaced her dress and tossed it on the chair while Lady

gobbled up her supper heartily. Sansa was so sick to her stomach; she couldn't even eat the food on her plate. Sansa lay down on her bed and knew she would never get any sleep tonight.

Curse you, Petyr!

Had she not experienced what that kind of passion and pleasure could be, tonight's revelation would not have hurt so much. She could still taste his mouth and how his touch burned her skin and she could feel how much he wanted her. In the end, he pushed her away and yet he was downstairs fucking Myranda instead. Perhaps, after all, it was she he was fantasizing about that night. It was her he really wanted.

Sansa finished off the rest of the decanted and soon enough the alcohol's haziness pulled a soft veil over her. She wanted to sleep but all she could hear were the erotic moans and groans of two people in pleasure. Her candle flickered low on the table, as it created shadows on the wall from the sculpture. Mars was arched over Venus in a sensuous embrace. The flame danced slowly and the shadows seemed to move, Sansa thought.

Mars groaned in desire as his head dipped down to Venus' neck. Her body arched into him as Sansa heard her own moans in tandem from the other night. The shadowed danced and writhed as Mars began thrusting into Venus and Sansa felt that aching heat again between her legs.

You are mine, a voice eerily similar to Petyr's echoed in passion.

Sansa glanced at the painting, and the girl was staring directly at her as her naked hips gyrated in wanton need. Her hand had disappeared between her legs and Sansa could feel his fingers grazing her. Sansa gathered her chemise up, baring her thighs feeling the cool air upon her wetness. The girl threw back her head as her hips pumped harder in the air as if her lover were watching her and waiting for him to come and release her from such sweet agony.

Unable to stop herself in such a foggy haze, Sansa reached between her legs touching her slick arousal. Petyr's fingers had coaxed and teased making her throb with need. Her fingers circled what he called her little rosebud and a fire blazed. Sansa had never touched herself before. She had felt that dull ache occasionally with dirty thoughts but never knew how to bring her own pleasure until Petyr forced it out of her.

The shadows on the wall fucked as Venus thrust back in time with Mars. The painting was writing and Sansa rubbed herself harder and harder feeling the throbbing build with more intensity. One finger dipped inside and then another lightly thrusting. It hurt a little at first but then the throbbing became stronger and she needed to come, as Petyr described it. She heard his voice in her head as he told her what he wanted to do to her. Lying on the bed with her legs spread, Sansa looked down and could almost see his head between her legs. Her fingers worked harder and faster and the feeling of his tongue in her mouth and how it would feel down there made her back arch.

Sansa had no control of her voice. She heard her moans and grunts as she bucked against her fingers, feeling that blinding pleasure rack her body and mind. Unconsciously, Sansa brought her fingers to her lips curious as to what Petyr would have tasted. It was musky but a little sweet and the idea was so foreign to her and wicked, that she couldn't help but blush.

Wiping her fingers on the linen, Sansa sighed in discontent. She had just pleased herself and it felt wonderful, but she wanted more. She knew that side to a man now, and the desire was addicting. How she wished that Petyr had never kissed her, never touched her. Ignorance was bliss, but now that she had eaten from the tree of knowledge, Sansa couldn't erase those desires from her mind.

She glanced back at the painting, and it hung there as it always had. Motionless. The candle was almost out, but the shadow of the sculpture did not move and Sansa wondered if she had imagined it all. If she was lucky, perhaps she walked in her sleep downstairs and nothing ever happened between Myranda and Petyr. Before her eyes closed, the moonlight streamed through the window shining on the plate of food and the empty decanter of wine.

There was a hard knocking on her door that finally roused Sansa from bed. Her legs were cold and Sansa could see that her chemise was still up around her thighs. Quickly, she pushed it down and slipped on her dressing gown before unlocking her door.

Sarah came in with a breakfast tray, but the idea of eating made Sansa's stomach churn. The maid set it on the bed and petted Lady giving her a bone, presumably from last night.

"Lord Baelish says you're to eat and dress," Sarah mumbled hurriedly as she looked through Sansa's wardrobe.

Sansa looked at the time and it was only ten after eight.

"Why the rush? It's early. I highly doubt Lady Myranda has even risen yet," Sansa muttered sleepily.

"I do believe his lordship said that Lord Royce wanted to leave early this morning for Kings Landing," Sarah explained.

"Well, he doesn't need me down there to say good riddance to them," Sansa chuckled picking through her breakfast and giving some bread to Lady.

"I'm only doing as he commanded, my lady," Sarah spoke nervously and Sansa patted her shoulder as she laid out her blue dress.

"I know. Don't worry, I'll be ready to act the part of traitorous witch turned good little hostess for him," Sansa teased letting the maid finally laugh a little.

"She's a nasty piece of work, that one," the maid whispered. "We had hoped his lordship was going to marry you, but I can't work for a woman like that, no matter how kind the master is. The only one that seems to adore her is Duncan. He says she's a real lady and will bring order to the house. Ugh, I'd rather milk goats for the rest of my life than have her ordering me around. You've

been so kind to everyone... I just can't imagine..."

"Sssh, I understand. It's all right," Sansa said softly. All her memories of Aunt Lysa and how terribly her servants at the Eyrie were treated came flooding back. Myranda, it seemed, learned a thing or two from the Duchess. "We'll just have to take it as it comes. At least we'll have the winter and maybe part of the spring before they return."

The both laughed at the ridiculous situation they found themselves in. Sansa ate a little of her breakfast when her heard Sarah mutter something.

"I'm sorry?" Sansa asked as the maid pulled the linens away and saw a tiny stain of blood. Last night came back in a whirl and Sansa blushed pink.

"I said, it looks as though your menses have started," the girl said pulling the soiled linens from the bed. "That must be why you did not come to dinner last night."

"Oh yes," Sansa chuckled nervously. "I wasn't feeling well since yesterday morning. I only came down because Lord Petyr asked me to."

"Well, he wasn't too happy about your absence last night," the maid responded harshly. "Men will never understand these things. It's not as though we can help it. Don't be ashamed next time, and bolt your door. I'll bring your supper to you," Sarah smiled warmly.

"Thank you," Sansa replied in kind. "Well," she huffed picking up her corset, "we best not let the king and queen wait too long for me."

Sansa came downstairs as the footmen were loading Lord Royce's carriage. The handsome one, belonging to Royce, winked at her as he hauled a rather large trunk out the door. Myranda's shrill voice could be heard from the dining room as she argued with her father. They couldn't leave fast enough, Sansa wished.

"You will behave yourself when we get to the capital, young lady," Lord Royce rebuffed his daughter as she followed stomping her feet like a child. "I will not have you be smudging my name with these antics. You're to be presented before the king, for God's sake, behave like a lady."

"Heavens, you're so old fashioned father," Myranda whined. "The Lannisters have one of the worst reputations of any family, yet they're royalty."

Lord Royce marched past Sansa and grunted in her direction.

"Good morning, my lord," she tried to hide her smile.

Myranda was talking in low whispers to Duncan as he draped her traveling cloak around her shoulders. Occasionally, Myranda would glance in her direction and Sansa wondered what she could possibly want to discuss with that old man.

Gentle hands touched her shoulders from behind and Sansa knew it was Petyr. Disgusted, she shrugged him off and moved away before eyes looked their way.

"I'm actually surprised to see you this morning," Petyr mused and Sansa hated his smug tone.

"Still think me a coward, do you?" she retorted quietly. "I happened to be ill yesterday whether you believe it or not."

"Oh? Shall I call for the doctor?" he asked in disbelief.

"If you wish, it's only that condition we women are blessed with every month," she whispered not caring what he thought. Usually, that was a statement that would make men run from the room. They did not want to know such things, let alone hear them.

"Ah, that's good news," Petyr chuckled sarcastically, "as I'm happy to know that you are not with child."

Sansa clenched her fists. If he continued any longer, she wouldn't care if she punched him in front of his guests.

"You're a bastard and I hate you," she seethed. "Do us all a favor and go with them today."

"Sadly, I had to reject such a tempting invitation already this morning," Petyr japed as they walked out the front doors. "I'm sure it would have been a... mentally stimulating carriage ride."

The sarcasm tried to mask a tone that gave Sansa pause. Myranda flounced her way over to them making a scene of tearful departure and Sansa did everything she could not to flinch when the brunette embraced her as if they were the best of friends. She leaned up and kissed Petyr chastely on the cheek, and Sansa wondered who they were fooling. He helped her into the carriage and nodded to Lord Royce before the door was closed. The horses pulled away and Sansa finally released a sigh of relief.

Thank God that was over. Now, all that was left was for Petyr to pack his things and follow suit.

"Well, that would have been a horribly unpleasant ride, the four of us cramped in that carriage," Petyr said walking back into the house.

Sansa thought she had misheard him and followed Petyr into the foyer.

"Excuse me? The four of us?" she asked incredulously.

"Even if we took my carriage which is far more spacious and comfortable... no, no, I simply could not do it," he continued on ignoring her question

"What are you talking about?" Sansa prickled. She was so tired of his games.

"In the commotion, I seem to have forgotten to tell you?" he joked again and Sansa was very close

to slapping him and then it hit her.

No. No, no, no. It couldn't be what she was thinking. Sansa felt like she was standing in her uncle's home that fateful morning when Petyr broke the news that changed her life.

"Have the maids pack your things, sweetling. You're coming with me to Kings Landing."

Chapter End Notes

Chopin Piano Sonata No. 1 Allegro maestoso in C minor — Chopin composed this piece at the age of 18. This is the first movement in the sonata.

Lovesick

Chapter Notes

Thanks for being patient. We're going to start seeing a criss-cross in Petyr and Sansa POV's.

I've written most of the ending, epilogue and two key chapters that are coming in the future. I hope I have written something you guys really won't expect and possibly love/hate. I'm going to make some of you cry because I bawled my eyes out writing some of the pieces. There is so much going under the surface and I hope that when some of these pivotal moments hit, it will work the way I'm hoping. I think I have put together a really good story for you guys. At least I hope so. I think this might be better than Underworld and I fucking loved Underworld. I have some big surprises and some smut, and some heartache, tears and good moments... Again hoping that you don't figure it out until it happens.

I'm really excited for some future chapters.

The waters of Gods Eye lake were icy as the carriage passed by and the chill in the air biting. Petyr told Sansa to dress warmly but furs were still needed as winter had come earlier than he expected. Three days since the Royce's left, Petyr made his arrangements for Duncan and Mrs. Ames until the spring. A few ravens were sent to signal their arrival and prepare for a lady in his townhouse, in that time, he barely spoke to Sansa. In fact, she went out of her way to avoid him. He couldn't blame her, really. She was going to find out about Lady Myranda sooner or later, just not this soon. Now, with their unexpected visit, all of the ton would know he was caring for the last remaining Stark. Leaving her alone in Harrenhal wasn't wise nor was the implication that he had something to hide.

No, she had to come with him now whether he had wished it or not. He couldn't allow Lady Myranda or her father to spread gossip and cast any doubt. They were just as power hungry as any in the ton and Petyr made no illusions about Myranda's false seductions. He was no more marrying her for love than she. However, dealing with Royce and bedding his daughter was a better route than marrying Lysa, whom he couldn't abide for longer than one evening as Robert's ball. The Royce's would give him an edge considering their desire for more land and titles in the Vale. Once Lysa was gone and young Robert on his own, the boy would only take the advice of his beloved uncle. Lysa's death would be suspicious in any case and it would be better if Petyr were not seen as the direct beneficiary to such a thing.

Three hours rolled on and Sansa had hardly said a word sitting across from him. She was dressed in her wool and fur lined pelisse but still huddled under the extra furs. Lady, the little pup, occasionally would poke its head out as her mistress refused to leave her behind. Petyr tried to argue that Kings Landing was no place for a wolf, but Sansa wouldn't hear of it. She said she would worry the entire time and Petyr thought it best to let Sansa have her way. He was going to hear it all winter, she threatened.

Petyr knew she didn't want to go. The ton had never been kind to her, he knew, and it was surely going to be an ugly affair, but their futures were now sealed and Petyr couldn't hide her in the country as he had hoped for a little while longer. He would have to deal with the Lannisters and Joffrey. Protecting Sansa would hurt her and Petyr dreaded it all the same. He knew what was coming as he glanced at her and Petyr wondered if she too, also knew.

In those three days, Petyr had been feeling steadily worse for wear. The headaches and bitter stomach he contributed to the stress of quickly re-arranging his plans had not abated. Normally, he thrived on chaos and it never affected him mentally or physically, but the carriage ride was almost unbearable. Petyr's head was pounding and the rocking had turned his stomach sour. Twice, they had to stop in fear that he might retch. Petyr said he needed to stretch his legs as he breathed in the cold air, but the skeptical look on Sansa's face told a different story. Indeed, he felt terrible and wished there was a quicker way to get to Kings Landing.

Checking his pocket watch, Petyr sighed making his lungs cough a little. It would be close to sunset before they reached the Ivy Inn. Lady leapt from her mistress' warm furs onto his lap and gently pawed at his arm for attention. It was the first, Petyr noticed, that Sansa truly looked at him. There was something in her eyes that he couldn't place. Yes, there was anger there, but some hidden emotion lingered just beneath the surface.

"Lady, come here. He doesn't want to be bothered," Sansa patted her lap.

The stubborn wolf arched her back and settled down in the crook of his arm, making Petyr smile for the first time in days. He had to admit, he was becoming very fond of this bundle of white fur and blue eyes. His gloved hand stroked along her spine and the pup stretched out across his lap in pleasure. Petyr glanced at Sansa, and saw a hint of jealousy. This was her pet after all and it abandoned her for him. He stifled a chuckle but all it made him do was cough.

"You don't look well," she said studying him.

"You're finally speaking to me and that's all you can come up with?" he smiled sarcastically.

"I have nothing to talk about," she muttered looking out the window again.

"Oh, I believe you have quite a bit to say," he chuckled making her frown. "I'm sure when the time is right, we'll have *plenty* to talk about. In the meantime, if you wish to continue ignoring me,

then I'll stop pretending to be courteous and get some sleep."

"It never stopped you before," Sansa quietly shot back and Petyr wanted nothing more than to spar with her, but the more he spoke, the more his chest and throat hurt.

He never got sick. Petyr couldn't remember the last time he had ever been ill. There was much to do once they arrived in Kings Landing, and lying in bed for days was going to set him back. He was trying hard not to let the irritability come to the forefront but he couldn't help but bristle at her current demeanor. He had apologized for that night, had he not? Was she intending to hold it against him forever?

What was more strange was the underlying hostility between Sansa and Myranda. Petyr knew now why Lysa cast her out but just how bad had living at the Eyrie been for Sansa? Lady Myranda and her father were easy enough to read and frankly being merely annoyed with them wasn't surprising, but Sansa's behavior was controlled hatred.

Clearly, she wasn't happy about the idea of an engagement to Lady Myranda. Hell, Petyr wasn't thrilled with it. It was a necessary evil. She wasn't an ugly woman. He could bed her but now after tasting the delectable strawberry who sat across from him... the idea of marriage to Lady Myranda was more than burdensome. He never should have kissed Sansa, he thought sadly. A kiss wasn't nearly enough and only inflamed such fantasies. The feel of her body, the way she clutched him in ecstasy struck every nerve. He never wanted a woman more than in that moment in the hot pool beneath the house. Had sensibility not taken over, he would have fucked her right there... and she would have hated him for it.

The look of shame on her flushed face was too much to bear. It was a moment of weakness on her part. He forced it out of her and she was ashamed and regretful. His body and cock ached with need but he would never take her against her will. That she had been willing... only for a moment, filled his dreams with her in his bed.

After that day at the market, Petyr felt he had made ground with Sansa. A fleeting moment of lust between them seemed to have created an ever widening fissure. He had enjoyed the quiet of the library after dinner, eagerly anticipated a ride or stroll, and a smile found a home on his face when the soft music of her on the piano echoed up to his study.

Petyr watched her with half lidded eyes. She was indeed beautiful, more beautiful than Cat had ever been. Sansa had Cat's fire but years of living as prisoner had almost snuffed out that flame. After everything they had put this girl through, she was still strong, kind and compassionate. Saving her from those men at Riverrun started a chain reaction he wasn't fully prepared for. It was an indulgent thing bringing her to Harrenhal. Petyr thought he could keep the past where it belonged, but the need to protect her was overwhelming. If it had been possible, he would have smuggled her away from the Eyrie the first time they met.

Watching her now, there was nothing he wanted more than to see her smile. When he gave her the mare, she flashed him the loveliest grin. That was pure happiness and it was like a drug to him... until he kissed her behind that tree. Petyr thought he could keep it under control. He would provide for her as he promised and keep her safe for that's what he had intended.

Now, he needed to possess everything about her. She had to be his. No, he couldn't marry Lady Myranda now and insulting Lord Royce and his daughter would not bode well. Petyr had to find another way to get out of this engagement. He knew Kings Landing society would reject Sansa unequivocally. By the time they reached the capital, Petyr wagered everyone would know about Lady Sansa. He would use that to his perceived disadvantage. He wasn't considered so much a fop, but definitely not manipulative enough to use a traitor's daughter for any use other than the obvious.

It pained him knowing he would have to play the part and use this girl. He would let them belittle her and call her a whore. He suspected she had already been subjected to as much in the Vale. It was the only way to make it acceptable for a titled man, even one such as himself, to keep her. Petyr was convinced she wouldn't be safe anywhere or with anyone else. Once he paraded her around the city, it wouldn't take long. She would want to return to Harrenhal and the ton as well as the Lannisters would suspect nothing more. Surely, what other use would a man like him have for a young woman like her?

Petyr wasn't sure what made him more sick in this moment. Was it the cold, the bumpy ride or the idea of what was about to happen to Sansa that made him want to leap from this carriage? She would never understand that it was to protect her. Petyr often wondered why he didn't just leave her in Riverrun, sending monthly allowances to her and Mrs. Cole.

He closed his eyes and tried to will the nausea away petting Lady. At some point he must have drifted off when he felt a soft handkerchief dab his forehead. Sansa was leaning over him with concern written all over her face. Perhaps she didn't completely hate him as he suspected.

"You're feverish, my lord," she told him with a slight frown.

"Petyr," he corrected her with a half-smile.

He glanced outside and knew the inn was nearby as the sun was low on the horizon. Lady was still in his lap gnawing at his index finger playfully as Petyr loosened his cravat that threatened to choke him. Every muscle in his body ached and he was sweating profusely.

"You need to bring that fever down and rest. How much further is the inn?" Sansa asked worriedly.

"Not far now," Petyr replied feeling worse than he did this morning.

She pulled the basket from under the cushioned seat that contained a bit of food and wine that Mrs. Ames had packed for them. Sansa uncorked the Chablis and doused the handkerchief.

"What are you doing?" he asked as she started pulling his cravat away and unbuttoned his collar.

"It's not quite as good as spirits but the alcohol in the wine will help cool your skin a little until I

can obtain something better,” Sansa explained with annoyance when he lightly pushed her hands away as she tried to use the damp cloth on his face and neck.

“Ugh, don’t. I’ll smell like a cask of wine,” he groaned.

“An improvement from reeking like whiskey all the time,” she retorted swatting his hands. “Besides, who are you aiming to impress at an inn?”

If Petyr wasn’t so feverish, he might have detected a touch of possessiveness in her tone but he didn’t care. She was speaking to him again and he would let her sponge him down in wine if needed.

Lady started barking and distracted Sansa from her task to look out the window.

“I think we’re almost there,” she told him and muttered to herself, “I can’t wait to get out of this carriage.”

The inn was very busy as far as Petyr could see when Brune opened the door helping Sansa out. The look on the man’s face was pure confusion at his lordship’s state of dress. Petyr didn’t bother to adjust his clothing and slowly emerged from the carriage seeing Sansa waiting patiently for him with Lady tucked inside her pelisse.

“My lord, are you alright?” Brune asked cautiously.

“I’ll live,” Petyr grumbled pulling his cloak around him. “Take care of the horses and baggage. Get them warm and fed,” he instructed in regards to their men.

Sansa took his arm more to help him than for appearances. He felt light of head and all he wanted to do was lie down.

“Lord Baelish,” the innkeeper greeted. The round fellow stared at Sansa for a moment and glanced at his disheveled appearance. “I have the room you requested.”

“Room?” Petyr asked incredulously. “My letter instructed for two.”

“Oh yes, m’lord but we’re full tonight,” the innkeeper mumbled. “Lord Pemberly along with Lord Templeton arrived earlier. Due to the heavy rain, two of my rooms have damage because of the roof, not suitable for any nobles, especially a lady. Those were my best rooms but I kept the bridal chamber for you, your lordship and I’ll not charge you a single coin more.”

Petyr glanced at Sansa waiting for her to make a fuss like last time, but she didn’t say a word. Petyr’s head was spinning yet tried to focus.

“My lady absolutely must have her own room,” he insisted. “It is simply unacceptable to expect her to ruin her reputation because of your problems.”

Petyr grasped her arm a little tighter feeling the walls close in. He needed a bed and needed it now.

“My soon to be lord husband is being overly chivalrous and modest,” she protested graciously. “He is feeling very ill and needs to rest. The bridal chamber will be most satisfactory. My father need never know if you are discreet. You’ll be paid handsomely, of course.”

Petyr hid his shock at her proposal. Never would he have expected this considering the past few days.

“My lord?” the innkeeper asked for his approval.

“Very well, my love,” Petyr coughed. “I’m in no condition to argue.” He leaned into Sansa’s ear and whispered, “This is not wise. Surely, you will be recognized.”

Petyr scanned the inn and didn’t see anyone of the ton, nor either of the earl’s mentioned a moment ago.

“I’ll stay in the room and keep my face hidden when we leave,” Sansa whispered back. “You’re ill. You need to lie down. I can’t leave you alone with a fever. I’m assuming you don’t want any attention brought to us as it is, yes? Demanding a second room will certainly do that. No one would question Myranda’s virtue.”

Petyr couldn’t help but detect the snide remark aimed at his future wife. He knew she had a reputation, hence why Royce probably had a difficult time finding a suitable husband for his daughter. He eyed the man directly, handing him several coins.

“My wife’s reputation is not to be tarnished by gossip for I will know where it originated and I’ll burn this place to the ground, do I make myself clear?” Petyr demanded harshly.

“Yes, my lord,” the man agreed. “I would never tarnish your lovely lady. As you said, she is to be your wife.”

The man escorted them upstairs and Petyr barely made it to the bed before collapsing. He heard the door close as Sansa and Brune discussed him before his man left the room leaving Sansa to lock it behind him.

Wearily, Petyr took off his cloak and top coat. By damned if he didn’t feel even worse leaving the bloody carriage. The room was drafty making his lungs cough again involuntarily. He laid back on the lumpy mattress and cursed himself. This was not how he wanted to come back to Kings Landing.

All of a sudden, he felt his boots being tugged off before Sansa pulled him up a little. The anger had left her face and what was left was that of an annoyed nurse with a stubborn patient. Lady was sniffing around the room and jumped up on the bed but Sansa gently put her back down on the floor.

“Come on, let’s tuck you in. Your feet are like ice,” she told him briefly. “I sent Brune bring my

trunk and a tub to soak in.”

“I am not using a community wash tub. I’d rather die of scarlet fever,” Petyr grumbled. “I’ll probably catch something worse.”

“Ugh, you’re such an arrogant arse, you know that?” she growled back. “I only want to soak your feet in hot water. Mother did that with us. It takes the fever out of the head. You’ll need to strip down.”

Petyr laughed, “Oh sweetling, I don’t think so.”

Sansa huffed, “You can’t shock me. I’ve seen all of you. I’m going to wet down a sheet of linen and wrap you in it while your feet soak. If you don’t behave, I’ll have Brune throw your stubborn, boiling head in the river to cool you off.”

Petyr couldn’t help the sarcastic smile. He couldn’t deny he loved pressing her buttons. She had a quick and sharp wit and didn’t hesitate to use it on him.

His head was spinning and he felt parched. The less time he had to spend in this god awful place, the better. All he wanted was to get home and into his own comfortable warm bed.

“Yes, doctor. Whatever it takes to get us out of here by morning,” he mumbled.

“Morning? You shouldn’t travel at all tomorrow. It could be worse,” she said shocked.

“Do what you must,” he bit out angrily. “We leave tomorrow. I will not spend another night here.”

A knock on the door and before long, Brune and a servant were bringing in everything Sansa requested to make him well. She pulled a small case from her trunk and set it on the table. Petyr lifted his head, watching her sift through a few small jars and sachets with what looked like a miniature apothecary most likely from Mrs. Ames.

His head pounded and the bed felt like it was on water making his stomach turn over again. A fowl smelling powder was added to the small wooden tub and Petyr had to keep himself from retching.

“Alright, disrobe and wrap this around you,” she ordered wringing out a bed sheet from a basin of cold water.

Petyr sighed. Why couldn’t he just stay under the covers? Trembling in cold, wet linen in a drafty room was less appealing than her earlier threat.

“I’ll turn my back, if that’s what is bothering you,” she huffed and turned around but didn’t catch his smile.

He didn’t care what she saw. He gathered she had an eye full and education that night. Even when they were both in the pool, the shift she wore and his linen shirt did nothing to hide their bodies from each other. Petyr berated himself. That was the last thing he needed to be thinking about right now.

He sat up, removing his waistcoat and shirt before finally slipping his trousers down. Sansa backed up and held the sheet behind her until their hands touched. He was tempted for half a moment to pull her to him, but decided against it. It was not the time for games.

He wrapped the linen around him and cursed under his breath. It was cold but at the same time it felt good. He didn’t realize how feverish he must have been. His own clothes were lightly damp with sweat sitting next to him.

“Are you decent?” she asked.

“If you can call it that,” he sighed as she turned around.

Without a word, Sansa pushed the tub next to the bed. He couldn’t place the smell, but it was horrid. Even Lady snorted at the odor coming from the small tub. Sansa removed his stockings and placed his feet in the water forcing another curse out of him. It wasn’t just hot, it was scalding!

“Sorry,” she mumbled pouring a little cold water into the tub.

A tea kettle was boiling in the fireplace and the scent of sweet herbs didn’t help mask the other offensive odor. Sansa wrung out another cloth and came to sit next to him. She let the cool compress touch gently around his face and the back of his neck. Petyr had to admit the gesture was sweet and tender. She had no reason to be kind to him. He knew she was upset with him for taking advantage of her that night and not being open about the Royces before they arrived unexpectedly.

Petyr felt his head automatically leaning into her touch as he closed his eyes. All he wanted was sleep. The cold made his body shiver uncontrollably and he wondered how much longer he needed to endure this. After a time, she felt his forehead and neck and sighed.

“You’re still terribly warm,” she said. “A little while longer and then you can slip into bed, alright? I want you to drink some tea.”

“As long as it doesn’t taste like my foot bath,” he complained as she retrieved the kettle and poured a steaming cup.

Sitting next to him again, she lifted it to his lips and it wasn’t bad at all.

“Yarrow and elderflower,” she explained as he took another sip. “It will help reduce the fever a little. You’ll need plenty of water. Nurse Burrows said it was the best thing for fevers in the North.”

Petyr chuckled, “My own little witch, brewing her potions for me. Who needs a nurse?”

Sansa huffed and set down the cup.

“Shall I call the doctor instead? Depending from which way he comes, it will be a good day’s ride and I bet all he’ll do is bleed you. Does nothing for fevers... Mrs. Ames says most of these doctors are more apt to kill you than what ails you.”

“Does she?” he smiled. “I suppose she hasn’t taught you to poison me just yet.”

“Well, if my services are not appreciated, you can suffer on your own,” she retorted and stood up before Petyr grabbed her hand. Her skin was so soft and his was cold, and clammy.

“Please,” he murmured. “Forgive me. I do appreciate your efforts.”

Reluctantly, Sansa sat back down and returned to using the cool cloth on his head. After a time, the bath water was growing cold and he was done wearing that blasted freezing linen. Petyr shrugged it off, not caring that he was bare beneath it. He leaned across her and grabbed his shirt, slipping his arms in the sleeves, silently telling her he had had enough.

Dizziness set in as Petyr laid down and pulled the bedclothes over him and tossed the wet sheet on the wooden floor. His feet were going to smell like that for days, he grimaced. As much as he hated to admit it, her treatment did help. He didn’t feel as hot as before, and his head wasn’t throbbing as badly.

“I’ll bring you something to eat a little later, nothing heavy mind you,” Sansa said and Petyr turned around a little too quickly making his head spin.

“Let Brune do it. You cannot go downstairs alone and unchaperoned,” he insisted. “Plus, you should not be seen as it is, *my wife*.” Petyr tugged gently on a strand of her red hair. “A memorable shade.”

Sansa pulled a wooden chair over to the bed and sat down.

“Will I be subject to never being seen once we reach the capital, as well?” she asked lightly but Petyr didn’t answer. He knew what he had planned and it was best not to discuss it. “You didn’t say why you decided to bring me with you.”

Petyr turned on his side away from her penetrating gaze and Lady hoped up on the bed to cuddle into him.

“A young woman cannot be left alone for months without a guardian or chaperon of some sort,” he said testily, petting the wolf.

“Why not? No one cares about me. Mrs. Ames... even Duncan could act as such,” she replied. “It’s not as though I or you would be expecting visitors in your absence....”

“Stop asking silly questions,” he retorted harshly. “You are my ward, my responsibility. That is the end of it. I don’t need gossip to start about the girl I’m keeping in the country.”

“Oh, I see,” Petyr heard her anger seeping through. “I can assure you, Lady Myranda will do a fine job of that. Enough to have you send me to some convent in Sisterton.”

Sansa was a smart girl, Petyr thought to himself. It would be hard to play this game without her figuring it all out. It would be best if she believed it was not his idea but forced on him. Petyr had a strong feeling if he told her he wanted to make her his wife, that she would refuse him ardently. That night in the pool, he thought that she could learn to care for him. If she was that responsive to his touch and kisses, that perhaps... but her reaction the next day was the truth. She was ashamed and that old hatred from the beginning resurfaced. The ground he thought he made with her, evaporated.

Petyr’s own insecurities still echoed in his broken, boyish heart. Fresh, still, were those old wounds. He had loved Catelyn so blindly, that he couldn’t see the truth. She was his world and it all came crashing down one summer’s day. He didn’t know how to let go. Even now, he felt he was still trying to hold to Cat through her daughter. What he didn’t expect was how much Sansa dazzled him. She was smart, witty and could spar with him head to head. She was kind and loving but damaged now. Petyr often wondered, if he were younger, would Sansa unlike her mother had given him a chance? Sansa surely would have had her pick of any young man, Petyr guessed. Before her family was murdered and she was thrown into the pit of obscurity and hatred, why would she ever consider a man like him?

“I would never send you to a convent or hide you away,” he whispered in answer to her silent question.

“But you are ashamed of me, aren’t you? That’s why you’re taking me with you. Had the Royces not come to Harrenhal, would I be here now?” she asked directly. “You don’t want gossip about me to ruin your marriage chances? You don’t exactly strike me as a man that bows to the rules of decorum, if you weren’t trying to marry into the good graces of the ton.”

She was astute, Petyr had to give her credit.

“Unlike your aunt and uncle, I don’t see the point of hiding you away or treating you as if you do not exist,” Petyr replied shortly. “Believe what you will. I simply decided that perhaps you would like to see the capital and being left alone for months wasn’t a good idea in such a remote place as Harrenhal.”

Sansa laughed bitterly, “Oh, I can see strolling several feet behind you and Myranda in the park, sitting in the corner at balls, dining alone most days and nights. Maybe if I’m lucky, you’ll let me sit in the hallway outside your box and listen to my first opera. Yes, I can’t wait to see the capital.”

Petyr turned around and stared at her. Yes, she knew, for her time at the Vale had taught her well.

“Am I to be judged so harshly?” he asked with a cough. “Have I treated you that badly these past few weeks?”

"You have given me shelter and lovely things, yes," she began. "You did apologize... in your own way, I suppose. Perhaps it is the company you keep... or will keep. Your future wife will expect you to disown and send me away, I am sure. So why you intend to parade me around Kings Landing is beyond my understanding. Certainly the Royce's will be demanding your time and will not want me anywhere near. You could have weathered any gossip or scandal about me. Lies are all the ton wishes to hear and talk about. This isn't about what is good for me. It's about making sure you don't look like your hiding something to your peers at court. For keeping a traitor's daughter isn't fashionable even if you're a reprehensible scoundrel."

As much as she tried to mask it, a sadness filled her blue eyes that she did not wish him to see. Sansa was trying so hard to be strong, but they both knew what awaited her in Kings Landing.

"Well, I shall have to prove you wrong, sweetling," Petyr coughed laying his head down. No, she wouldn't marry him now, he wagered. Even a traitor's daughter had self-respect. Even if he asked sincerely, she would certainly question his motives. The look of shame and guilt on her face when he made her come and then the hatred the next morning, gutted him. Sansa didn't want him to touch her again much less be his wife.

You're a bastard and I hate you

She may hate him, but at least it would keep her safe. Sansa wouldn't understand why he was doing it. The king, the ton... they needed to believe they were in control. Petyr would let them continue believing it until the opportune moment. He knew them so well. He knew Sansa would be treated with the same contempt as he. However, Petyr was a man with title given by the king and couldn't be dismissed as easily as he used to be when only a lowly lord. Money bought him into power and standing. The ton may hate him, but that money kept him in the right circles. That wealth they envied but detested in his possession would bring them all down. Petyr was buying something with everything he gained after all these years. He would watch the downfall of the aristocracy.

No, she wouldn't understand why it had to be done this way. The king and society had to believe they pressured him into marriage. Petyr rightly assumed they thought he chose Lady Myranda for her family's good name. Forcing him to marry Sansa would appear to work against him and Petyr would play that angle the best he could. Petyr couldn't announce his intentions towards Sansa without grave suspicion. No bans would be read. No asking for her hand. She would be forced to marry him. Only the king could break the agreement between Petyr and Royce now and he was going to use it well. Joffrey was easy enough to manipulate. Petyr just needed to play the right cards at the right time.

Later in the evening, Brune brought a light supper. The stew was barely edible and Petyr did not have much of an appetite as it was. He choked down what he could, drank more of Sansa's tea before lying down again. He gave the rest to the wolf anxiously awaiting what she knew would be hers. Sansa touched his forehead again and placed another cool, wet cloth on it.

"Please tell me I don't have to wear that wet sheet again," he grumbled.

"No, I don't think so. It appears to be going down, the fever. You should stay in bed for a few more days, though," she answered.

"We leave tomorrow. I will not endure another night here," Petyr told her.

"So be it. If you die on the way, can you at least order Brune to return us back to Harrenhal? I don't wish to hang just yet... and especially not for your death," she retorted calmly. "If I'm going to die, I'd rather it be for something that is worth my life."

Petyr couldn't help but laugh making him cough harder.

"Oh sweetling, you will outlive me, rest assured," he japed.

Petyr watched her play the doctor with that little chest of wonders. She combined some liquids and the scent of mint was almost overwhelming. She sat next to him and rubbed some of the oil on her hand. The aroma was strong as she dabbed a little near his nose and then just around his collarbone avoiding his bare chest. It was intoxicating watching her nurse him. She was so lovely, he thought in amazement. His eyes followed her every move. She was so close, that he could almost breathe her in. A lock of hair fell from its pins and Petyr couldn't resist. His hand drifted up and tucked the red strand behind her ear making her pause.

For only a moment, there was something behind her eyes as she looked at him. Petyr desperately wanted to know what she was thinking. If he wasn't so ill, he would have pulled her head down and ravished her mouth. As quickly as it came, her eyes turned to stone and pushed his hand away.

"You should sleep if we're to leave tomorrow," she scolded lightly.

Petyr glanced around the room and fixed his tired eyes on the wooden chair next to the bed.

"And where pray tell are you sleeping tonight, my dear?" he asked knowing the answer.

"I'll stay up and keep an eye on you," she said unconvincingly.

Petyr scoffed, "How very dutiful. Come, you're exhausted. Lie down."

"With you? Absolutely not!" she feigned shock.

Petyr scooted to the side of the bed and pushed her down with what little strength he had left.

"Lie down. I have no desire to touch you, if that's what you're worried about. I'm to be married after all," he muttered and turned on his side away from her. Petyr expected her to get up and sit in the chair but after a few minutes, he glanced over his shoulder to see she had not moved. Perhaps she was more exhausted than he was. They were both stubborn as mules, Petyr decided.

The candle was low when he pulled the heavy covers up and threw them over her as she lay in a tight ball. He was still warm but clearly Sansa was cold even fully clothed in her traveling dress.

Lady jumped up and curled at their feet, settling down for the night. He watched Sansa's corseted chest rise and fall and wondered if she was truly asleep. His eyes drifted close as her hair whispered against his hand.

Petyr felt himself begin to wake with the aroma of mint and lemons as something tickled his nose. His chest still felt heavy and it was hard to breathe. His head ached and his body was warm but it wasn't just the sickness that weighed him down. Petyr's eyes peered open in the early morning light only to be clouded by a haze of red. It was Sansa's hair that tickled his nose and her weight upon his chest. Her arm was draped around his waist. She was fast asleep. Somehow, during the night, she had curled into him and the thought made his heart skip a beat. Unconscious as it may be, Petyr didn't care. She was here, lying next to him as if it was where she was meant to be.

His arm was resting next to her back and Petyr longed to caress her but he knew he couldn't. His cock twitched between his legs and he silently cursed his own damn body. Petyr raised his knee to hide the morning erection that was threatening to make itself known. The movement must have woken her, for her breathing changed. She knew where she was laying and was pretending to still be asleep or hoping that he was.

Petyr prayed she didn't see him harden but her rigid posture said otherwise.

"Sorry, it happens to men sometimes in the morning, sweetling," he heard his own raspy voice speak.

She slowly and deliberately moved her arm from his waist and rolled away from him and Petyr let her. He knew she was embarrassed and even though she was nearing three and twenty, Sansa was still naïve in such things. Already missing her warmth, Petyr turned on his side away from her, letting Sansa save face knowing she had probably slept in his embrace all night.

He felt her get up from the bed and sighed. He would have given anything to pull her back down and sleep all day, but he knew they had to leave. Staying any longer would rouse gossip. Petyr was positive Lady Royce had swelled the rumor mill in Kings Landing leaving him much work to be done.

Petyr let her ready herself with dignity and refused to watch her, staring at the dirty window instead.

"Shall I call in Brune, my lord?" she asked quietly, tying her bonnet and lowering the lace to cover her face.

My lord...

Petyr sighed. They were back here again.

"Yes," he replied. "I want to leave as soon as possible."

He groaned trying to sit up and his head and body ached. It was going to be a dreadful ride to Kings Landing. Thankfully, it was a shorter distance and would not take as long.

Petyr caught his reflection in the standing mirror near the window. He was pale, with dark circles under his eyes and clearly needed a bath. He rubbed his face scratchy with new whiskers and wanted to lay back down. He didn't think he would be able to stomach any breakfast this morning and asked to have some fruit brought along with them today.

Dressing slowly, Brune helped him down the stairs to the waiting carriage. Sansa had placed a small chest between the seats, setting a few cushions on top for him, Petyr presumed. He couldn't help the little smile. It was a tender gesture even though the scowl on her face attempted to tell him differently.

Settling down and covering him with furs, the cold air didn't help his lungs and the coughing became worse.

"You stubborn bastard," she growled, "You'll die from the chill and I'll be blamed for it."

"If we're lucky, our lost souls will go back to Harrenhal and we can truly scare the daylight out of everyone," he laughed and Sansa frowned at his mockery.

As the carriage moved along at what felt like a snail's pace, Petyr couldn't find any comfort. His body burned and ached and even the ability to stretch out did not help. Leaning against the window was too cold but moving to the center meant pushing his feet against Sansa. His illness still did not give him leave to be rude and make her uncomfortable.

Lady left her mistress and came to curl into his lap once again and Petyr saw Sansa frown. Lady was hers, yet she chose Petyr on so many occasions. Leaning his head back and coughing horribly, Petyr now regretted leaving the inn today. If he had waited one more day, perhaps... Ah, it didn't matter now. They were on their way and he couldn't stop the domino effect of what was to come.

A movement made his eyes pop open as Sansa came to sit next to him. She brought a flask to his lips and told him to drink. It was brandy and it burned his throat.

"It will help warm you," she told him but he didn't really hear her. That pounding and heat in his head returned with full force making him wince in pain. He unconsciously leaned into her shoulder. She was warm and smelt of sweet lemons.

The girl had moved back into the corner and in doing so, pulled him back with her.

"Here, lean against me and lie down," she said and he gratefully did as he was told.

Sansa pulled the heavy furs over them and let him stretch his legs out as his head lay against her soft bosom. It was hell and gone from proper, he knew, but didn't care in this moment. She was warm and supple and that's all that mattered. His body relaxed immediately and wondered why she had such an effect on him.

Lady found a spot between them and yawned showing her growing canine teeth. Her ears perked occasionally at a sound but finally closed her blue eyes as Petyr felt tender fingers sift through his hair. He could die right here and not care.

His mind swam to and fro, and Petyr knew he could never marry Lady Myranda. This beautiful woman that he was about to hurt terribly was holding him as if she really cared. All the awful things they had said to one another didn't seem to matter right now. Whatever her reasons, she was comforting him knowing he belonged to another, or so she thought.

Petyr closed his eyes and turned his head, resting his cheek against the swell of her chest and waited for her to swat him at his brazen move. God, he wanted to touch those tender breasts again. Her hand stilled for a minute but then resumed its soothing touch making him drift and sigh in content.

He had not a clue what she was thinking, and she couldn't know how he wished he could just take her far away. Plans were in motion and there was no turning back. Perhaps one day she would forgive him. Even if she hated him, Petyr felt he was saving her in the long term. She may never love or understand him, but at least he could keep her safe from harm. He knew the aristocracy probably better than she did. If he could convince them to let him have her, perhaps they wouldn't suspect him of anything else. Just a social climber with a wife that would never be received in any household. That would put him in his place, they would say.

Oh, how they didn't know what was coming for them. In the end, it wouldn't matter what anyone in the ton thought of his lovely wife. They would all be dead and the dead have nothing to say.

Pity

Chapter Notes

Okay, this is a bit of a quickie chapter because a lot is happening next. :D

Sansa's new maid helped her dress for the day and the household was very welcoming. Brooks, Petyr's butler in his townhome, was the polar opposite to Duncan. He had been gracious and kind to Sansa since their arrival three days ago. Whether he had thoughts about her in general or why Lord Baelish had acquired a woman in her early twenties as a ward, he never said a word or gave a disapproving glare as the majordomo in Harrenhal took pleasure in.

When they arrived, Petyr was deathly ill and taken straight to his bed. They never should have left the inn that morning. The chill in the air only made the sickness worse and the doctor said he was not to leave his room for days. What had surprised Sansa and Brune, who never seemed to leave his master's side, was that the doctor asked if Petyr had ingested anything unusual.

Sansa chastised herself with ignoring him after Myranda left before their own journey to Kings Landing. She didn't notice anything wrong with him until the carriage ride south. The fever seemed so sudden and worsened quickly. Sansa had seen Northerners die of consumption of the lungs and scarlet fever, but it didn't seem to come out of nowhere. Perhaps she had missed the signs in those few days before leaving. The doctor said he would recover, but that he couldn't rule out a possible poison.

If Sansa knew anything about Petyr, he would never allow any form of rotten food or drink in his home and she couldn't fathom Mrs. Ames would be so careless. It seemed rather odd, that after the Royce's departure that Petyr would become ill. Mrs. Ames accidentally let slip that Lord Petyr had actually intended to leave the day the Royce's appeared unannounced. He came to apologize to Sansa that morning and was going to tell her he was leaving before Myranda's unexpected visit to see her fiancée. That meant he would have become ill by the time he reached Kings Landing.

Had it been a poison of sorts, why would Myranda or her father do it? They would lose title, land and wealth. Lady Myranda seemed to be overjoyed at becoming the new Marchioness for whatever her reasons and Lord Royce would gain by his daughter's marriage. It did not make much sense and Sansa wanted to believe that it was merely fever and nothing more. She was terribly angry at him, but even the thought of killing Petyr never crossed her mind. She did not hate him enough to do that.

Why she should care at all also plagued Sansa's mind. Apparently, Petyr had never intended for anyone to know about her it seemed. Lady Myranda ruined that secret of his and now he brought her all the way to the capital. There was a time when Sansa would have been thrilled at coming here, but now she lived in fear as any wild animal on display in a cage. She was furious at Petyr but at the same time felt an overwhelming need to care for him. It wasn't so much just being ill, but the thought that someone possibly tried to poison him made a protectiveness come out in her. Why? She did not know.

Petyr was going to marry Myranda and Sansa would end up, just as she feared, a governess or cast away to some remote place and forgotten. Petyr was only lustful that night under the house. She was a woman, and if she had let him, he may very well had taken her to bed that night. In the heat of that passion, Sansa was all but consumed by him. To her shame, she probably would have let him have his way, but it was Petyr that stopped and pushed her away.

Now she understood why. He was marrying Myranda and it was also entirely possible that he could have feelings for her. He didn't make love to Sansa in the pool but he clearly ravaged Myranda in the music room. Sansa wondered if they had been intimate since she saw him for the first time at the Vale. Myranda did say they wouldn't have to hide from her father much longer. Did Petyr bring Sansa to attend his upcoming wedding perhaps? The thought made her stomach turn.

Sansa sat next to his bed and wrung out a cool cloth for his forehead. She barely left his side for the last few days. He looked much better today and color began to return to his skin. Sansa didn't know why she felt betrayed. Was it jealousy she felt at the knowledge of him and Myranda? She was beginning to like him and the time he spent with her. Sansa was even hoping he might kiss her again. The way he made her body feel that night was pure bliss. Is that what it felt like with any man or was it because of Petyr and Petyr alone?

Running her fingers through his hair, she dabbed his face, keeping him cool. She didn't know her own heart anymore. Sansa had no reason in the world to care for Petyr. Other than Joffrey and the Lannisters, Petyr had caused her such pain and aggravation in such a short time. She couldn't turn back time and change anything and had to live in the present. This lying, devious man she watched over now was all she had. There was no family left she could call her own and without Petyr, she would be destitute. A poor, educated woman could still make her way in the world, but who would hire Sansa? The skills she possessed would be only good for teaching children or running a household and what family would be willing to take her in?

Looking at Petyr sleeping, she sighed in resignation. If all she was fit to be was a governess and housekeeper than she might as well stay with him. Petyr said himself that he would not send her away. Why would he keep her? Surely, Myranda would put up a fight about that or make Sansa's life miserable. Sansa wasn't sure what bothered her more. Was it only the idea that he was marrying Myranda or that he actually *wanted* to? Did Petyr desire her?

Sansa remembered her own moans of pleasure at his touch and could still hear Myranda's lustful voice in her head. He clearly had no problem making love to her before marriage. *Marriage*. That word hurt because even a lady of Myranda's questionable reputation could still marry well enough. No gentleman would marry Sansa for it would degrade him. She was pretty and they would try to sample her wares or pay for them as mistress but they would never treat her like a lady or make her a wife.

Petyr was a man with a terrible reputation and only climbed as high as he did through manipulation and money. Not even a rake, such as himself, would consider a woman like Sansa. He flirted and kissed her of course, had his fun and games but now he was to be a married gentleman and Sansa wondered how long it would take before he sent her packing.

She had pulled the curtains keeping the harsh sunlight out. Before his bedroom smelt of herbs, liniments and the wood burning in the hearth, Sansa noticed it smelled very much like his room back in Harrenhal. His room was richly decorated with dark woods, gold and burgundy tones. The entire house was almost a mirror image of the house she left by the lake. Petyr had a particular style and both homes were filled with it.

She had wandered the townhouse looking at length at all his beautiful paintings, sculptures and the perfectly tailored garden outside. Lady was able to spend time outside without fear of losing her to the city streets. The servants thought it was odd at first, but never said a word about the dog she brought with her. Sansa believed that none of them knew what a wolf was, let alone seen one. The house was large and felt lived in as compared to Harrenhal. Petyr must spend much of his time in Kings Landing, she surmised. The parlor was decorated in soft violet and all the rooms were filled with color. Petyr liked color, Sansa decided with a smile, and he certainly loved art.

So many paintings hung on the rich damask walls throughout the house. The one in his own bedroom was quite scandalous by the artist Fragonard. "Le Verrou" depicted a young man bolting the door to his lover's bedchamber. The French certainly did not care about shocking people. So many works of art had begun to make their way to other countries due to the revolution taking place. They overthrew their king and Sansa wondered when her own countrymen would wake up to the tyranny of their monarchy. Her father's failed attempt ended before it really begun and she hated that her uncle and aunt did not stand with family and instead bowed low to keep their lands and titles. Now years later, Sansa was a kept woman masquerading as a ward to one of the most disreputable men in the country.

Sansa didn't want to admit it, but she liked Petyr when she had him to herself. He seemed a different man when they were alone in Harrenhal. She was warming to him and felt that he was opening up to her a little more every day. Had he left her there, no doubt Sansa would have missed him.

He was hiding something under the house, something treasonous enough to perpetuate lies in order to keep his secrets safe. Harrenhal was out of the way of most important eyes of the ton and a better place to hide things than in the capital. Petyr said he didn't trust anyone and that included her. Sansa knew she couldn't betray him, for they would kill her right along with him. For better or for worse, she was stuck with him and his secrets. How he expected to keep Myranda in the dark was a mystery, or the woman was his partner in crime.

A few men had come to see him since they came to Kings Landing but Brune turned them away. The Marquess was far too ill to receive any visitors. In fact, Petyr had barely spoken a word in his delirium and most of the day, Sansa tried to keep him comfortable until one of the maids would take over and let her rest.

Suddenly, his head leaned into her hand and Sansa stopped her ministrations.

"Have you picked out my coffin yet, sweetling?" his voice rasped in the dim room.

Sansa smiled. Even in illness, Petyr still managed to keep sarcasm alive and well.

"No. Too expensive," she answered taking the cool cloth down his neck. "I told Brune to put your body in a burlap sack and throw you in the dirt. I'll need all the money I can steal from you."

Petyr laughed heartily at that.

"Sweetling, when I die, I'll make sure you are well taken care of," he grinned.

"Oh? Why didn't you tell me sooner? I would have killed you ages ago," Sansa replied with mock seriousness.

"You didn't do a very good job," he chuckled. "Next time, use a stronger poison in your tea."

"What? I would never... I did not do this to you," she sat appalled at his words.

Petyr took her hand and kissed it lightly.

"I'm teasing, my dear," he muttered. "When you kill me, you won't need a poison. A stab to the heart will do."

Sansa pulled her hand away. What did he mean by that?

"Here, help me up," he asked weakly.

Sansa pulled him up to sit and Petyr stretched, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I need to get out of this room..." he groaned.

"But the doctor said..."

"I don't care what the bloody doctor said. I need to get out of this room before I go mad," he retorted testily pulling the covers off him and placing his feet on the rug. His night clothes were rumpled and sweaty.

"My lord..."

"Petyr, *please*..." he sighed.

"Petyr, what if you get sick again? The doctor said it could have been fever, yes, but that he thought maybe you ate something foul or... well, that... someone might have..."

"Poisoned me?" he smirked at her shocked expression. "Don't worry, my dear. I wondered as much but I doubt it."

"You're so sure are you?" Sansa asked skepticism.

"Love, when you're in the business of politics, trade and intrigue," he huffed as he stood up, "you would be wise to expect such things."

"A great many people want to kill you, is that it?" Sansa japed, helping him when he wobbled a bit.

"Funny enough, no," he smiled holding her arm as he walked to the pitcher and basin by the window. "A great many people are not that smart."

"And you are?" she asked pouring cold water into the basin for him.

Petyr splashed this face and neck a few times before Sansa handed him a towel. He stood up and dried himself as the water dripped from his scruffy face. He chuckled throwing the terry cloth over his shoulder.

"Yes," he answered with a smile. "You don't get where I am without *this*." Petyr pointed to his forehead. "Know your enemies as well as you know yourself and never underestimate them."

"And who are your enemies?" she asked slyly wondering if he would actually answer her.

Petyr closed the distance and grinned.

"*Everyone*."

Everyone? If she was his enemy, then why did he save her weeks ago and kept her with him? She couldn't do anything to him. Even if she did, she would suffer his fate as well.

"What does that make me?" she wondered, not realizing she said it aloud.

Petyr moved closer, placing his hands on her waist and studied her.

"A very good question, sweetling," he whispered.

Petyr was so close that she could feel his breath on her face. He was playing with her, Sansa thought. They were deep in the lion's den and Petyr, in his teasing fashion, was still asking if he could trust her.

"Would an enemy nurse you back to health and watch over you for days on end? Surely, an enemy would have just let you die that night at the inn," she muttered back.

"The best foes gain your trust and friendship, before slitting your throat. They help you, give you what you ask for... they seduce and even pretend to love you," Petyr breathed as his lips were so dangerously close.

Sansa's breathing was constricted from her corset making her chest heave. The air in the room was thick and heavy and she had not been this close to him in such a way since that night under the house. The memory of his lips made hers tingle in anticipation. Sansa held her breath and waited to see what he would do. Suddenly, she remembered his lies and that he belonged to Myranda.

"Are you *my* enemy?" she tested him as he stared at her lips.

"My clever girl," he smiled and pulled back. "That's how you must think at all times in this city. No one here is a friend to us. Oh, they can be great actors, playing the part of sincerity, but never believe them. Not for a single moment. Never give them any information that you aren't willing to have passed through the entire ton whether it be true or not. Play the game better than them and never let them get the best of you even if it appears that way. They want you to be weak, to break you, belittle you. Sometimes the best way to play the game is to let them have their way. Let them mock you and find you inferior. When you are not a threat, they will never suspect you of a thing and that is always an advantage. Remember, at all times, you are smarter and have the control. Whatever they say or do, no matter how much it hurts, make it work in your favor. Do you understand?"

Us. It was strange that Petyr made a reference as if it were they against the rest of the ton. Why was he telling her this? Sansa had no illusions that Kings Landing society would be any kinder than the Vale.

"What of your future wife?" Sansa asked before she could stop herself.

Petyr stepped back and sighed.

"Myranda is none of your concern," he ended with a tone of finality. Discussing his betrothed was clearly off the table. Perhaps she was the exception to this rule of his.

Petyr sat down putting his hand to his forehead.

"Well, you are my concern at the moment," Sansa changed the subject quickly, wishing to never speak about Lady Myranda. "Don't pretend you're well yet, because you're not. I'll draw you a bath and have the maids change the linens in here and open the windows to let some fresh air in. I don't want to be nursemaid to you longer than necessary."

Petyr chuckled at her candor and she wanted to smack him at the same time. Friend or foe, Sansa

didn't have a choice with Petyr. She might as well make herself useful and curry what favor she could before he married. If Petyr wanted her to play the game, then she would do just that. She wasn't going to get a better offer anywhere else.

Just as he told her at Harrenhal, Petyr had his townhouse fitted with plumbing. It took a couple of minutes, but finally the water was hot enough as it pumped in and filled the tub. Petyr walked in and Sansa avoided looking at him all together.

"Use the lemon soap, it cleanses better. I'll make you a mint tea to settle your stomach. I told you to eat light this morning but you refuse to listen to me," she blathered on wanting out of this room. "For heaven's sake, don't slip and break your neck. It's bad enough having to deal with your temperament now, let alone you as an invalid."

Petyr picked up the soap, unwrapping it and inhaled deeply.

"Ah, now I know what this scent reminds me of... *you*," he grinned sinfully. "I've been trying to place it for some time. So, as I'm washing I'll know that this is what you used in my tub the day of market."

Sansa turned scarlet. This cad! The idea of him thinking of her like that made her blood boil.

"Well, the next time I purchase soap, I'll be sure to find one made of lavender," she said calmly. "That is Lady Myranda's favorite scent, my lord."

With that, she turned and left the bath closing the door tight. Damn it, Petyr infuriated her sometimes, she fumed while opening one of the windows. He was getting married, why did he keep flirting like that with her? She didn't want to know what he did in the bath.

Sansa went down to the kitchen to make tea and tried to ignore what just happened, sending the maids to change his bed. Married or not, men were still terrible. As their wives bore their children, husbands cheated on them and took mistresses. Some didn't even bother hiding it. They flaunted their mistresses all over town, taking them to dine and theatre, buying them all sorts of luxuries. These women probably didn't have it bad, that is until their patron got bored of them and moved on.

The bell rang and Sansa knew it must be another business caller for Lord Petyr. Brooks was given instructions to tell anyone wishing to see his lordship, that he wasn't taking callers at the moment. The shrill voice that echoed from the foyer made Sansa close her eyes. She directed the maid to take Petyr's tea to his bedroom and walked towards the foyer.

"I'm not just anyone, I am his fiancée," Lady Myranda bellowed at Brooks.

"My lady, please. His lordship is ill and doesn't wish to be disturbed," the butler tried to explain but Myranda was having none of it.

"Ill? My darling is ill? Take me to him," she demanded.

"Lady Myranda. Lord Petyr would not wish to pass his sickness on to you," Sansa said walking towards them. "The doctor expressly said that he is not to leave his room. Perhaps in a day or two. I expect the doctor tomorrow morning and I'll ask if his lordship may receive callers."

Myranda's face was filled with fury and Sansa tried not to smile.

"You," she hissed. "He brought *you* to Kings Landing?"

"Astute as always, Myranda," Sansa replied with cool ease. Somewhere deep in her gut, Sansa enjoyed seeing Myranda riddled with anger... and perhaps a tinge of jealousy? Sansa waved off Brooks, telling him she would handle it.

Myranda crossed the foyer and stood directly in front of Sansa by the staircase.

"You little whore," she sneered. "How did you persuade him to bring you here? You being his ward is complete rubbish. You're his mistress, aren't you?"

"Believe what you like, but I'm only his ward and nothing more," Sansa bristled. "I think his reputation should have you worried about other women in the city. Not me."

Myranda circled her slowly but Sansa refused to let this woman intimidate her.

"Just like your mother and aunt," she whispered nastily. "Tully whores. Don't think I don't know what you're doing."

"Really, Myranda? Calling *me* a whore are you?" Sansa smirked. "I'm the one that is still a virgin."

"Oh, my dear, you don't have to be fucked by a man to be a whore," the brunette sniggered.

"Such lovely language for a lady, I must say," Sansa smiled sweetly.

"Ahhh," Myranda laughed. "Say what you will, but you'll never be a lady, so you can drop the airs, Sansa."

"Coming from a gold digging *lady* such as yourself? I'll take that as a compliment," she retorted holding her ground.

"You're such a naïve and stupid girl, Sansa," Myranda laughed quietly. "Or that is the game you are playing? The delicate, virginal flower? Keeping him interested just enough to give you a roof over your head and pretty gowns? How does that not make you a whore?"

Sansa scowled, "I will not and have not lain with him."

Myranda smiled, "The moment you do, he'll be rid of you. You do know that, right? What? Do you think he'll fall madly in love and marry you? Like all men, they just want to taste a virgin and then the thrill is over."

Sansa's façade was slowly cracking. She didn't want to marry Petyr. He was more trouble than he was worth.

"I'm not the one marrying him for his wealth and titles," Sansa japed and they both knew it was the truth.

"And you were marrying Joffrey for love?" Myranda shot back.

Sansa stood astounded, "That was arranged. I didn't have a choice."

"Ah, but I do and I chose Lord Petyr when other women dismissed him so eagerly because of his heritage," Myranda spoke with a tenderness that threw Sansa off. "I don't deny that his wealth is appealing but you automatically think I don't care for him. Would you have taken him if he asked for your hand before your family became traitors?"

Sansa was speechless. She knew damn well she never would have been allowed to meet with a man like Petyr, let alone her father entertaining any proposal from him.

"Just as I thought," Myranda seethed. "A little hypocrite even now when you'll never be received in any household or hold a respectable position." The brunette paced and suddenly her tone changed. "I have made mistakes but now I have the chance to marry a man that will take me. You think we don't know what we are? I know what he is and vice versa. We're alike he and I and we understand each other. I can't expect you to fathom such a thing. I can't expect you to believe that I actually care for him and want to marry him. I could give him children and a happy life."

"I don't want him, Myranda," Sansa argued, "and he doesn't want me."

"Of course he does, Sansa," Myranda breathed in frustration. "You're beautiful and he's a man. Why do you think I've been so cruel to you? I'm madly jealous."

The two women were silent as they stared at each other and Sansa didn't know what to do or say now.

"Sansa," Myranda sniffed turning away, "I could handle him taking a mistress, as most men do, I'm not blind... but just not you. He fancies you, I can see it. I saw the way he looked at you at Robert's ball and then to find that you're living at Harrenhal..."

"He doesn't," she pleaded. "How many times must I tell you."

"You can't make him happy," Myranda continued. "He will be shunned after how hard he's worked all this time."

"Somehow, I don't think he really cares about what the ton thinks of him," Sansa muttered.

"All men say that, but it's not the truth. They care," Myranda sniveled. "Why do you think father hasn't been able to marry me until now? No gentleman in the Vale wanted anything to do with me. My reputation was in the gutter. But you..."

"Yes, I see what you mean," Sansa sighed. "My reputation is already in the gutter." She looked at Myranda's unshed tears in her eyes and couldn't help herself. "And yet, you have a chance to reclaim yours."

It was Sansa's turn to pace. What was she doing? She didn't really care for him did she? Petyr was arrogant, sarcastic, secretive and a royal pain in the arse, no matter how lovely his kisses were. Sansa knew nothing about this man. God, she had only known him for a short time. Myranda was right, Sansa couldn't marry him if she wanted to. She would be society poison for him. Why would a man want her as a wife anyway? No gentleman in his right mind would want to marry a traitor.

"Myranda, I swear to you," Sansa began slowly feeling a knot in her stomach. "I do not want him. I don't wish to marry him. I have no feelings for him. He is yours completely. He hasn't touched me nor would I ever allow him to. If you do... love him, then I'm the last person to stand in your way."

The brunette smiled and it wasn't the type that normally made Sansa want to flee. Tears streamed down the girl's face as she hugged Sansa with all her might.

"I'm so sorry for being beastly," she cried softly. "I was just terribly jealous. I thought you were going to take him away from me. You're so beautiful and men always gravitate towards you. I mean, I wanted him for his money at first, but I think I've grown to love him. He doesn't mind my past and I could help him with my family name. I want him to succeed... and gloat a bit to the ton about how rich and happy we are."

Myranda pulled away and wiped her eyes, giving Sansa a peck on the cheek.

"Oh, I never should have been so nasty to you. We'll be like sisters, you'll see. Maybe in time, they will forgive and forget and we'll find you a suitable husband too..."

Sansa smiled but her stomach was in her throat and a deep ache resonated in her chest.

"Look at me, I'm a mess. He can't see me like this," Myranda sniffed running to a large oval mirror on the opposite wall.

"You look beautiful," Sansa winced. She needed to get away from Myranda. She wanted the quiet of her room and Lady to hold. The horrible pain she felt was only growing stronger.

The maids came downstairs and told Sansa that Petyr had finished his bath and had been told Myranda was here to see him and to send her up to his private parlor.

"Myranda, I think you should see him," she said softly. "He's waiting for you upstairs."

"How do I look? Will he think I've been crying?" the girl asked.

Sansa pinched her cheeks a little to give them a touch of rosy color.

“There,” she smiled. “You look lovely.”

Sansa watched the brunette practically bound up the stairs to where her lover and future husband awaited. She could barely catch her breath and tears threatened to pool in her eyes. Sansa blinked them back but the heartache was real. There was no denying it. She had lied to Myranda and to herself. She liked Petyr. Sansa couldn't understand why. He made her so angry most of the time and she should hate him. Was it because he really did belong to Myranda? Was she only jealous because she knew that she would never find someone to want her for herself? Maybe Myranda and Petyr was a perfect match. No woman of title wanted him and Myranda suffered the same dilemma. Myranda wanted wealth and Petyr had it in spades. He needed a respectable name and Myranda could give that to him. Petyr was a social climber after all. What could Sansa ever give him other than her body? Nothing. She had nothing to offer any gentleman.

The truth hurt more than Sansa could bear. She belittled Myranda and yet, Sansa was the hypocrite. Would she have said yes if Petyr asked for her hand instead of Myranda's?

Sansa wiped a stray tear away. Petyr kept telling her she was compassionate and kind, well now was her chance to prove it. She gathered Lady from the garden and headed up the stairs. Glancing towards his rooms, the doors were closed and Sansa didn't want to know what was going on inside.

Walking past the landing overlooking the foyer, Sansa would never know that the man in question heard every word the two women had said.

The Libertine

Chapter Notes

Okay... don't kill me on this one. *runs and hides*

Sansa's voice echoed in his head as Myranda fussed over him in the parlor next to his bedroom.

I do not want him

I don't wish to marry him

I have no feelings for him

Petyr watched and listened to the two ladies discussing him in the foyer. Sansa's words hurt but he did not hold it against her. He gave her no real reason to care for him. She couldn't know how he felt considering the situation. If everything went to plan, she would be upset, there was no doubt about that. However, he vowed he would make it up to her in any way he could. He would make her happy.

Listening to the exchange, Petyr almost expected Sansa to glance up and see him, wondering what her reaction would be. Myranda was playing her part better than he expected. He was almost shocked when she whimpered and begged pity as a woman looking for redemption. *Almost.*

Sansa may be naïve but Petyr wasn't. Lady Myranda had not apologized a day in her life, he was willing to bet. She was protecting her assets the best way she knew how. Sansa was a threat and she knew it. Bringing her here to Kings Landing only changed Myranda's game. If she could not scare her away or insult the girl, she would play on her tender heart instead.

Perhaps Sansa saw through Myranda just as Petyr did, but he couldn't be sure. Either Sansa was becoming a better actress or Myranda's arrow of hollow pleas finally found a target. Playing up the fallen woman was right up Sansa's alley, and the Royce girl knew and exploited it. Now, it was just a question of whether Sansa actually believed it. If she did, it went two fold. It only confirmed what he loved about Sansa, her compassion and kindness and that it would make his job easier.

When Lady Myranda knocked on his door and entered, the act from downstairs had disappeared completely. She shut the door and glared at him sitting in his dressing gown by the fireplace. It had been days since he had a drink, and he already downed a glass of brandy before his future wife entered.

"Is it your intent to insult me?" she breathed in anger and Petyr took a sip and let the alcohol burn down his throat.

"I don't know what you mean, my love," Petyr smiled gesturing to the chair across from him. "I'm touched by your concern for my well-being. I rather expected you before now. Did the news take so long to make its way to you or were the parties that exciting?"

"Don't play with me, I know she isn't your ward," Myranda insisted. "If she's your mistress, fine, but send her away. I will not have her here, do you hear me? I will not have it."

"Darling, what does it matter? I have many mistresses in this city alone. In fact, I'm quite positive you have socialized with most of them," Petyr sighed. "Stop with this act. We're both guilty of disrepute."

"Will this end when we're married or should I expect that you'll be spending most of your time gambling and whoring?" she asked with mock politeness.

"Tell me, did you truly presume anything less? You knew what I was. How many men change for their wives?" he japed lightly. "If you believed I would suddenly turn into a man escorting you to garden parties, then you're marrying the wrong man, my dear."

"I expect you to respect me," Myranda barked.

Petyr finished off his drink and gazed at her. Myranda was a very attractive woman. Had he not found Sansa, Petyr thought he wouldn't have had any trouble fucking her.

"And do you respect me when you're giving it out all over town?" he smiled not being able to help staring at her ample bosom threatening to spill out of her dark blue dress. The girl had the audacity to look shocked and it made Petyr laugh. "Ah, you didn't know I knew, did you?"

"It's not what you think," she floundered a bit.

"Oh, it's not what I think but *know*, my dear," Petyr retorted as he poured himself another drink. God, he wanted to get very drunk right now. "Don't worry, I don't hold it against you. You have your vices and I have mine."

Myranda straightened her posture a little even though Petyr could see he made a dent in her armor.

"So, is she to live with us and we have our own lovers, is that it?" Myranda chided him.

"Ah, that is up to you. We both know we're not in love with each other. Ours is a marriage of convenience. We're very similar creatures though. Insulting you would be insulting myself, wouldn't you say?" Petyr grinned and took another large sip.

"Why her? If you must have your mistresses, then do so," the girl eyed him. "I know Sansa, she is still a virgin, undoubtedly. If you haven't fucked her, then why keep her? Just a sick game until she finally breaks? Virgins are boring, Petyr, you should know that. All they do is lie there. But if you must have her, then have her and be done with it. I don't care how many other women you keep, just not her."

"My, my, I never thought you to be the jealous type," Petyr chuckled.

"Jealous?" she grinned wickedly. "I am not jealous of a traitorous, little virgin. I will not have a traitor in my home and raising our children. You're marrying me for my name. I'll not have it besmirched because you want to fuck her."

Myranda had no idea how right she was. Petyr wanted nothing more than to take his little witch to bed and fuck her until she was screaming his name. She quivered under his touch once, and in time, he could make her want him again... but not as his mistress. Sansa would be his wife for Petyr would have no other.

"In fact, I think you have underestimated what you will get with me," Myranda licked her lips and doubled down on her wager she made on this man. She was not going to lose him so easily.

Myranda unlaced her bodice a bit, letting her breasts fill his view. The woman moved towards him and Petyr couldn't help the lust building in his groin. It had been a long time since he had a woman and he was almost drunk enough to consider Myranda's offer.

"You wouldn't even need a mistress," she purred moving between his legs. "A virgin hasn't a clue how to please a man. Know what he needs, what he truly wants in a woman."

Myranda leaned over him and tried to kiss him as her hand slipped inside his robe.

"I'm still rather ill and not up for this little game, pet," he tried not to groan as her hand worked him.

"Hmmm, I beg to differ, my husband," she grinned and bit his lower lip. "I think you're more than up for it. Shall we find out?"

Petyr clenched his jaw fighting the moan that desperately wanted to come out. Her soft hand was skilled as it gripped him up and down. Once her hot, wet mouth engulfed him, Petyr couldn't stop it as he threaded his fingers in her hair and pushed her head further down. God, she was good and was living up to the talk he heard from men at the gambling hells. A few of them actually patted Petyr on the back when news of their engagement was known. Besides the fact, that she was apt to fuck any and every man, at least she would be good in bed, they told him.

He was very close, when suddenly she stopped and leaned up to his face.

"Sansa doesn't want you, but I do," Myranda breathed lifting her skirts. "Lady Beatrice said you were quite the talented lover..."

He felt her silk stockings as her hands guided his up her thighs. They both knew he was aroused and refusing her now would cause serious suspicions in regards to Sansa. It wouldn't be anything different than the women he had bedded before. He felt nothing then and he felt nothing now for the brunette that was teasing his hardness with those, wet folds.

"I want you inside me," Myranda moaned in his ear sinking down on him. "You don't want some little, frightened girl. You need a woman to fuck you."

She rotated her hips and his need to come was too strong. He pushed her off him and pulled her over to the lounge chair. Lifting her skirts, he spread her legs and thrust deep into that waiting heat. It wasn't Myranda he was fucking. Petyr closed his eyes and it was his beautiful redhead he thrust madly into. Sansa's moans filled his ears and the scent of lemons had him dizzy.

"You're mine," he growled feeling his gut clench.

"Oh yes, I'm yours. Make me come, I need to come," she cried out and Petyr dug his fingers into her curls where they were joined making her throb around him. It wasn't Sansa's voice that begged him, it wasn't red hair spread out on the cushion. Quickly, he pulled out spilling onto her skirts but didn't forget to send the brunette over the edge with his fingers.

"Oh dear God," she sighed, shaking under him and Petyr felt sick. He didn't know if it was the brandy, the lingering illness or that he just fucked this girl. His head spun and he needed Myranda to leave immediately.

"Are you alright?" she asked lifting his head. "No, you're well at all are you?"

No, he wasn't well at all. Petyr cursed himself. He never should have said to bring her upstairs. He knew he needed to keep her under control and professing his love would have been idiotic. Myranda wasn't stupid, she would have seen right through him. She knew what she was marrying and trying to act like something he wasn't would have fallen flat. Myranda couldn't know he had feelings for Sansa or any other motive towards her other than the obvious.

Myranda helped him onto the lounge, as he tucked himself back in his pants and tied the dressing gown around his waist once more.

"I over exerted you, didn't I?" she muttered pouring herself a drink. "Well, I say that we'll have to do that more often when you're feeling more yourself."

Petyr watched her right her bodice as well as trying to fix her hair and smiled to himself. If he had

not already fallen for his little witch, Myranda would not have been a terrible match. She was pretty and at least he could have sired a few children from her willingly. She loved fucking, that was clear enough and Petyr wondered how many men had her already. He certainly couldn't trust her. He would have had to keep her here in the capital which probably would not have been a problem. She loved the city life and all the social aspects of becoming a Marchioness. Myranda would probably have spent his money faster than he could make it.

Perhaps the man he was a couple years ago would have been happy with it or keeping his mistresses but now he just couldn't see being married to her at all or continue on with that bachelor life. Petyr hadn't lied when he told Myranda he was not the kind of man to escort his wife to garden parties and host lavish dinners every other night. He loathed the ton and wanted to associate with them as little as possible.

In the long term, there was nothing to be gained after his plans came to fruition. Petyr did not want a silly wife. He wanted some semblance of love and contentment in his later years. It had been too long since he loved anyone and Petyr practically forgot what it felt like. When he took Sansa from Riverrun, something stirred in him. Perhaps it was only a masculine need to protect and care for something so delicate and fragile. She reminded him intensely of Cat, but the feeling was different. He wasn't that naïve schoolboy, in love for the first time. The years had been hard as he promised he would never fall to weakness again.

But how he wanted to feel that emotion that he thought was long dead. Petyr wanted to make her smile, spoil her with anything she wanted just to see that glow in her eyes. He wanted to wake to that sweet face every morning and make love to her every night. When all was said and done, when he no longer had to play this game, Petyr could see himself growing old with her. He could give her children and a simple life with love and respect.

There was no love without trust either, Petyr thought as he watched Myranda with her false concern about him. He didn't trust this girl as far as he could toss her. He couldn't see a mother in her, not one he'd want raising his children. She was cold and full of selfish pretense.

As Sansa cared for him, there was a genuine tenderness. If she hated him, it didn't matter as that born kindness wouldn't allow her to leave him to die. She had to care even if just a little. Her generosity towards the small folk at the market and that she was willing to protect a dying wolf, spoke volumes. Sansa was a good soul, and he was unworthy of her. After all the horror she had been put through, this woman was still loving and compassionate.

Sadly, he wondered how far she would have to be pushed before it broke her. Petyr did not want Sansa to lose that quality he loved so dearly. In the end, she would hate him but more importantly she would be safe. At least he could give Cat one last gift. The pieces were well placed on his chess board and soon it would be time to checkmate his opponents. In one move, that would erase all the players, would Sansa think him a monster? He was risking so much but in the end, it would be a clean slate for those that remained to pick up the pieces of a new life. He had travelled to countries where democracy was thriving or those were in open revolt against the old aristocracy.

Petyr did not deny that he would enjoy turning the tables on the elite. Their rule was soon at an end. In this new world, men like him would be able to play on level ground. He could see it everywhere he traveled. The people were ripe for it even if they did not know it. They were tired of living under the boot of tyranny. He wanted to see those smug faces fall.

"You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?" Myranda huffed in annoyance.

He had almost forgot she was still here. Petyr laid his head back and looked at her. She hated Sansa, that was evident. Perhaps he could use that. She would most likely object to him being seen with her around town. He needed this girl to keep a cool head. Myranda was a vicious little thing but she also wanted status and the wealth he offered. She was not likely to break the engagement and he knew he couldn't and still stay within acceptable standing within the court. Being ostracized now, would ruin everything.

They all knew he was social climbing rake that had already broken so many rules of decorum. Fucking other men's wives and keeping mistresses was one thing, publicly parading a blood traitor as if she were equal to them was another. He needed Myranda to let him do it. Something she would find entertaining due to her hatred and jealousy of Sansa. He couldn't openly throw Myranda over for her and he couldn't be seen as wanting to marry Sansa. Choosing her over a lady, even as promiscuous as Myranda was still unthinkable and suspicious considering his lightning fast rise in court. Lady Myranda, no matter her whorish reputation, was still one of them. Sansa was not. No, it had to be forced on him. A punishment, per se for overstepping his bounds.

"Forgive me, pet. My mind is completely addled with lust and brandy," he smiled. "I daresay, you have become the cure to what ails me. What a pair we could make."

Myranda sauntered over and sat next to him with a wicked gleam in her eye. He leaned up and caressed her flushed cheeks with a grin to match.

"What fool would want any other woman than you?" he lied smoothly.

"Don't lie to me, we don't love each other," she played coolly.

Petyr smirked, "Did I say love? Oh no, darling. Love is overrated and for silly children. We both don't believe in such things. We are very much alike, you and I. We like fucking, gold and beautiful, expensive things. Who needs love?"

He ran his hands up her waist bringing her closer to him. Petyr nipped at her lips before kissing her deeply.

"Get rid of her," she murmured against his lip.

"Oh, I will. I haven't had my fun, yet," he chuckled kissing down her neck. "You play your little games, let me have mine."

"What game?" she moaned when he found a pulse point.

"Don't play coy," he teased. "You like to play with those modest gentlemen just as much as I enjoy turning those proper ladies into depraved wantons. Such debauchery is addicting. You're the only lady of quality that knows what her cunt is for and isn't ashamed in taking such pleasure. I fully intend to make you scream and writhe on our wedding night that you will never want another cock inside you."

"You're seducing her?" she laughed bitterly but gasped when he lightly bit her neck.

"I'm seducing you, you're seducing me but we're to be married so it's not quite the same game," Petyr japed, his hand finding its way under her skirts. "I thought, why not one more little challenge before the wedding? I managed to get both the duchess and Lord Tully to disown her. I wanted to see how long it would take me to break her. Do you think she would spread her legs for a night at the opera?"

Petyr pressed his fingers into her making her gasp.

"You are positively cruel," she groaned. "Well, her mother was a whore, so it's no surprise..."

"Yes," he pumped his hand harder. Myranda definitely liked to be fucked. "I never did like any Tully and then add in the arrogance of the Starks... it was great fun watching them all tumble down from their pedestal. But I don't rape women, I like to play with them. However, Sansa is proving to be a little more difficult than I thought. Apparently new dresses didn't do the trick. Obviously, a traitorous virgin has a higher price on her cunt. I don't see why. It's not as though she'll ever marry. What should I do, my pet? Give your husband some advice?"

"She won't give it you, she's too high and mighty. You'd think she would have learned her place after she was spared from execution. I would bet anything she still thinks some knight is going to come and save her," Myranda laughed viciously.

"Do I detect a wager?" Petyr chuckled lowly and worked her dripping quim harder.

"You'd have to make her fall in love with you, and you'll never do it," she moaned. "Oh god, that feels so good."

"Ah, you doubt my skills, do you?" he teased and slowed his hand making her whimper in frustration. "I bet I can do it by His Majesty's Grand Ball, what say you?"

"I don't care, just make me come again, damnit," she begged.

"I love hearing you beg for me to finish you off," Petyr japed not letting her have it.

"What do I get if you lose?" Myranda growled.

"I'll send her to some convent or remote place... to please my future bride," he smiled, picking up the pace again. "And if I win?"

She was bucking against his hand now and he knew she wasn't going to last much longer.

"What do you want?" she moaned harder.

"I want you do give up that young footman of yours, I'll not have my wife fucking the servants," he grinned madly at her shocked face. "I don't want other men touching what is mine," he lied but the devious smile on her face was everything. She believed he wanted her, thinking it gave her power over him. "I will give you everything you desire. Gowns, jewels, riches... whatever pleases you. But you must be mine alone."

"You're a cruel man, I knew you to be a scoundrel but this is positively horrible to do to her," she gasped and her eyes rolled back. "I love it because either way I win."

"Really?"

She was coming hard and clenched her thighs, trapping his hand as he brought her down.

"If she falls in love, then she'll be devastated when you marry me. So you see, I win," Myranda laughed. "Darling, you could not have given me a better wedding present. I don't even care if you fuck her. How do you win so often at gambling when you make terrible wagers like this?"

"Maybe I just like to play the game, darling," he teased. "How often does a man's bride agree to him seducing another woman for pure entertainment?"

He pushed her up and wiped his hand on his dressing gown. He'd have it washed immediately and take a bath. Petyr didn't want to smell like sex or her. He detested the scent of lavender, and just as Sansa had told him, it was clearly Myranda's favorite.

"Now, go be a good girl for a week," he winked. "One of us needs to maintain a virtuous reputation for now. Afterwards, everyone will believe you've made me into a decent man and I promise I'll play the role of doting and respectable husband in public and we can be whatever we want in private. What wonderful gossip that would be?"

"Maybe I made the right decision to marry you after all," she said playfully and kissed him before leaving and shutting the door behind her.

This was going to be easier than he hoped, Petyr chuckled. Just as he thought, no one was going to believe he honestly took on Sansa as his ward. Myranda now would let him parade her rival around town, believing his maliciousness. Lord Royce and Lysa would be outraged and the ton would gossip endlessly on how he was insulting his future wife by bringing a traitor into their circles. Myranda would insist on the marriage even if her father objected due to Petyr's rakish behavior. Knowing Royce, he would sell his daughter to a pirate if he thought the price was right. They both knew he could not marry Myranda before and Petyr was paying handsomely to take her off his hands.

Petyr was gambling quite a bit in this charade, but he knew he had made himself indispensable to King Joffrey. He had tripled revenues and trade making Joffrey very wealthy as well as others

within the court. Petyr had made headway with the Riverlands and trade between the Vale and the North. The Lannisters couldn't afford to strip him of title and power because he was fucking a young girl. Money had perceived power was far more important to them.

If it worked, they would see him as rising too high and getting a little arrogant, enough to flaunt someone like Sansa as his mistress. If he was lucky, since he kept his intentions towards Lady Myranda quiet until the engagement was announced, they would consider his marriage to an old family too presumptuous for a lowly man like him. Joffrey granted him Harrenhal and the title of Marquess and Lord Paramount, but gaining more standing by marriage would hopefully be too much for this social climber in their eyes. Petyr could be named a duke and the ton would still patronize him, he laughed to himself.

Now, he had to deal with Sansa. If he could shield her as much as possible, he would need to find a way. She would also object to him escorting her around town believing Myranda would be upset or perhaps not with that little scene downstairs. Petyr would have to test the waters. It mattered not, he was going to enjoy every moment of strolls in the park, visiting the gallery, dining and taking her to the theatre. Petyr knew she had never been and with her love of music, he couldn't wait to see her at her first opera.

Reading his letters this morning, he knew the new ball gowns he had ordered before leaving Harrenhal, would arrive soon. Sansa would be a vision and he was going to flaunt this beauty for all to see. The challenge would be keeping his hands off her until he could make her his wife. Petyr was so close to taking her to bed that night. He wanted to do this right. He would not make a whore of her. She would be his wife when he made love to her for the first time. Sansa would be the mother of his children and those lovely thoughts steeled his resolve. Yes, he was a selfish man. She would be his and that was the end of it.

Now, as he stood up and gazed at his rumpled appearance in the gilded mirror, he needed to take another bath and wash off Lady Myranda.

David & Goliath

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the wait. This month has been hell for me. I haven't had any time to write. In fact, this chapter isn't very long either. I'm hoping to pop out another one very soon and get this story back on track with more regular posts.

I have some good and bad things... depending on how you look at them... coming in the following chapters and then the story takes a different turn. Thanks for sticking with me.

Almost a week had passed since the confrontation with Lady Myranda as Sansa took tea in library with Lady. It had only been a few weeks, but Lady seemed to grow quickly and had made Sansa, unequivocally her new mother. . . and Petyr, her adopted father of sorts. Sansa was a bit jealous of the attention Lady gave him sometimes. She would paw at his bedroom door begging to be let in. When they were together after dinner, just as they tended to do at Harrenhal, Lady would lay at his feet instead of Sansa's.

Petyr was appearing healthier every day even to taking visitors in his study. It was always business but at least she no longer had to refuse people who came calling. Strangely, Myranda only came back yesterday to see him, but it was brief unlike the last time. Sansa did not want to know what went on inside his room that day. The maid had joked that Lady Royce looked rather ruffled upon leaving not realizing how that news made her mistress feel. How exactly did she feel about it? Sansa didn't trust Myranda but her revelation did give her pause. Sansa loathed the way she was unfairly judged and treated by society and yet she was doing the same to Myranda. Perhaps, she was just taking the opportunity to finally find a husband that wanted her. That wasn't such a bad thing. She was right in a way, Petyr would be one of the few that wouldn't judge Myranda's past, he being an outsider himself. Maybe, it was for the best, the two of them, but it didn't make Sansa feel any better.

There were quiet times between them at Harrenhal, and little moments that Sansa actually enjoyed Petyr's company. In those moments, he was different with her, gentle and sweet. Sansa did not realize she was liking that side to him until Myranda and her father arrived that day.

He had no other companionship than you, that's all it was. He has his future wife now and you're exactly where you expected to be.

Sansa sipped her tea and petted Lady's head that slept on her lap as her white body stretched out on the sofa. Oddly, the servants here did not question once about the animal the Marquess brought with this new young lady. The household was rather welcoming but kept to themselves and that barrier between servant and master, leaving Sansa rather lonely once again. Petyr had kept to himself for the past few days busy with business matters. A few large packages arrived from what seemed a boutique and Sansa wondered what Petyr had purchased for Myranda.

They must be for her since he never mentioned it at all. Sansa's chastised herself. She had many beautiful things Petyr bought her, she certainly did not need anything else. It was funny how she did not want him to buy her anything in the beginning, now she was feeling a twinge of covetousness that he was probably buying lovely things for his bride to be. When they would be married, she did not know and dared not ask. It could very well be soon and Sansa tried to figure out how they would all interact in this house together. Myranda wept and told Sansa the reasons why she was so cruel, that same anger and jealousy for a rival. If she was to be believed, the brunette was not as mean as she appeared and perhaps it wouldn't be too terrible. That is, if Sansa was telling the girl the truth that day in the foyer.

I have no feelings for him.

No, Sansa thought, setting down her cold tea, You do not want him. You were only craving companionship as well, considering you do not have any friends or family anymore. Petyr still has a dark streak that frightens me. He has a fiancée now and what was in the past must stay in the past. Accept the new situation and try to make it bearable. If all goes well, maybe Petyr will send you back to Harrenhal and they can stay here. You may only see them a couple times a year for Myranda will probably insist on living in Kings Landing.

Lady yawned and stretched languidly. She was bored, Sansa knew. The wolf couldn't run outside and Sansa couldn't really take her for walks. Petyr wouldn't allow Sansa outside the house without him chaperoning her and he wasn't escorting her anywhere anytime soon. They were regulated to the garden and the house. Even Sansa was beginning to feel the claustrophobia. Here she was in the capital, the place she was dying to travel to, and spent her days indoors. Frankly, Sansa did not know what she could possibly do here considering her station now. Petyr was right, she couldn't do a thing without him as an escort and where in the world would he take her? It wouldn't do him or Myranda any good to have Sansa tag along with them on outings.

Once again, Sansa wandered the house. Her days were spent reading, playing the piano or staring at his many paintings. Just as in Harrenhal, Petyr had an eye. Most of the works gave a little piece of him away if anyone was willing to really look.

From the Boucher in her former bedroom and others at Harrenhal, Sansa recognized artists such as the risqué painting by Fragonard in his own bedroom, to Géricault's lovers and even Natoire's depiction of Hades and Persephone. Hades wanted the young girl and kidnapped her taking her to

the underworld, making her his queen. This painting was quite different as Sansa often came to gaze at its beauty. Persephone was not weak and afraid. She was empowered as Queen of the Underworld and sat contentedly next to her husband, Hades, as his equal. Persephone was always depicted as this young, naïve girl, but she was truly a powerful woman even in her realm below.

Yes, Petyr was a romantic and tried very hard not to show it. Sansa truly believed he didn't choose art purely to impress visitors to his home. He chose pieces that spoke to him and revealed a tiny bit of who he was. Even the décor at Harrenhal were hints at places he traveled. Petyr liked color and variety and her certainly had a passion for art and music. He wasn't all business and money. He liked the finer things in life, even by his own wardrobe. Petyr only had the best. The finest silks and satins. His waistcoats were embroidered with detail and sported the best tailored clothing a gentleman of royalty could wish for. The wardrobe he had made for her was exquisite. Surely, he would need to fit his future wife with something better than what he gave his ward.

Perhaps Miranda knew him better than Sansa thought she did. Maybe she had already glimpsed the man behind the mask and grew to care for him. All three of them were outsiders in a strange way and soon they would be thrown together, but for how long? No matter how hard Sansa tried not to think on it, that nagging little voice was always there. Sansa never became too comfortable in her surroundings with that thought lingering in her head. How long did she have with Lord Petyr Baelish?

Sansa let Lady out to the garden for a while and walked to Petyr's study to ask him what he would prefer for dinner this evening. Save for the fire, the room was empty. Sansa stoked the dying embers and saw the decanter of brandy on his desk. Glancing at the door in deliberation, she poured herself a small glass and took a drink. The oaky, vanilla burned her throat as she strolled around the room. Polished dark walnut with emerald green made Petyr's study a bit too dark and foreboding for her taste. It didn't have that warmth as his study at Harrenhal. Sansa didn't dare look through the papers on his desk as the door was wide open. Whatever he was working on, it clearly demanded his time. She sighed and looked at the clock on the mantel and wondered where he was. She could hear Lady barking in the garden for there were squirrels in the trees and it made her smile a bit.

She leaned against his desk holding the amber liquid in the cut crystal glass and noticed a painting she had not seen before. Granted, Sansa did not frequent his study and this was really the first time she was here alone and took a look around. Compared to the other works displayed in his home, this one felt quite out of place. Sansa knew the artist instantly, for her mother had two of his pieces at Winterfell.

Caravaggio. David was holding the severed head of Goliath in triumph over the giant. All of Petyr's artwork coursed with meaning and this was no different. Everywhere else in the house, reflected his romantic and sensual side and yet, here was something dark and gruesome right in front of his desk. Why would Petyr hang such a painting in his study? Sansa took another sip and studied the Baroque style of this hero's story. Did Petyr see himself as David, the small man winning against such odds?

"A most convincing lie, isn't it?" his deep voice sounded from the doorway, startling Sansa.

Regaining her composure, Sansa finished off the brandy and set the glass on his desk.

"A lie?" she asked, keeping her eyes on the painting.

"Yes," he said as he came to stand next to her, gazing at the work of art. "It is a lie, can't you see?"

Sansa didn't understand him and searched his face for some answer.

"Well, here David is holding a sword. However, he bested Goliath with pebble and a sling," she offered in explanation.

"True, but it is still a lie, sweetling," Petyr smirked and glanced at the brandy decanter with a questioning.

"So, you're saying the tale is false?" Sansa finally asked.

"All such faerie tales are false, my dear. I would think you do not believe in such ridiculous things," Petyr countered.

"What is so wrong about David beating Goliath? Rather admirable, isn't it? The smaller, weaker man beating the confident and strong with just a tiny rock?" she smiled but wondered why Petyr did not like the story and yet kept a painting of it where he would see it every day.

"Telling children lies and stories such as this is wrong, sweetling. Did tales of romantic princes and castles prepare you for the Lannisters and Joffrey?" he frowned and his eyes returned to the painting with disgust. "Once there was a young boy that believed such stories. He believed that love would protect him, that he could win over the giant like David here. He believed it so blindly that he challenged the suitor of his love to a duel... only David did not win. Goliath cut him down, leaving him for death and the boy's lady love gave her favor to that of a brute she was set to marry out of family honor and duty."

Sansa watched Petyr in fascination and a touch of fear. Such venom dripped from his words that made her curious as to the details behind the hatred emanating off him. Mrs. Cole said he loved her mother as a boy and Uncle Edmure shouted that Brandon should have killed him back then. Uncle Brandon was a large and menacing figure, she was told. A painting at Winterfell had him towering over her father and grandfather. Petyr was supposedly younger than Uncle Edmure and her mother. He was likely younger than Sansa when her family was executed. Did Petyr actually duel Brandon for her mother's hand? He would have been the personification of David.

Goliath cut him down...

Brandon cut me down and left me for dead...

Sansa mustered a bit of courage and took a deep breath.

"Would the boy have fought for love if he knew he couldn't win? Was she worth fighting for?"

Petyr raised his eyebrows in surprise to her question and was silent for a time as he studied her harder than the painting before them.

"Yes," he breathed. "She was worth fighting for. It was a harsh lesson learned."

"A lesson in defeat that you keep on your wall? I don't understand," Sansa muttered.

Petyr smiled thinly, "More as a reminder of the truth, sweetling. That life is not a song, a sonnet or a faerie tale that children learn to their sorrow. Life is harsh and cruel. The strong feed on the weak. One thing I learnt that day... I'll never win playing their game, their rules. I used to believe I was equal and just like them. Even now, with wealth and power... it matters not to them. You should understand this very well over the past few years. You played by their rules and all it has brought you is tears. Play the game, Sansa, but not their game. I pretend and they believe, but I know what I am and what I want. When the time is right, my pebble will hit them like a ton of bricks."

Sansa remembered the hot spring under the house and one word rang in her mind.

Treason

Petyr was playing some kind of game, but what? Clearly something that could get him killed but he was willing to take the risk. Her mother was worth fighting for when he was a boy, what was so important that he was now fighting against? Society that looked down upon him his entire life?

"Where is the lie? From what I see, David is still fighting Goliath," Sansa hesitated, not meeting his eyes. "Perhaps the boy somewhere inside still believes... even if it only a little bit."

Petyr chuckled deeply, "Touché. However, the man is taking a different strategy. I'm not going to fight them. I'm going to fuck them."

Sansa swallowed and didn't know what to say. Petyr wasn't going to elaborate it seemed and she wasn't sure she wanted to know what he was planning.

"It won't bring her back," she breathed.

"Even if it did, it wouldn't matter in the slightest," Petyr rumbled. "That boy is long gone. He died that day." He looked at her with such sorrow. "Just as you did when Joffrey murdered your family."

Sansa couldn't hold his gaze and turned away.

"You and I are so very much alike, Sansa," he whispered taking her shoulders in his hands. "We were both dreamers and romantics until reality dealt us both a harsh blow. Now, we see the world as it truly is. We do not trust anyone or anything. I beg you to remember that while we're here."

"Does that include Lady Myranda?" she asked abruptly.

Petyr released his hold on her and stepped away. "Myranda, as I said once before, is not your concern," he said steadily. "There are things she need not know mainly because I do not trust her father, Lord Royce."

Did Myranda know know of Petyr's plans, whatever they were? Sansa believed that Myranda would have no reason to tell her. Everyone had their secrets.

"Rather difficult to begin a marriage without trust..." Sansa mumbled and realized she said it aloud.

Petyr stepped closer again and eyed her steadfast.

"Do you trust me?"

"I'm not your wife," Sansa answered backing away.

"Alright, if you were, would you completely trust me?" he asked again moving forward until he had her backed against the wall.

"What? I - I... but I'm not," she muttered.

"Would you trust me with your deepest secrets? I know you keep them, sweetling," Petyr smiled blocking her escape and pinning her to the wall. He knew she was keeping things from him? Oh God, that wasn't good, or he was overly perceptive. Could she really trust him? "Do you believe men and their wives are completely honest with each other? Lord Royce is no friend of mine but I needn't hurt my future wife with that knowledge."

Wife. She was beginning to hate that word more and more. Sansa could see some truth in that but it still bothered her that Myranda was going to marry him. What on earth would they talk about? Sansa knew things that Myranda may or may not know. Was she expected to keep it from her?

"I'm trusting *you*, whether you believe it or not, Sansa," Petyr pressured. "I'm asking you to trust me a little. I think I've earned some of it."

Some was definitely the right word. Petyr had done enough in her eyes to mistrust him, regardless of his reasons. In the end, he did do other things in protecting her as well. Then again, she wouldn't be in this mess had he left her with Uncle Edmure to begin with. That didn't matter anymore. What happened from this moment on would decide her future.

Petyr was hiding something and seemingly protecting Myranda from it. Did that mean he cared about her? He was asking Sansa to trust him and frankly, she didn't have much of a choice.

Sansa sighed and conceded to him, nodding her head.

"Fine, what do you want me to do?" she asked numbly.

Petyr tilted her chin up and smiled, "I would like to take you to the Royal Gallery tomorrow, for starters. It's about time both of us get out of this house."

Her face must have been shocked for Petyr started laughing.

"You want to be seen with me? Myranda will not approve..."

"My dear, she and I have already discussed it. It's done," Petyr chuckled and moved back straightening his waistcoat.

"She will be joining us, of course," Sansa stated.

"No, she doesn't care for the gallery as I do. I figured you would like it and she agreed," Petyr lied smoothly. "Firstly, I will not take no as an answer, as if you had a choice to begin with. I'll not have you sulk the entire time we're here either."

"I do not sulk!" Sansa retorted hotly.

"Then stop moping around the house and accompany me into the city," Petyr rolled his eyes. "Good god, woman, you would think I was torturing you."

"But, it would not do you or her well to have the ton gossip because of me," Sansa tried to explain. She wanted to go, most definitely but surely this would end badly.

"Sweetling, if the ton doesn't have something to gossip about, they'll die," he laughed, pouring himself a drink in the same glass she used. "Tomorrow it will be us and the next day they'll find someone else's life to ruin. If you haven't noticed, I have a deplorable reputation in this town as it is. In fact, I do believe you have told me so on several occasions."

Petyr downed the liquid in one gulp and sat down at his desk. He did have a point. Neither Petyr or Myranda had stellar reputations. Still, something in her gut was telling her this was not a good idea. Petyr should have left her at Harrenhal. Myranda was being pleasant now, but what if the gossip became too much to bear? She was trying to fix her reputation, not make it worse because of a kindness to a traitor. Petyr was a fool if he believed otherwise.

Sooner or later, if they didn't know already, Kings Landing society would be bustling about the Marquess' new ward. If Petyr and Myranda were truly being kind, it would backfire on them eventually. Sansa predicted it wouldn't be long before he sent her away. Perhaps it would be a blessing. Sansa had no friends here. At least back at Harrenhal, she had Mrs. Ames and the servants and wouldn't have to hide behind closed doors all the time.

"When do you expect me to be ready tomorrow?" she sighed.

"Eleven, should do," he eyed her suspiciously. "I do expect one thing, Sansa..."

"Yes?" she answered turning towards the door.

"The pleasure of your company," Petyr smiled. "Do us both a favor and wash that sour look off your face and try to enjoy the day."

A Rose By Any Other Name

Chapter Notes

Oh, the angst..... I hate it but love it. LOL

Lady wasn't happy at being left behind today, Sansa smiled as the carriage drove through the center of Kings Landing. As much as she wanted to take Lady to the park or anywhere outside Petyr's home, she knew it was virtually impossible. The look in the wolf's eyes were that of frustration and sadness and Sansa felt terrible for her. However, she couldn't deny the excitement she felt as Petyr helped her into the carriage. Sansa didn't realize how isolated she felt until they were on their way into the busy city.

"It's good to see you smile," his voice interrupted Sansa's thoughts.

"Oh, am I?" she lied but couldn't help the blush on her cheeks.

Petyr was in a good mood this morning as they broke their fast. It seemed he was dying to get out of the house as much as she. Sansa gazed out the window. The city was just as chaotic as she expected. Vendors selling their wares, numerous riders, carriages and carts filled the cobblestone streets. It was unseasonably warm today in the southern capital and Sansa wondered as to how much snow Harrenhal had now. This morning, Sansa left her wool pelisse and opted for her shawl instead. How strange it was to wear a shawl in mid-November. The warm southern winds and water kept the climate here cool but not the winter chill she expected.

Sansa heard the call of merchants on the streets and kept her attention to the city life as they passed by. She could feel Petyr's gaze on her the entire time as if he seemed interested in her reaction to the city. Petyr's townhouse was in the southeastern and fashionable part of town as they made their way into the heart of the city. From here, Sansa could see the royal palace on the shore of Blackwater Bay. It sprawled, in its grandeur down the coast line and Sansa couldn't help but wonder what her life would have been if she had married Joffrey. She would have been a crown princess. Now Lady Margery was set to marry and become queen of Westeros. It didn't surprise Sansa in the least that it could be Lady Margery. She was very beautiful, so Sansa heard; clever and elegant and would fit the role well. Lady Margery was rumored to be kind and Sansa hoped the woman knew what she was getting into with Joffrey and the Lannisters.

"Ah, the palace," Petyr mused. "Do you regret not being a princess, sweetling?"

Petyr's unsettling talent for mind reading made her lips quirk into a half smile.

"No," she emphasized with a laugh.

"Clever girl," he grinned. "Lady – I mean Queen Margery will have quite the task in taming that boy."

Sansa turned to him in surprise, "They're already married?"

"Oh yes, about a fortnight ago," he offered simply.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Sansa wondered.

Petyr looked out the window and added casually, "Ah, I didn't think you would be quite that interested, my dear. Besides, it doesn't really matter who the king marries at this point."

"You don't believe the Tyrell's will have any influence on the throne?" Sansa scoffed. For someone that seemed to take pride in knowing everything about everyone, this was a new development.

"Margery is harmless enough... her grandmother, the Dowager Duchess is very interesting. Don't let her age fool you, she is far from feeble," Petyr chuckled.

"It's not as though I will be meeting her anytime in the future," Sansa smirked and returned to gazing out her window.

"One never knows, sweetling," Petyr mused. "Always keep your guard up in this city. You never know who you'll bump into."

"Play my part, is that it? Humble and grateful ward to my generous benefactor?" Sansa rolled her eyes.

"Yes, quite," he smiled.

"Whatever it takes to get me out that house, I suppose," she grumbled under her breath and Petyr laughed heartily.

"We both needed an outing, my dear. Myranda will join us for supper tonight so let's not ruin the day with bickering. I plan to fully enjoy myself," he teased. "With that said, stay aware of your surroundings. No one here is to be trusted."

"Worried, I will accidentally spill your secrets to some handsome young man that attempts to catch my eye?" Sansa teased back.

Petyr chuckled but his eyes narrowed slightly, "Try as you might, but remember your situation,

sweetling. *I am your only friend here.* Without me, you'll surely be sinking in quicksand if you haven't been sold off to a brothel first."

"And bringing me here isn't going to cause *you* any trouble?" she countered not letting him win this little battle.

"Not if you play along, love," Petyr grinned. "Come, enough of this. It's a beautiful day."

The carriage had come to a stop at a large building with stone columns and carvings that reminded Sansa of Greek temples in her father's books. Petyr exited and waited with his gloved hand stretched out to her. Sansa decided to leave her frustrations and suspicions in the carriage, taking his hand and stepping out into the bright sunlit walkway. Trees here still had their leaves even though they were bathed in reds and golds. The gardens were lovely with expertly trimmed hedges and topiaries.

Petyr donned his dark grey hat that matched his top coat. Even during the day, he was immaculately dressed as any man Sansa had ever known. Petyr took pride in his finely tailored clothes and appearance. The streaks of grey were almost hidden by his hat and made him look younger, she noticed. Petyr was rather handsome in his own way. If he were nearer her age, would she have taken note of him before knowing his reputation?

Those grey-green eyes smiled in amusement as he offered her his arm. Sansa paused for a moment to adjust her wide-brimmed hat with flowers and ribbons in the soft breeze. Taking his arm at last, he led her up multiple tiers of granite steps. Members of society passed them as gentlemen tipped their hats and ladies nodded. Petyr knew some by name and gave a passing greeting. Sansa didn't know what to expect but it wasn't this. These people either didn't know who she was or probably believed she was just another one of his mistresses and did not care.

Two gentlemen greeted them with enthusiasm and Sansa realized they must be involved with Petyr in some sort of business. She stood quietly and tried not to draw any attention to herself.

"Baelish, I must say, you always have the loveliest ladies on your arm," one man laughed and both Petyr and Sansa caught his meaning. Sansa expected Petyr to play her off as one of his mistresses for certainly a man wouldn't say such a thing to a known lady of the ton.

"May I introduce, Lady Sansa, my ward," Petyr turned to her with a smile.

Both men looked astonished. Apparently, not everyone knew of this arrangement. Perhaps Miranda had not told a soul about them. Sansa was certain she would be greeted with some kind of hostility and disrespect early on.

"Lady Sansa? Ned Stark's girl? Oh Baelish, you didn't," one man tutted in amusement.

The other, however, was quick to bow and excuse himself only acknowledging Petyr in the courtesy.

"Is there a problem? She recanted publicly, did she not? I can't see why one must hold a grudge over a woman," Petyr turned to smile at her, "... so beautiful and kind."

Sansa felt her cheeks flame and lowered her head to hide her face under the bonnet.

"Well, if I were you Baelish, I wouldn't keep her here too long before the king finds out. You know his temper..." the man flustered.

"Pssh, he knows my love for beautiful things. Certainly he wouldn't begrudge me, his loyal servant who has brought so much gold into his treasury, the simple pleasures. We're not attending one of his balls, just a day at the gallery. Where is the harm, I ask you?" Petyr chuckled but Sansa couldn't help but fume as she stood still and clutched his arm letting him know her displeasure.

"It's your head, my friend," the man laughed nervously. "I suppose if I were to die, I'd rather have a creature like that to bed first instead of that rancid thing I call my wife. Good day," he smiled and raked his beady eyes down her body making Sansa ill.

Petyr's grasped her arm and held it tightly as she pulled her away towards the entrance. The footman took both their hats and Sansa kept her shawl firmly around her shoulders. She couldn't believe a man would say such lewd things to a lady. What burned her insides is that Petyr let him. He didn't defend her honor. She was only an adornment on his arm and nothing more.

She followed Petyr into the main foyer and was already wanting to leave before seeing one piece of art. The sun streamed through the lead-framed skylights high above into the main gallery. Beautiful southern plants with their large green foliage accented the red damask walls and marbled columns.

Suddenly, he pulled her around a huge plant and hid themselves partially behind the polished pillar of stone from curious eyes.

Petyr was so close she could see just how green his eyes were. His breath was warm and smelled of mint as Sansa thought for a moment that he might kiss her. He hovered for a second before tilting her chin up and Sansa held her breath. She glanced nervously at the plant worried someone might see but they were completely hidden.

"What did I tell you before leaving the carriage about the people here?" he breathed.

"Don't trust anyone," Sansa muttered staring at his lips.

"Very good," he smirked and licked his lips in thought. "That man is a boil on a boar's arse. Pay him no attention. It was just smoke and mirrors, Sansa. I have a reputation, as you know. I'm only keeping up appearances."

"Are you?" she breathed. "Just keeping up appearances?"

There was something in his eyes that flashed for a moment and then it was gone.

"Hmm, well, I must admit I'm toning it down some," he smirked as his eyes never left her mouth. "Sooner or later I will need to become the loyal husband for... Lady Myranda's sake."

"So, I'm supposed to settle for insults and disgusting gossip of being your mistress, is that it?" Sansa held her ground. "You could have left me in Harrenhal for that without having to subject me to it. Do you wish that for me?"

Petyr took her gloved hands in his and held them for a moment in silence.

"Sweeting, what I'm trying to say, inarticulately, is that the ton will see you as any man's mistress instead of the lady you are," he explained quietly. "That you're with me is of no real consequence. I'm known for it and I'm sorry. A tiger can't exactly change his stripes."

"You didn't answer me," Sansa pressed again. "Why did you bring me here? As I said before I'm going to become a problem for you and Myranda just with my presence. You should have left me for the winter."

Petyr brought her fingers to his lips and smiled gently.

"No," he whispered. "I couldn't leave you alone for months. I trust you but that doesn't mean I trust anyone else in the Riverlands knowing I have a beautiful and virtuous girl living all alone for the winter. A young woman, unchaperoned? No, no, no...."

He was quiet and Sansa looked around again hoping no one noticed them hiding here. That would be terrible gossip for which he would not be able to talk his way out of.

"If you wish to go back home, I'll take you. I rather had plans to take you to a few places since you've always wanted to come to the capital. You needn't worry about Myranda, as I said, we've discussed it," he finally released her hands and searched Sansa's face for an answer.

Sansa hesitated, he was beginning to know her too well. Petyr knew damn well she wanted to come to the gallery. Now his words piqued her curiosity. Where else did he want to take her?

"Well, we're already here," she started and saw the smile grow on his face. "It would be a waste not to see all this."

Petyr moved past her and peered around the plant, looking for an opportunity. His hand told her to stay put for a moment as he walked out and waited. A flick of his wrist told her it was safe and Sansa followed him further until they stood in front of a whimsical scene of cherubs, Pan and Psyche in a garden. Pastorals didn't seem to impress him that much, Sansa guessed, when he took her arm and moved to the next painting.

The gallery was enormous and it was rather interesting observing other patrons just as much as the art itself. Some people were aficionados and others look bored to tears or even overly critical. There weren't too many people and Sansa was grateful. Only a handful of times did gentlemen or ladies stare at her and Petyr. Two ladies were obviously whispering about them and a couple of men did a double take. Occasionally, someone would greet Petyr casually but thankfully, it was brief.

Sansa was right about Petyr. He was well educated and loved art. Almost every painting he knew something about the artist or the work itself pointing out little details. Time passed slowly and Sansa was immersed in his voice and storytelling. She was happy that he dominated the conversation and learned quite a bit. Certain styles and techniques that artists copied from each other, the time periods of pieces. He said there was quite a romanticism about current artists today in their use of color and themes. Sansa was almost drunk on his words as they slowly moved from piece to piece.

Sansa stood in front of a beautiful woman lounging in a blue-green dress with peach rosettes. She was captivating with her silvery blonde hair and air of elegance that Sansa couldn't tear her eyes away.

"I see you have found the counterpoint to the painting in your room back home," she could hear the smile in Petyr's voice. "Madame de Pompadour. She is rather striking isn't she?"

She stared at the French king's mistress, studying the woman's face. She was relaxed in her position not only in the portrait but her position in life. She was a woman in charge of her life and Sansa was envious.

"Only a king's mistress, so favored, would have portraits such as this," he admired the work. "There are several of her from what I understand. A beautiful and powerful woman. Knew her position and how to use it to her advantage."

"A king's mistress would never sit for a portrait in this country," Sansa japed. She couldn't imagine the kind of mistress that Joffrey would have as it was. The French court weren't as harsh to such women it seemed. Here, such a thing would never happen.

"Right you are," Petyr spoke in quiet praise and echoed her thoughts in a whisper, "Joffrey could never get a woman so beautiful, don't you agree?"

Sansa stifled a laugh with her hand and dared not look at him, afraid she would burst. Petyr pulled her hand down and stared at her strangely that made Sansa blush for the hundredth time today.

"You have never sat for a portrait, have you sweetling?" he asked serenely and it surprised her.

"No," she replied. "Father was going to commission one when I was introduced to society but then Queen Cersei said a royal portrait would be made instead... well, as you can see, that never happened. There's an old portrait of mother at Riverrun. Mrs. Cole said I always looked like her... and.."

"Shame," he said studying her. "Nothing would be more beautifully immortal than you."

Sansa didn't know how to respond to that. Shouldn't he be saying that about his future wife?

"You should have Myranda's portrait commissioned," Sansa lied. "Wouldn't she be lovely in blue?"

In a heartbeat, Petyr's demeanor changed and that congenial façade took over instantly.

"Why yes, that would be a lovely gift," he replied softly but there was something in his tone that didn't sound right. "Thank you for suggesting it. Yes, a wedding portrait would be something she might like."

"Do you have a likeness?" Sansa couldn't stop herself from asking.

"Me? Ah, you're too generous, my dear," he chuckled. "This old face has seen better days. Even when I first came into my wealth, it never occurred to me to have a portrait. Who did I have to impress? Unlike some of these stuffed shirts," Petyr glanced at other lords in the gallery, "I don't need to inflate my ego more than it already is."

"Now that you're to marry... and you *are* Marquess and the Lord Paramount – well, you might reconsider?" Sansa pressed him a little further.

Petyr seemed to ponder it but his eyes were full of mirth and Sansa couldn't stop the smile on her face. Yes, she liked Petyr when he was like this.

"Hmm, you think a good artist could deliver a miracle and make me handsome and ten years younger?" he japed and Sansa laughed loudly but quickly stifled it when people took notice of them.

"You're not ugly, my lord," she teased casting her eyes to the floor. Sansa didn't want him to see right through her.

Petyr put a hand to his chest and frowned playfully, "But not handsome either. Oh, a compliment in reverse."

"That's not what I meant," Sansa shushed him not wanting him to make a scene.

He chuckled taking her arm and glancing at their observers. "Yes, well, that's about as close to a compliment I've had from you, so I will take it most happily."

Petyr took her to lunch at a restaurant with an adjoin greenhouse garden. He asked for a private table and they dined quietly away from judging eyes behind lush greenery with the scent blossoms in air. With the exception of the rude men, it had been almost a perfect day. Petyr was every bit the gentleman Sansa could have asked for such an outing. He was pleasant and charming and made her feel as if she were the only woman in the room. She couldn't even imagine his rakish side right now. Petyr acted with ease as if he'd been a well brought up gentleman his entire life. How would it be to tour the city with him without the sneers and gossip of society? Sansa had almost forgotten he was engaged to be married. This outing felt as if Petyr was actually courting her rather than a man with his ward.

They waited for the carriage to be brought around to take them home and Sansa felt a twinge of disappointment. She didn't want it to end just yet. Today, Petyr belonged to her and once they stepped inside those doors, the magic would be gone. He was still going to marry Myranda and Sansa would be a spinster for the rest of her life. There was a tiny ache in her chest and didn't know from whence it came.

"Wait here, I'll return in a moment," Petyr told her by the lamp post. Sansa wrapped her shawl around her for the air was turning a bit chilly in the late afternoon. Hopefully, he wouldn't be long.

Sansa watched carriages and riders pass as busy people wandered the walkways where shops awaited patrons. She saw a little girl in a floral dress and matching bonnet throwing her dolly in the air as her father caught it and gave it back to her. Sansa moved from the lamp post to continue watching them as they moved down the opposite side of the street. It reminded Sansa so much of her father. He played with wooden swords with Arya and let Sansa be the little princess.

A loud whinny and strong arms pulling her back made Sansa shriek as fast moving horse and cart almost hit her. A man held her tightly as they both fell to the ground tearing her pretty dress in the process.

"Miss, are you alright? Are you hurt?" the kindly voice asked in desperation.

The man moved quickly trying to help her up and Sansa saw the face of a very handsome young man. He was blonde with sea blue eyes and couldn't be much older than her years.

"I'm alright, yes," Sansa mumbled and saw just how close she had come to being hit. How far did she wander from the lamp post into the street? How did she not pay attention? The man in the cart was yelling at her for being in his way as the young man shouted back that he could of killed her but Sansa couldn't hear what was being said as shock set in.

The young man helped Sansa up, inspecting her for any damage when Petyr came dashing holding a large bouquet of flowers.

"Sansa! Good god, are you hurt?" he gasped out of breath, looking her over.

"No, it was stupid really. If it hadn't been for..." Sansa looked at the blonde who seemed to be a little disappointed that Petyr arrived to her aid. "I'm sorry, may I have your name, sir?"

"This is Sir Harrold Hardyng, ward of Lady Waynwood," Petyr supplied with a strange tone before the young man could answer.

"My lord," Harrold tipped his head in respect. "The last time we spoke was at Gulltown... a few

years ago was it?"

"Returned from abroad, I see," Petyr mentioned nonchalantly as his attention was solely on Sansa. "My dear, are you sure you're not hurt?"

"Really, my lord, just shaken. I didn't see him..." she mumbled looking at the horse cart and Petyr began yelling at the man.

"She just came out of nowhere, m'lord... I barely had time to stop. I didn't mean to hurt the lady," the man flustered at the Marquess.

"Here, I don't want you to trip. Hold still," Harrold bent down and took a knife to her ripped skirt where a long piece of lace was hanging.

Pocketing the knife, he stood and smiled at Sansa. "My lady, please be more careful. It would be an awful shame to see such a beautiful lady get hurt. May I know the name of the angel I just saved?"

It was a dreadful attempt at flattery, Sansa thought, but she couldn't be rude to the man that just saved her life.

"Lady Sansa," she smiled warmly and Harrold picked up her dirty glove and kissed her hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Sir Harrold."

"Harry, please. I never did like being called Harrold," he grinned charmingly and Sansa couldn't help the little flutter in her stomach. He was very handsome indeed.

Petyr practically pushed Harry aside to attend to her once again. There was something in his eyes that she had never seen before. It wasn't anger, not necessarily. It wasn't directed at her but for some reason at the man that saved her.

"Harry, much obliged, but I must get her home and make sure she is well," Petyr said with a tone of finality.

"Of course, my lady's well-being should be attended to," Harry smiled watching Petyr fuss over her. "May I call on Lady Sansa when she is feeling better?"

"Lady Sansa is not receiving callers for now," Petyr clipped as he helped her into the carriage.

Sansa glimpsed Harry from the window and caught his eye. He bowed gracefully and gave her a winning smile. Petyr tapped on the roof and his carriage pulled out into the street. When she leaned back into her seat, Petyr was watching her most curiously. Sansa was at a loss for words.

Suddenly he sighed deeply and leaned forward taking in her torn dress and dirty hands. Convinced she was injured, he checked her over and then had the audacity to lift up a foot and then the other. Her stocking was ripped and noticed a bit of blood above her shoe. She must have scraped her leg when she fell. Gentle fingers explored the cut, tearing the stocking from the bloodied rip.

Petyr took out his handkerchief and lightly dabbed the scrape gauging her reaction if he was causing pain. Sansa almost gasped at the tenderness of his touch. His hand was on her calf and then buttoning her shoe. The shoe clattered to the floor of the carriage as his hands inspected her ankle gently.

"You didn't turn it? This doesn't hurt?" he asked slightly rotating and massaging her foot.

"No," she breathed. Sansa almost wanted to lie so that he would continue. His hands on her foot were almost sinful.

"Sansa," he began as he kept his eyes on his task. "I don't want you anywhere near Harrold Hardyng, do you understand me?"

"Why? He seemed kind and..."

"No. He is not the kind of man you should be associating with. His reputation is deplorable," Petyr growled.

"You're one to talk," Sansa shot back, not sure if she was defending Harry or just wanted to call Petyr out on his hypocrisy.

Petyr set her foot down and leaned back into his seat. "Yes, I am a rake, a seducer of men's wives with a mistress on every street corner and gamble away thousands of pounds at gaming hells. *That's* how I know what kind of man he is."

"Does Miranda know what she is marrying?" Sansa retorted coldly. "Or did she turn you into a better man?"

"You act as if she is a virgin saint," he chuckled darkly. "Of course she knows. It is you who are naïve right now. Stay away from Hardyng. He is not worthy of you."

Sansa huffed and crossed her arms, looking out the window.

"Who is? No man in his right mind wants me. I know what I'm not. Not fit for a proper marriage to any decent gentleman," Sansa sighed and refused to look at him. "I do believe my options are mistress, temporary ward or housekeeper. I'm not naïve."

The ride was silent for some time and Sansa was glad of it for she had nothing to say. A rustling of paper and a soft bundle was placed in her lap. It was the flowers he had purchased, and they were beautiful. Sansa fingered a delicate rose petal and felt her eyes well up. No, she would not shed one tear. Not for him.

Taking only one rose from the massive bundle, she handed the rest back to him.

"You should only give flowers to your bride," Sansa whispered and said no more.

That night they dined with Lady Myranda and all Sansa wanted to do was take her supper in her room but Petyr wouldn't hear of it. Myranda wanted to know all about the gallery but both Sansa and Petyr neglected to say anything about the accident. Dinner went by in a blur and Sansa barely listened or contributed to the conversation as they took sherry in the parlor. Myranda swooned over the flowers Petyr did not intend for her and it didn't make Sansa feel any better.

She could hear Lady whining upstairs, begging to be let out. The wolf still hated Myranda and for good reason, Sansa mused. That animal had a good memory. Sansa excused herself to take care of Lady before she chewed the door open. They were still talking in the parlor when Sansa took Lady to the garden to do her business and would use the wolf to make her excuse to retire for the night.

Padding softly to the parlor hoping to pass by unnoticed to the stairs, Myranda came into the hallway with a smile.

"It's late isn't it? I must head home lest father thinks badly of me," the brunette giggled.

"I doubt that," Sansa forced a smile holding the growling wolf.

"Oh, she will never like she now, will she?" Myranda frowned at the animal.

"She'll come around. She just doesn't know you well yet," Sansa smiled sadly and wondered where Petyr disappeared to.

Petyr entered from the front door as one of the maid's fastened Myranda's cloak around her. Good, she was leaving and Sansa could finally go to bed.

"Good night, Myranda," she said and refused to look at Petyr. "My lord, good night."

"Good night, my dear," she heard his voice as Sansa ascended the stairs.

"Do I get a good night kiss?" Myranda's sultry voice asked and Sansa crossed the landing towards her room when she saw the brunette slide her arms around Petyr's neck and kiss him deeply. His hands found her waist when Sansa dashed to her room, locking herself inside not seeing the man had pushed the woman away.

Sansa set Lady down and leaned against her door. Where was her little ghost when she needed her? Someone to tell her everything was going to be okay. Before she knew it, the tears fell and Sansa hated herself for being weak. She saw the single red rose on the mantel in a slender crystal vase. Sansa walked over and grabbed the flower crumpling it in her hand.

I do not care for him

I do not care for him

I'm the greatest of fools if I care for him

Afternoon Delight

Chapter Notes

Oh, how do I love thee, Sassy Pete, let me count the ways....

Flowers arrived for Sansa every day since the accident and Petyr was annoyed by it. They both knew who was sending them even without a card attached but Petyr found the letters neatly folded so small as to be hidden amongst the flowers. He did not show Sansa the letters but read them privately in his study. He had to give the boy credit for being resourceful knowing Petyr's refusal to let him call upon her. They were brief but perfunctory in wooing her and asking to convince Petyr to allow him a visit.

Petyr didn't say anything but his disposition changed every time the bell rang right after breaking their fast. On cue, every day, a man would deliver a gorgeous bundle of colorful blooms for Sansa and Brooks would ask Petyr what to do. Each time, he would find the notes and remove them from her sight. Refusing the flowers would make him appear controlling but she did not need to read one of those letters.

After the fourth day, Petyr just waved his hand in irritation, silently telling the butler to put the new addition with the rest in the parlor. He could have easily rejected them each time, sending them back to the young man expressing his intentions clearly for the girl, but he didn't and he could see the questioning in Sansa's eyes.

Petyr expressed his displeasure at entertaining any invitation from the boy only once since the accident. Harry was worse than Petyr had ever been and he could see that Sansa didn't quite understand why he was being so harsh. She had made a good point the other day, Petyr was himself of questionable reputation and here he was disapproving of a young and handsome man wishing to call on his little witch.

Harry did not want Sansa for anything other than a tumble in his bed. He would sweep the down trodden girl off her feet and once he sated his lust, he'd throw her to the gutter. Sir Harrold Hardyng was looking for a woman with wealth and title so he could pay his gambling debts and continue to whore himself around town. Sansa had no money or title, so pursuing her was merely to bed a pretty girl and Petyr would beat that boy into the ground before letting it happen.

The bell rang as they finished breakfast and Petyr fought not to roll his eyes as he looked at the clock. Right on time, he frowned to himself. He glanced at Sansa and smartly she drank her tea and kept her eyes down. She didn't know it, but Petyr was insanely jealous of the handsome lad. Hardyng was a few years older than Sansa and if he were a decent man, he would be the type she might fall in love with. The idea made his stomach burn with hate when he saw her blush at his flattery and hint of anger when Petyr denied her any involvement with the boy. It was for her own good, Petyr convinced himself. Harrold would leave her in tears and heartache.

Brooks entered the dining room with another bouquet of flowers but instead of the usual question, he told them a caller waited at the door. The butler stood slightly nervous awaiting his master's instructions. Petyr immediately wanted the man turned away, for who else could it be? He glanced at Sansa's surprised face that quickly flushed bright red. She knew as well as he.

"Who is it, Brooks?" Petyr asked knowing the answer.

"Sir Harrold Hardyng, my lord," the butler replied. "He wishes to have a word with Lady Sansa."

"I'm sure he does," Petyr muttered. "Tell him she is not receiving callers presently, if you please."

"Yes, my lord," Brooks answered and retreated back to the foyer.

"I could at least thank him for the flowers, Petyr," Sansa whispered. "They were a nice gesture."

"Hmph. Yes, the gesture is well played to serve him only," Petyr sighed. "I would have thought the Eyrie had taught you about men's intentions."

"They're only flowers," she muttered angrily and Petyr knew that if he did not stamp out this attempt to woo her, it would only cause trouble. Harry, by now, knew who she was and his persistence meant only two things. Neither of them Petyr would allow over his dead body.

"Yes, and now he's waited a respectable amount of time and is at our door seeking you," he smiled. "Harry knows how the game is played."

"Well, you've been spending your time with Lady Myranda..." she hesitated. "Would it be so terrible that..."

"What did I tell you about him, Sansa? What he wants from you is far from respectable," Petyr sighed setting down his tea. "Flowers seem to have erased that from your mind."

Petyr knew Sansa was flattered by the flowers and attention. Any young lady would be if a charming, handsome young man lavished such attentions and Petyr paused. He was forgetting how young Sansa was. She would turn three and twenty this year and other than a brief first season and quick betrothal to Joffrey before the rebellion, Petyr could bet she hadn't received much attention, such as this, in years. What he observed at Robert's ball was more direct. The young men did not even attempt to court her, they made it known what it was they wanted from

her. They did try to pretend she was a lady.

Harry had heroically saved her life and now was playing the gentleman knowing full well his intentions were anything but gentlemanly. He was playing on the emotions of this lovely girl because he damn well no other gentleman of quality would court her. He was hoping she would fall for such attentions that she probably was not used to or expecting.

Petyr glanced at the girl across the table. She was disappointed and trying hard to hide it. After all she had been through, the hope of a little romance lingered in her eyes. He had spent quite a bit of time with Myranda the past few days for the sake of appearances and could see the boredom and sadness on Sansa's face when he would return.

"I thought a stroll in the park today would be lovely," Petyr smiled and Sansa didn't look at him. Clearly, she thought he meant with Myranda. "I think Lady would enjoy it, don't you?"

That popped her head up in confusion.

"The park?"

"Yes, I believe that's what I said," he chuckled lightly and stood up. "Go and change your dress. I'll make a harness for Lady."

The look on her face was a mixture of concealed happiness and doubt making Petyr stifle a laugh.

"She'll take your hand off before letting you put it on her," Sansa japed leaving the table.

That did it and Petyr laughed out loud and caught the smile she tried desperately to conceal as she left the room.

Petyr and Brooks made a harness from a silken cord used for one of the tapestries. He struggled getting it on the animal just as Sansa had predicted but once Lady realized he wasn't trying to harm her, she finally let him slip it on and fasten it snugly.

The wolf pawed at him and trotted around in excitement. She was dying to leave the house and Petyr couldn't blame her. She had been cooped up and denied her natural instincts. Sansa came down the stairs and shock was painted on her face.

"How did you...?"

"You continually doubt me, sweetling," Petyr grinned. "Come, it looks to be a gorgeous day."

Sansa was having trouble with the ribbon for her bonnet when Petyr swatted her hands away. He took his time making sure he was as close to her as possible as he tied the ribbon fashionably around her neck. She smelled divine and it was all he could do not to ravage her mouth right here in the foyer.

"There," he mused. "Perfect."

Petyr took her arm as Lady excitedly charged for the door when the footman opened it. Outside, his Phaeton waited. It was still warm enough for a stroll before winter finally made its way south. Kings Landing rarely received much, but soon the city would be dusted in snow.

The footman helped her up into the small two-person carriage and Petyr handed her the wolf that barked with eagerness. Petyr climbed in and the white horse whinnied anxiously.

"Are you warm enough?" Petyr asked eyeing the fur wrap. Her wool could be too warm in the bright sun, but Petyr had brought his top coat in case.

"I'm fine," she replied holding onto Lady as Petyr flicked the reins and the horse trotted into the street. "Are we going somewhere nearby?"

"King's Park," he told her.

"King's..." she stuttered with wide eyes. "That's near the palace, isn't it?"

"Yes," Petyr smiled to passerby's.

"Why there?" she asked nervously.

"I have a surprise, sweetling," Petyr chuckled.

"Are we meeting Myranda today?"

"No, she is otherwise engaged with Lady Francis, the Countess of Ashford. If I wanted an afternoon kip, well, I'd rather stay at home," he jested making her smile.

As he drove her through the city closer to the bay, Petyr could see her nerves come to the surface. King's Park, she knew would most likely be filled with high society on a day like this... and she would be right. Petyr had only a few planned attempts to showcase her in public and the news would travel fast. Men of the ton did not bring their mistresses, let alone the daughter of the disgraced duke, to mingle with proper ladies and gentlemen of court society. And display her, he would. Petyr would flaunt the bright jewel on his arm until finally the Queen Mother or King Joffrey would have to deal with him.

Petyr knew Cersei and her boy too well. They thought they were clever with their little intrigues and punishments. He was too valuable to them in matters of finance and managing the Riverlands hoping to avoid more contracts with the Tyrells and Martells. Keeping the Riverlands profitable kept them from having to give any power to Dorne or the Reach. Playing Petyr's game was a smaller price to pay. Only they would make an example of him thinking it worked against him. What fools they were.

He pulled the carriage over and hopped out securing the horse. Tucking Lady under his arm, Petyr offered his hand aiding Sansa down as the breeze whipped her skirts. She adjusted the fur stole while he set Lady down and the wolf wagged her tail with sensory overload. Thankfully, the

makeshift leash held true as the animal tugged against it willing her masters to move along. Petyr took Sansa's arm and linked it in his as they made their way through the park, painted in hues of red and gold.

Time passed slowly as leaves crunched under their feet and Lady sniffed and yapped at everything in her path. She desperately wanted to run free, but Petyr held the leash tightly as they strolled along. He tipped his hat in greeting to passing couples and some greeted him in kind but others only stared at the woman on his arm.

The sun was high in the sky and bright and one could hardly believe it was so late in the year. It felt more like September today than November. Sansa opened her parasol as she squinted from the sun but Petyr felt it was more to hide behind. He felt it in the way she held his arm and avoidance of the people that were clearly gossiping about them.

Petyr pointed out the architecture of the Royal Cathedral to their right, patterned after stunning ruins in Rome. He had only been inside once during Joffrey's coronation. The royal palace wasn't too far away as it sloped up along the coastal point giving the bay a beautiful skyline. The tower bell sounded as the clock struck noon and Sansa stared at the palace for some time.

"Are you alright?" Petyr asked looking at her stone expression.

"Yes," she answered in kind but did not tear her eyes away from the building. "May we go now?"

"Go? I thought you would be dying to get out on a day like this," Petyr tried to lighten her mood but the girl nervously looked around and Petyr sensed her uneasiness.

She didn't like them looking at her and Petyr felt a twinge of regret at what he was doing. In the end, it would be worth it, he told himself. He would make her understand.

Petyr was about to lead her to the surprise when Lady growled and snarled. He sighed waiting to hear the brunette's voice but it was far too masculine, which was even worse.

"Lady Sansa. Lord Baelish," the charming voice called from behind. "I thought that was you."

Harry made his way over and Petyr knew the boy had followed them. Damn it, why did he not think of that before they left? Sansa turned to Petyr in shock and silently asked him what to do. He patted her arm cautiously, giving her a knowing look to follow his lead.

Lady barked viciously at the blonde as he approached and Petyr couldn't have been more proud of that animal's true instincts. She knew, as Petyr did, Harry was nothing but trouble. Petyr tugged on the leash a bit but Lady stood her ground protecting her mistress and that little wolf put just enough distance between them and Harrold Hardyng.

"Sir Harrold," Petyr's voice dripped condescendingly. "What a surprise to find you here. Did you lose your way? I believe the brothel you frequent is on the *other* side of town."

Harry had the decency to smirk for he very well knew he couldn't start a fight with a higher lord in the middle of the park and with a lady present.

"Well, I don't have the funds or the peerage for acceptance to Black's. Which is why I'm rather surprised you are such a welcome patron," the boy took aim and Petyr smiled. Oh, he was witty, this one.

"Ah, money and power are useful, but you wouldn't know that. One day, perhaps I'll teach you to gamble and win for once instead of having to court rich widows to enable your habits," Petyr chuckled and glanced at Sansa. "This conversation is titillating, I must say, but not for the ears of ladies."

"The ear of the lady, is why I'm here until you had to degrade the conversation," Harry quipped as he bowed to Sansa gracefully.

"Oh, there was a genteel conversation to be had? By all means, *we're* dying to know what is on your mind," Petyr shot back with an air of arrogance.

"I never did care for your humor Lord Baelish. It is even less amusing after enough spirits to dull the senses," the boy growled.

Petyr raised his eyebrows mockingly as if he were wounded by the insult and pulled out his gold pocket watch.

"Which is why I'm amazed at your coherency. Isn't it time for your noon feeding?" he smiled, holding Sansa's arm more firmly. "Or have the taverns kicked you out so early in the day?"

The boy was turning beet red and Petyr had to withhold his delight. He knew damn well why Harry was here and Petyr wasn't going to make it easy for him. If he was lucky, he could use Harry in his favor. The boy hated him, that much was obvious and he fancied Sansa. He would be more than happy to get the rumor mill into full swing if it meant damaging Petyr in any way publicly.

"I won't even dignify that with a response," Harry turned up his chin and attempted move towards Sansa before Lady growled again halting him.

Sansa's fingers dug into his arm as she spoke, "What it is you have to tell me, Sir Harrold?"

Petyr fought a smile at the use of Harrold and not *Harry*, as he preferred to be called.

"If your, *chaperone*, would be so kind as to let me have a word with you in private?" Harry asked eyeing Petyr.

"That is the point of a chaperone, Harry, to protect a lady's virtue," Petyr japed and Sansa elbowed him hard underneath her fur wrap. "Whatever you have to say, it will be in my presence."

"My intentions are honorable, my lady," he spoke and Petyr coughed slightly making Sansa frown at him. He couldn't help it, this was by far too ridiculous a charade to be believed. However, Sansa did not have an ungracious or unkind bone in her body and Petyr decided to see how poetic the boy could be in lying.

"My mind has been filled of only you since that day," Harry began again and Petyr rolled his eyes. "You would honor me beyond words..." he glanced at Petyr's bored expression, "... to accompany me to the theatre tomorrow evening. I do not own a box, or I would, of course, expect Lord Baelish to chaperone..."

"Oh?" Sansa squeaked and looked to Petyr for help. "Erm, well – Sir Harrold, you do flatter me but..."

Petyr saw her drowning and finally jumped in, "What Lady Sansa means, is that she is already engaged for tomorrow evening. I have reserved my box for the new opera. I'm very sorry, Harrold. Terrible timing."

That took the wind out of Harry's sails and Petyr couldn't have been happier. The boy was flummoxed and tried to control his anger towards the older man.

"I am truly sorry," Sansa chimed in but there was enough sincerity in her tone that Petyr did not care for. "I'm sure it would have been lovely and thank you so kindly for the flowers. They're beautiful."

Harry mustered enough grace to bow, taking her gloved hand and kissing it lightly. "Another time perhaps, my lady?" It wasn't a question as the boy released her hand, backing away accepting defeat.

"Perhaps," she smiled warmly.

Harry smiled back but it didn't reach his eyes and Petyr was thrilled. The boy straightened his posture and nodded to Petyr, not out of respect but etiquette alone. The two of them watched the blonde cross a grassy area and disappear behind tall hedges when Sansa turned and slapped Petyr's arm hard enough to bruise.

"What in the world was that?" she glared.

Petyr bent down to pick up Lady that was gnawing at her make-shift leash, fearing she would succeed in tearing it apart.

"That, my dear, was protecting your virtue," he smiled petting the wolf in his arms.

"Really? That's not what it looked like to me," she growled and tried to grab Lady and Petyr retreated a few steps to the right forcing her to follow him.

"Pray tell, what was it? Please educate me," he jested, taking a few more steps backwards.

"That was you being an arse," Sansa huffed looking around not wanting to draw any more attention to themselves. "You're *not* my father."

"Indeed, I am not," Petyr smiled thinly, trying to keep the anger from building. He was protecting her from a piece of filth, did she not appreciate it in the slightest?

"You didn't have to be so rude. He was only trying to..."

"Bed you anyway he could," he finished for her. "Don't try to explain to a man his own game."

"Everything is a game to you men," she spoke harshly. "You whisper lies of love, honor and respect and yet all you want is some wanton from a brothel... turn a lady into a whore. For what? Marriage, a title and money? Father's sell their daughters and women marry men they don't love for security and wealth."

Petyr smirked even though it made her frown deeper.

"Now, you're thinking soundly," he praised her. "Do you really believe for one moment that Harry wants love and respect from or for you?"

Sansa thought about for a moment and then shook her head, sadly.

"No," she answered plainly.

"Then don't sell yourself for a night at the theatre or a hundred flowers. They are meaningless," he pressed again to drive the point home. Petyr knew she wanted a gentleman to fancy her for the right reasons. He knew she wanted romance, flowers and love. If she would only be patient, he would give her everything and more. He would make her a wife, a grand lady, with all the love and respect she could ever want, if she'd only let him. No man would love her, not the way he could.

Sansa sighed and held out her arms for Lady. Petyr gave her the wolf and took her arm once more guiding her in a different direction.

"I always dreamed of going to the theatre. Funny, that and the gallery were two of the reasons I wanted to come to Kings Landing when I was betrothed to Joffrey," she mused sadly. "At least you gave me one."

"And I'll give you the other," he stopped and grinned, touching her cheek as those blue eyes widened a bit. "Look there," he pointed.

Sansa followed the direction of his hand towards the beautiful building across the street. She glanced back at him in shock and then the loveliest of smiles emerged.

"Do you mean it?" she asked incredulously waiting for him to joke with her. "You're really taking me to the opera?"

"That was my surprise until Hardyng attempted to ruin my afternoon," Petyr teased.

Unexpectedly, she launched herself at him almost crushing the animal between them in a fierce embrace. Petyr glanced around slightly shocked that she cared not for decorum. It wasn't proper at all to be so affectionate in public with a man not her husband. It couldn't be more perfect if he planned it. All too soon, as he was enjoying this intimacy, she remembered herself and pulled away quickly.

"I'm sorry, I –" she stammered.

"Nothing to be apologize for, my dear," he grinned petting Lady on the head.

"Do you really have a box?" she smiled sweetly and that little girl in her came out with excitement. Petyr stared at her in thought, that he could spend the rest of his life making her smile and it would be well worth the effort.

"Sweetling, you should know me by now. Only the best will do," he winked.

The handsome, young blonde forgotten, she smiled and kissed her wolf tenderly.

"Do you think my blue silk dress will do? The one with the silvery brocade?" she pondered aloud and Petyr couldn't help but grin at her pure happiness. Never in his life had a woman been this excited about the opera.

"Well, I'm afraid I did not tell the whole truth, Sansa," he mock frowned and instantly her smile fell. "I don't think any of your dresses will be suitable for tomorrow night. Other than balls, the opera is one of the more fashionable events in society."

"Oh," she breathed in disappointment and he couldn't bear to tease her any longer.

"So, I had one made and it's waiting for you back home," Petyr grinned seeing her face light up.

Harry? Harry who? Petyr's ego soared at the thought. That boy had no idea what game he was playing or whom he was playing against. Petyr knew his sweetling, and no other man was going to steal her away. Harry was no match for what Petyr could give her even if the boy's intentions were true and honorable. Petyr could give her everything her heart desired. If she wanted the moon, he would find a way to pull it down from the sky and make it hers.

Petyr linked his arm with hers walking them back to the waiting carriage to take her home.

"What will they be performing, Petyr? Mozart? Handel? Beethoven?" she questioned him relentlessly.

Helping her into the carriage once more, Petyr climbed in and glanced whimsically at Sansa.

"None of the above," he chuckled. "A new composer, in fact. I daresay, it will not be well received here."

Sansa frowned, "Why not?"

"Because, sweetling," he smiled and lifted her chin. "It is based upon a northern legend. A tale, I gather, you know very well. So, I believe you and I will be the only ones to appreciate it."

Sansa scoffed a little, "You know about old northern legends?"

"I do," he laughed. "I myself am not native to the south even though I grew up with your mother."

"What tale is it?" she asked anxiously and he could see her mind working furiously as to the answer.

"A tale of love and such woe, sweetling," he took her hand and kissed it softly. "Lovers who could never be together, forced to marry others... and died, in the end, in each other's arms where their souls entwined forever. Do you know of such a tale?"

"Yes," she whispered in awe. "Tristan and Isolde."

Tristan & Isolde

Chapter Notes

Whew... a BIG chapter for you today.
Onward, we go!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Petyr looked at his pocket watch for the millionth time as he sat in his chair by the fire. It was warm in the library and he wasn't sure if it was from the hearth or the numerous glasses of brandy he had consumed while waiting for her.

Originally, Miranda had wanted to go, but Petyr insisted it wouldn't do well to have the three of them together. This was his last resort after all. Or so he told her. Miranda was convinced she had won the silly wager as Petyr had failed to seduce Sansa before Joffrey's ball in a few days. Petyr knew the final insult would be to bring Sansa to that ball and he was anxious to get it over with. Confidence, balanced with information and timing was key.

Tonight would kick his plan into high gear as he and Sansa would be the only of topic of conversation. Petyr smiled and could almost hear them now...

How dare he...

Who does he think he is?

His arrogance knows no bounds...

He never should have been given a title for he'll never be one of us.

He had escorted mistresses to the theatre before, but Sansa was completely different. They may think she was nothing more than another one of his mistresses, and would feel that was the best she could attain considering her circumstances, but it was still an insult. She was pardoned by the king, but that did not mean her sentence was null and void among high society. She was an outcast in their eyes, a traitor in name and undesirable in their presence. Keep her in his bed, if he must, but out of sight and mind, never to bring her into their midst.

If Petyr had kept her in Harrenhal, most of them would have just assumed the most basic. However, Petyr did not want anyone to think he was hiding the girl for some other reason. Possibly, he could talk his way out of it, telling them she was merely an addition to his bedroom... *if* he had been only a bachelor. Unfortunately, everyone knew he was engaged to Miranda and hiding a Stark girl, even as a mistress, did not look good. Since arriving in Kings Landing, Petyr had not heard anything about Sansa from his spies in the city and certain circles. No one was talking about her until after their outing at the gallery and park. So, Miranda, surprisingly had not said a word as he assumed she would and that gave him pause. Miranda might have another trifle up her lace sleeve and Petyr needed to be careful.

He finished off the last of his brandy and took a deep breath. Yes, this was the right course, he told himself. He would play Miranda for the fool she was for even she did not think this slight was serious in their eyes. Kings Landing was not the Eyrie commanded by Lysa, far away in the country. These people were not to be trifled with. They seized on any opportunity to oust someone they did not like and Petyr was handing it to them on a gilded platter. He was loathed for his quick rise to wealth and power. His low birth was a sore spot for any titled gentleman from an old family, but they continued to do business with him and line their pockets with gold.

Gold. That was the language all men spoke fluently. Gold gave men power. Gold gave them position and the ability to enter the domain of the privileged. Petyr had made them, especially Joffrey, very rich and that was the only reason they tolerated him within their circles. Petyr played the fop with the ladies and the non-threatening but shrewd businessman with the gentlemen. In return, he was allowed to mingle and pretend to be half as good as them. He whored, he gambled and lived up to his notorious reputation, but all of that was fodder and they never took him seriously. He was gossiped about and then brushed aside just as quick.

Even the idea of marrying a Royce wasn't as preposterous as he once thought it would be to them. Miranda's reputation was so dissolute, that marriage to a man like him seemed somewhat logical... to the men at least. It was well known that Royce had tried unsuccessfully to marry her off too many times. Petyr stepped outside the box they drew for him from time to time, testing the waters, but now that containment was demolished. This time, the ton would not turn a blind eye to his lecherous ways. Marrying Miranda was one thing, insulting her family name with a Stark was something else.

The game he was playing was precarious and if the pieces did not move where he wanted them to, it could spell disaster not only for him but Sansa. Petyr was gambling with the notion of how the ton perceived his actions and how Joffrey, but more importantly, Cersei would handle it. Joffrey would likely find the idea that Baelish, of all people, made Sansa a whore, rather entertaining. Cersei, however, never did like him and did not agree with awarding him title and land for his services. Granted, not one noble wanted Harrenhal, and it was a bit of an empty gesture knowing

the cost it would take to keep it. It was merely a grant to have Petyr preside over the management and profits of the Riverlands and nothing more. It was all about money.

Cersei did not want Sansa dead, she served as an example of what happened to those who defied her and her family's legacy and rule. Keeping Sansa alive, kept the North under control at the time the entire Stark family was executed. The woman was shrewd enough to know forcing the girl to recant publicly would soil her in the eyes of the North. Roose Bolton was granted Winterfell as warden, given he could control the northerners. Rumors of his cruelty, especially that of his son was well known across the land. Only months ago, did Joffrey finally reward Bolton with Ned Stark's former title of duke.

Sansa did not know, and Petyr certainly did not wish to tell her such news. It was something she could not change now and knowing would only cause her more pain. In time, Petyr's plans would cover many injustices across the country. Everything had been planned to the tiniest detail and in a few more years, it would be ready. Petyr knew striking in anger or too early was never good. It was a long game he was playing, covered under so many layers over the years, it seemed as nothing to the rest of the ton. They only saw a greedy and ambitious man collecting gold and titles.

Petyr smiled, Sansa would bring that to a halt in a few days. Cersei would make sure of it. She would stop his rise by denying him the marriage he wanted so badly to gain a respectable name. Cersei had once asked, after Jon Arryn died, if he was interested in marrying Lysa. It seemed they were quite worried he would marry Lysa and take control over the Vale. Petyr told the woman no, but his frequent visits to the Vale did not go unnoticed. Marrying a Royce kept him close to Lysa, and she was a powerful woman, even as Dowager Duchess to Robert. A little too close for comfort, she might think. What Cersei and her spies did not know, is that Petyr had no interest in Lysa at all. It was Robert that he was keeping close ties to. A Royce marriage meant that Petyr would have lands and titles in the Vale and close to his adopted nephew, the duke. A formidable ally and one that was easily controlled.

Cersei did not object to his engagement to Myranda, because it did not seem to give Petyr any real power other than a respectable name and solidify his position for future sons. Royce was not powerful, influential or even wealthy. It was not a threat at all. Just an old name and a daughter with a questionable reputation. No one in the ton would be vying for an invitation to Harrenhal nor would Lord and Lady Baelish be the toasted couple in society. They still would be social pariahs and dismissed as such.

As much as Cersei had not cared about Sansa's whereabouts for the past few years, they would never have suspected the girl would turn up in Kings Landing, let alone their social circles. The girl was discarded and forgotten. A treachery snuffed out and ignored. She had not done anything since her family's death to warrant suspicion or retaliation. She had been pardoned but it was made clear that she was not welcome and best that she just fade away into obscurity.

Now all Petyr needed was Cersei to make the decision for Joffrey. It would be unacceptable to keep a woman of Sansa's age as a ward as it was an insult to the Royce name. However, they could not afford to punish Petyr too severely for such a breach of etiquette. They needed him whether they liked it or not. Petyr made sure all these years of bowing, lying, hard business and tactics that filled the pockets of so many, made him indispensable. Petyr would play the foppish ignorance of his actions and Cersei would punish him with the denial of marriage and respect. He would keep his title and Harrenhal as he promised to make the lands more profitable than ever. Cersei, he hoped, would live up to her arrogant and spiteful self, and degrade him by making him marry the girl that would give his children nothing to aspire to. He would die with his meager title and his sons would never be anything more, for no family would marry their daughter to a son of Baelish and that of a Stark. It would be a petty punishment, but one they think would hurt him greatly as a social climber. Petyr and Sansa would be reviled in society and ostracized but he could continue with business as usual making them rich. Forcing him to marry his mistress, would keep him where they wanted him and the girl, once again, out of sight and mind.

Petyr looked at his watch again and tapped his fingers impatiently. He knew the king and queen were not attending the opera tonight due to the subject matter. Joffrey wouldn't degrade himself to sit through a northern love story. However, the ton, more interested in gossip and who attended would still gather in crowds. Petyr wagered most would consider the subject matter vulgar but it would not deter them from an evening of entertainment. Many played cards and chattered all through the performance only quieting down to hear the main aria, the show piece, and then return to their gossip. It was something Petyr loathed from the peerage. They did not care nor respect the beautiful art before them. The theatre was only a place to see and be seen.

Getting up and walking to the foyer, he glanced up the stairs and wondered what was taking so long. They were going to be late. Petyr was usually fashionably late for everything and did not care much about it. Tonight, however, he wanted enough time to mingle a bit and make sure they were seen as much as possible before the curtain rose. Most of all, he wanted to Sansa to experience her first opera in all its glory.

When he brought out one of the boxes delivered from Madame Berkins, he watched with pleasure as her eyes lit up with excitement. Petyr wondered if Sansa was like this during her first season before the rebellion and all the horrors happened to her. She lifted and pressed the dress to her bosom taking it all in. It was the height of fashion and she knew it. Petyr made it clear to the seamstress exactly what he wanted. He wanted his sweetling to shine and catch the eye of every single person tonight.

She hugged him fiercely, landing a sweet kiss on his cheek before running upstairs to change after an early supper. The look on her face was pure elation and Petyr wanted more of it. He knew he couldn't buy her heart, but it wouldn't stop him from giving her whatever she desired.

Petyr turned to the mirror above the side table that held his cloak and purse. He tuffed his lace cravat and straightened the ivory waistcoat brocaded with hints of green, silver and gold. Tonight he would look his part of the dandy lord with his emerald pin at his throat, rings, gold topped walking cane and flowing cloak. The woman on his arm tonight would be the real jewel, he smiled, tucking the gold watch into his waistcoat pocket and catching movement on the candle lit stairs.

Turning around, ready for a smart comment about how long he had been waiting, the words suddenly died on his tongue. The girl moved down the stairs with the grace of an angel and Petyr's eyes took in the sight. Sansa was more than beautiful, she was stunning and would put Aphrodite herself to shame. The emerald green silk contrasted the fire of her hair and Petyr knew the color would suit her. Delicate black lace shimmered with bit of silver that draped elegantly over the silk skirt and bodice. Silver brocade and lace trimmed along her bosom and sleeves offsetting her porcelain skin.

The maid had pulled her auburn tresses up into curled knots, letting tendrils cascade down the side that framed her face beautifully. A black and emerald green feathered adornment was placed in her hair above the ear where a little jewel glittered in the low light. She was the most beautiful creature Petyr had ever seen as she came to stand before him with a smile.

Her chest was heaving from either nerves or excitement; Petyr couldn't be sure. Her blue eyes twinkled, waiting for his approval. Petyr smirked and walked around the girl studying her with mock seriousness.

"Do I look alright?" she asked nervously.

"Hmm, I don't know," he circled the beauty, teasing her. "Something seems to be missing."

"Missing?" she pondered looking alarmed at her maid on the stairs, wondering what was forgotten.

"Yes, it isn't right," he frowned trying not to break into a smile.

"I have my gloves, cloak..." she whispered to herself and then found the mirror and checked her dress and hair trying to see what he found wrong.

Petyr grinned and walked up until he could see his reflection behind her in the mirror.

"I think I know what it is," he smiled bringing his gloved hands in front of her collarbone. The emeralds and diamonds shimmered from the candlelight as he draped the delicate silver necklace around her neck.

Sansa's eyes stared in shock as he fastened it, letting the scrolled chain hang elegantly along her collar with rosettes of emeralds and little marquise cut diamonds. Her trembling hand touched the jeweled necklace and Petyr knew, even with Stark's title, the late duke either could not afford or never got around to giving his daughter something so fine.

"It's too much," she breathed and it answered his question.

"It's not nearly enough," he replied resting his hands on her shoulders gazing at her reflection. He opened his palm and handed her the matching ear bobs.

Their eyes caught each other in the mirror as she clipped the little jewels to each ear. Sansa closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Are you sure this a good idea?" she winced and Petyr knew her too well.

"No," he answered truthfully and her eyes popped open to gaze at him. "but I don't care. We're going to enjoy ourselves this evening."

"Myranda hasn't changed her mind?" Sansa asked and Petyr could hear the fear in her voice as she turned to face him.

"She said she had a terrible headache this afternoon when I called on her at her father's," he said adding a hint of disappointment, as false as it was.

"Oh," she replied in kind. "I just fear that it, well, being only you and I, that... I don't want to start gossip."

Petyr chuckled lightly, "Sweetieing, there's always gossip about someone. Tonight it will be us and tomorrow it will be someone else. Myranda knows full well where we're going."

He knew it was a lie, but he didn't want to scare the girl. Petyr donned his cloak walking to the door before noticing she had not followed. The footman opened the door and Sansa stalled for a moment, wringing her hands.

"Don't tell me I bought the dress and jewels for nothing," Petyr teased hoping to lighten her mood.

Sansa glanced in the mirror once more and took a deep breath. Petyr was actually surprised she could breathe at all in that dress. The maid had cinched her waist tight, forcing her breasts up for all the men to see.

Petyr took her cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders, fastening the clasp. Patting her arms reassuringly, he smiled and waited for the girl to make her decision... even though he knew she could have said no at any time before dressing tonight.

Finally, she took his arm and Petyr admired her bravery. She was about to walk into the lion's den but Sansa was no timid, wide eyed deer. She was stronger than she knew. In the coming days, it would be more than tested.

The ride was smooth and relatively quiet. She held a brave face but Petyr knew she was nervous. This wasn't a walk in the park or the gallery. All of high society would be in this one building tonight and she would be a fool to think everyone wouldn't be watching and talking about her.

The footman opened the door and Petyr stepped out and holding out his hand. Sansa took it and he felt a tiny tremble as she stepped out in front of the opera house. There was a slight chill in the air tonight and Petyr wasn't sure if she was cold or her nerves were getting to her. He took her arm and guided her up the stone steps to the grand foyer. Once inside, footmen took their cloaks and all eyes were on them.

Petyr did not have to look around to know Sansa was the most beautiful woman in the room. Every male eye found her like an arrow to the target. Every lady stared, frowned or rose their fan to disguise the gossip they spoke. It was a packed house tonight and Petyr thought it could not have been more perfect. She clutched his arm tightly as he began walking towards men he knew well from gambling. The curtain would rise in ten minutes but the show began the moment they walked in the door.

Petyr guided her and played the part he knew inside and out. He nodded to gentleman and smiled at ladies, all the while acting as if nothing were wrong in the world. It was just another night, another ball, another dinner, with a new woman on his arm.

"Lady Dayne, you look ravishing tonight," he smiled and winked passing the older couple. "Roger, be careful, I just may steal your wife next." Luckily, Lord Dayne liked Petyr as the man laughed heartily.

Petyr glanced to Sansa and smartly she had painted a small smile on her face and followed him silently.

"Osgrey," he nodded and the bald man nodded back. "You still owe me three-hundred guineas from cards in August."

Suddenly, a boisterous voice came to his side.

"Baelish, knew it was you," the portly fellow laughed. "No man can get away with such fancy clothes as you and doubt his manhood."

"Manderly, I haven't seen you in ages. How is the weather in White Harbor?" Petyr smiled.

"Cold as a witch's tit this time of year," the man snickered and then halted looking at the young woman on Petyr's arm. "Good heavens, that's not Ned's girl is it?"

He felt Sansa hold his arm in anxiety and Petyr patted her hand gently. "Lady Sansa, have you met Lord Manderly?" he asked pleasantly.

"A long time ago, I believe. I could not have been more than ten years old," she smiled shyly.

Manderly bowed and kissed her hand. "Oh my dear, I don't expect you to remember an old, foul-mouthed man as me," he said taking her in from head to toe and smiled to Petyr. "Gads, it queer. I would have bet my last farthing that it was Catelyn."

Sansa's smile fell and the man immediately apologized. "I'm sorry my dear, I seem to have forgotten myself. When you get to be my age, time isn't what it used to be."

"It's alright, my lord," she smiled again sweetly. "It's in the past now."

"Well," the man jested trying to change the topic. "Don't let Petyr here fool you. There's a good man in him somewhere. I gather the right woman will sort him out. Petyr, if you have any sense, and you're a smart man mind you, you'd marry this girl first thing tomorrow."

Sansa's blushed six shades of red, for Manderly said it loud enough for several people to hear.

"As lovely as that would be, Sansa is actually my ward," Petyr educated the man.

"Ward?" Manderly asked in confusion. "Last I heard Lysa had sent her to her brother in Riverrun."

"And, good ole' Edmure is having some trouble with gambling and the drink," Petyr mused. "It wasn't a safe environment for her."

"Ah, I see. The Tully's never could hold their drink," the man sighed. "Strange, considering their sigil is damned fish. You think they'd take to it like water! Haha!"

Petyr chuckled at the old man's joke and Sansa smiled keeping her perfect air of graciousness.

"Now, the bird has swooped down and taken this lovely girl to roost," Manderly laughed. "Sorry, my dear. Just men's rubbish. Anyone would be a fool to think you were any of his other mistresses."

Petyr winced internally and the girl's posture straightened a little. Sansa chided him a few times about his unsavory reputation and associations.

"To use your words, a lady has sorted me out and I plan to marry her very soon, in fact," Petyr offered kindly and he thought Sansa stiffened a bit at his words.

Manderly looked to Sansa with surprise, "But you said Lady Sansa was your ward? I suppose it isn't uncommon for a man to take a ward as a wife, however, the impression you gave me..."

"Lady Myranda, Lord Royce's daughter," he interrupted.

"Royce?" Manderly's eyebrows shot up. "You, marry a Royce?" The man smirked knowingly and muttered under his voice but both Petyr and Sansa heard him clearly. "Didn't think the man would ever find that girl a husband."

Sansa glanced at Petyr at the old man's slight but Petyr brushed it off. It's what he hoped everyone thought.

"Come now, Manderly, there's an art to buying a wife," he teased and the man howled in laughter. "Would any good lady of breeding really have a man such as myself if not for my money?"

"I'll drink to that!" Manderly chortled slurping his wine. "That's what they all want, don't they? Title, money and if they're lucky a handsome man to bed. Pardon me again, my lady. Your father would have had my head for speaking so distastefully in the presence of his daughter. You must

be pleased you don't have to marry some ugly, old man such as myself. You have a young, handsome benefactor that will keep you in comfort. That is if your new bride doesn't mind."

"I'm hardly young or gifted with good looks, Manderly," Petyr chuckled. "Thank you all the same."

"You're younger than me, man, by decades," the portly lord laughed again. "If I were your age, I'd steal this girl away and marry her."

"I'm flattered, my lord," Sansa smiled at the old man.

"No, my dear, it is I that am honored," he said taking her hand again and whispered in her ear. "Be careful of this lot, they'll tear you to pieces if given the chance. Lord Petyr will take good care of you, I'm sure of it. He's not such a bad fellow."

Sansa blushed again as they said their goodbyes and Petyr walked her up the grand staircase to the balcony. Everyone was making their way into the auditorium but the gossip never stopped, not for a second. Petyr could hear the whispers and see the frowns and stares and he knew Sansa was fully aware.

He said she's his ward

I don't believe it

Such an insult to Lord Royce and his daughter

He's really gone too far this time

A Stark, a traitor's daughter... she should be escorted out

Of course she's his mistress, what else is she good for?

To her credit, Sansa held her head high but Petyr could tell she was close to breaking. Gratefully, they entered his box and the servant closed the door. Sansa breathed a sigh of relief but he knew she was hurt by their words. They meant for them to hear every syllable.

Petyr tilted her chin in the shadows of the heavy draperies of his box and smiled, "The worst is done. Now we can enjoy the performance."

"Would it have been like this had Myranda joined us?" she asked with a small hiccup.

"I don't know. Perhaps," Petyr lied smoothly. Had the three of them arrived together, Myranda most likely would have fluttered to several ladies to chat. Who knows whether she would have escalated the gossip and hate or diffused it. Petyr was betting on the former.

He insisted she come along...

I told him, once we're married...

She will not live under my roof....

Petyr couldn't wait to be rid of Myranda and the whole mess. He could conduct most of his business from Gulltown and Harrenhal if necessary. The bulk of his people in Kings Landing had been in place for a few years. It was only a matter of time now before his plans would come to fruition.

He kissed Sansa's cheek in the shadows but desperately wanted to press her against the wall and plunder her sweet mouth, but he held himself in check. He had to be patient. Instead he saw the champagne chilling next to their chairs he had ordered and poured a glass handing it to Sansa.

"Here, it will take the edge off," he grinned.

She took it gratefully and did not bother with a ladylike sip. The girl downed it quickly as if it were liquid courage and held the glass out to him, silently asking for him to fill it again. Petyr topped off the glass but held his tongue. She didn't think he noticed, but she was drinking more often than he cared for and it worried him. When he entered his study that day to find her with a glass of brandy early in the afternoon, he started watching a little more intently. At Harrenhal, she would have one or two glasses of wine at dinner and occasionally only a sherry some nights in the library. Since arriving at Kings Landing, she was partaking when she did not think he was looking.

"Come, we have the best seats in the house," he offered her the plush chair next to the balcony.

Sansa eyed it warily because it put her in full view of everyone here.

"I'd rather take this seat, if it's alright," pointing to the one inside and closer to the draperies.

"You have a better view of the stage from here, sweetling," he smiled. "Don't you want to see everything?"

The girl fidgeted with the glass in her hand as her eyes flicked around to the onlookers. He could tell she was conflicted. She did want to see everything but also wanted to hide from view. Reluctantly, she took the seat he offered and sat down avoiding the stares from the crowd.

Petyr poured himself a glass and stood next to her observing their surroundings. He was telling the truth, she would have a better view but he also wanted everyone to see her and seethe with anger and jealousy.

He chuckled drinking his champagne and Sansa stared at him curiously as to what was so humorous.

"They are so pathetic, sweetling," he said glancing around the auditorium. "Look at them. Nothing better to do than dress up, gossip, gamble and drink themselves to death."

Sansa followed his line of sight to the ladies flirting with handsome young men in Fop's Alley near the orchestra and those same men peacocking for any lady to notice them. Powdered faces with heavy rouge, ornate jewels, dresses covered in ribbons and bows, cigar smoke, loud chattering... it was all too ridiculous. Petyr had a mind to buy out a night just so he could have peace and quiet during the opera.

His eyes scanned the balcony and came to a dead stop at a box across the way. Their eyes locked and Petyr bowed gracefully as he heard Sansa gasp in horror. Lysa with her son Robert and Lady Waynwood sat in the box opposite them and did not return the gesture. Robert waved enthusiastically at his beloved uncle and didn't seem to recognize Sansa, but Lysa did.

Fuck. Petyr thought Lysa was going to stay at the Vale this winter but apparently had changed her mind when he politely refused her invitation. She knew of his impending marriage to Myranda Royce and it didn't stop her flirtations as if the marriage was only a ruse to be near her. Obviously, Lysa wasn't the only one that could believe such a thing. Petyr was praying Cersei would as well but that did not help him in this moment. Lysa's presence could definitely cause serious problems and Petyr would have to re-calculate quickly.

"Petyr?" her frightened voice asked.

"Do nothing but nod in greeting," he ordered quietly not tearing his eyes away from the angry duchess.

Sansa did as he instructed with a smile and returned her eyes to the stage even though it was only a heavy curtain. Thankfully, the composer took the stage as the audience finally acknowledged the man's presence and clapped politely taking their seats.

Candles were extinguished throughout the floor and balcony as the prelude began with strings in a somber disquiet. Soft woodwinds echoed the sadness of the story in minor keys when suddenly the entire orchestra bellowed in forte and then descended quickly into pianissimo. The music was vastly different than that of previous and more popular composers. Sweeping violins seeped with heartache and longing and not a note had yet been sung.

Petyr glanced at Sansa and she was captivated by the music letting every note fill her senses. She was a child given a sweet for the first time in her life and Petyr couldn't stop staring at her. The chatter had died down considerably and Petyr hoped it would last but it was not meant to be.

"Whore of Harrenhal!" a female voice yelled and both Petyr and Sansa looked out into the darkness in complete shock.

Even for him, this was a first. Never in all his years, and as many true harlots he brought to the theatre, had someone yelled such vulgarity. He was certainly deserving of it, but not her. Petyr knew she would be subjected to whispers and cruel gossip but he honestly did not expect this. Her spine stiffened and he could see the look on her face as she stared blankly at the orchestra.

"Traitor's daughter!" a male voice rang out and immediately whispers cut across the darkened theatre.

Sansa made a move to stand when Petyr clamped his hand on hers pinning it to the arm rest of her chair. The hand trembled and he could see the tears threatening to spill. He knew it had to happen, but right now in this moment, Petyr felt a terrible regret for what he was putting her through.

"No," he whispered holding her hand firmly. "Do *not* give them the satisfaction."

He scooted his chair back just enough to sit directly beside her never letting her hand go in his gloved one.

"Ignore them, sweetling. You are here with me," Petyr added kindly. "We are above such vulgarity and spite. They hate us because we do not bow or cower to them."

Petyr clasped her small and feminine hand in his, letting his thumb rub a comforting circle. She looked at their joined hands and then those eyes, filled with so many lingering questions, caught his and he could not look away if he tried. The music rose and rose as the crescendo matched the intensity between them. There was something in her eyes that transfixed him, something so pure and lovely.

The flutes and violins drifted from its high point and the curtain softly opened when the last of the woodwinds flowed with an ominous foreboding. The voice of a young sailor began the opera with the words " - *wild Northern maid*" and Sansa's head turned abruptly to the stage not withdrawing her hand from Petyr's.

The first act told of how Isolde was on her way to marry King Marke, transported by ship helmed by Tristan, the King's nephew and trusted knight. Isolde reminisces of how she first met Tristan, and fell for the handsome knight. She found a stranger, mortally wounded and used her healing powers to restore him. Realizing the stranger was the man that had slain her previous betrothed, Isolde threatens to kill him but his eyes pierced her heart and demand that he depart, never to return. Now, she was furious at his betrayal in marrying her to his uncle, the king. Isolde demands that they drink to atonement, a poison meant to kill them both for the northern girl would rather die than marry the older king. They drink, but instead of poison, her handmaiden accidentally gives them a love potion instead.

The story unfolded in the second act of how the lovers met at night, deceiving the king. Isolde's handmaiden warns the beautiful, young queen that one of the king's knights has seen her and Tristan exchange amorous glances but Isolde brushes it aside because the man is a loyal friend to Tristan. The maiden goes to keep watch as the lovers declare their passion for each other. Tristan decries the realm of daylight which is false, unreal, and keeps them apart. It is only in night, he claims, that they can truly be together and only in the long night of death can they be eternally united.

Petyr watched Sansa more than the singers below on the stage. He didn't need to know what was happening for he saw it all in her eyes, the way her breath hitched and occasionally her fingers would tighten in his. He was entranced in this girl and how every note, every word sung affected her. Not once did her eyes leave that stage and Petyr wondered if she knew he watching her the entire time.

The lovers deceived by their friend are revealed in each other's arms as the king discovers their treachery. The older man, broken-hearted at the betrayal of his wife and nephew asks why. Tristan tells Marke he cannot explain it, that he could never understand the depth of feeling between him and Isolde. Hurt by the betrayal of his friend, Tristan duels the man only to be once again mortally wounded and sent home, banished and alone.

Petyr could see that a few lords and their ladies had left muttering words of 'filth' and 'rubbish'. A southern king and young knight in love and fighting over a northern girl was too much for them apparently, he smirked. A girl with healing powers, that used potions and poisons and yet men were besotted by her.

Sansa never once glanced away from the performance. She was completely engrossed and captivated by the story and music as Petyr found himself gazing at her again. Her chest heaved as the third and final act began, for she knew exactly where the story was going.

Tristan dying in his home asks a shepherd if he sees the ship that will carry Isolde to him, for she is the only one that can save him with her powers. A mournful tune sounds and the hero falls to despair that his lover is lost to him. Lamenting his fate, his rails against his desires and the love potion, exhausting himself and collapses once again.

Sansa's eyes were brimming with tears as she watched intently as if feeling all of the character's pain. The gentle pipe of the shepherd sounded, signaling the arrival of Isolde's ship as she has come, at last, to save her love. However, it is too late and Tristan dies in her arms.

The auditorium became silent as the long awaited aria finally began. The soprano sang with conviction that her love had risen to be with her once more and forever.

*How softly and gently
he smiles,
how sweetly
his eyes open -
can you see, my friends,
do you not see it?*

Petyr glanced at his sweetling, when her breath hitched and those tender-hearted tears streamed down her face. Her pale bosom heaved, constricted by her corseted gown. The girl tried so very hard not let the sob, that threatened to break forth, have its way. The music swelled and lifted her emotions to the rafters and back. Petyr drew his silk and lace handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her in silence. She took it without a single word nor did her eyes tear away from the romantic "liebestod".

She dabbed her eyes and all Petyr wanted to do was kiss those tears away. Sansa held the silk to her nose and he heard a light hiccup as the aria crescendo into exaltation of Isolde's lament. He caressed her hand, and brought the cool and delicate skin to his lips, closing his eyes. Petyr heard her sniff and she clutched his gloved hand with such affection, it almost wounded him.

*Breathe my life away
in sweet scents.
In the heaving swell,
in the resounding echoes,
in the universal stream
of the world-breath -
to drown,
to founder -
unconscious -
utmost bliss!*

The soprano lay down on the body of her deceased lover, finally succumbing to death herself. The music drifted down softly, thus ending the performance. Petyr paid no attention to the scattered applause from very few patrons that remained in the audience. He cared not for the death glare from the woman across the balcony. The only thing he could see and feel was the girl that sat next to him, overcome with emotion. It was powerful and tender.

One by one candles, sconces and candelabras were lit, bringing the theatre back to life. The girl dabbed her eyes and nose, catching him looking at her with a knowing smile.

"I must look a fright," she hiccupped and Petyr could not have fallen more in love with her than in this moment. She had never been more beautiful or sweet than losing herself to a love story.

"You look beautiful, my dear," he smiled, finding words a bit difficult.

"I'm afraid I've ruined your handkerchief, Petyr," she sniffed again with the sodden silk at her nose.

Shyly, she avoided his eyes and looked over the balcony at the remains of the people mingling and discussing the opera.

"I think you were right," she muttered softly.

"Oh?" he grinned, pouring more champagne into their glasses. "What was I right about?"

"They didn't like it at all," she guessed correctly, gazing over the balcony to the floor below.

Petyr smiled and chanced a look in Lysa's direction. The woman had not wasted any time. She was practically pulling Robert from his seat as the boy complained and whined. He prayed she would not make her way to his box. By the look of disgust on her face, Petyr was willing to bet

on it. That did not mean he could avoid her forever. He would need to speak with the damned woman before Joffrey's ball.

Sansa gasped and suddenly sat back in her chair, looking anxious.

"What it is?" he asked amused.

"Nothing," she said too quickly. Petyr could tell easily when she was lying. "I'm just uncomfortable with people staring at me. May I have another glass of champagne?"

"Of course," he offered her the glass. She took a long drink and hiccupped again. "Don't drink so fast, the bubbles will make it worse."

Sansa fingered the glass nervously, and Petyr could see the wheels turning in her mind.

"Is that what they really think of me?" she whispered avoiding his eyes.

"Yes," he said plainly. No sense in lying to her, he thought.

The girl touched the emerald necklace and fidgeted in her chair. She took another sip and looked as if she wanted to escape from this fish bowl.

"Do you really care what *they* think, sweetling?" he asked simply. "They, who care nothing for you. They, who are jealous of you in every way."

Shocked, she turned to him and frowned.

"Why would anyone be jealous of me?" she scoffed.

"Perhaps, because you're the most beautiful woman here," a charming voice echoed from the darkened doorway.

Startled, both Petyr and Sansa glanced at the intruder that entered his private box, unannounced and most certainly uninvited.

"Lady Sansa, you look divine tonight," Harrold bowed with a wide grin and it took every ounce of control Petyr had not to throw the man over the balcony. "I couldn't tear my eyes away from you all night."

Petyr straightened his posture and stood slowly and leaned down to Sansa's ear. She was bright red and that delectable bosom rose with her heavy breaths. She must have seen Harrold below, that's why she was nervous before.

"Stay here, my dear. I need to have a word with Sir Harrold," he whispered sweetly, placing a kiss on her cheek feeling the heat of her blush.

Irritated, he adjusted his waistcoat and walked over to Harrold who was very smug in his appearance. Petyr gestured to the door and moved into the now empty corridor. The other patrons had already left to mingle in the foyer and Petyr hoped they were alone.

"Sir Harrold, I thought I made myself quite clear the other day," Petyr said evenly and without a shred of emotion.

"Yes, you did. However, I just had to try. I hear she is your ward? I didn't know you had a ward," Harry smiled and leaned against the wall.

"My business or Lady Sansa's is none of your affair," Petyr said not letting his eyes waver a moment. "If you are only here to court her, you may as well leave. She is not interested in the slightest."

"She or you? Is she already promised? I doubt that considering her station," Harry smiled and Petyr wondered what game this boy was playing. The city was filled with beautiful and willing women, why was he here? She had already refused him.

Petyr folded his arms and studied the boy for a moment. "Ah, now I see. You come, after such attempts of wooing her failed, knowing now she is my ward. It did not take you long, I must say. I won't pretend you are ignorant as to her parentage."

"Come now Baelish, we know you're about to marry the Royce girl. It's no secret from the Vale about Lady Sansa's reputation. I thought you might wish to spare your bride the insult in keeping her as your ward," Harry smirked knowingly.

"Obviously, you haven't spoken with my future wife in some time, for she doesn't find the situation disagreeable at all," Petyr chuckled holding on to his confidence.

"Really? *I do* find that surprising. I've known Miranda all her life. We grew up together," Harry mused relaxing into his confidence and Petyr waited patiently for the boy's motives. "She wasn't too fond of... *your ward* when she arrived at the Eyrie. I find it so strange that a man, such as yourself, would take responsibility for such an unwanted northern girl. Even her own family doesn't seem to want her."

"What is your interest in her? Obviously, you're here for a reason and it isn't love at first sight," Petyr smiled in suspicion.

"Well, with you as her benefactor and your upcoming marriage, I rather thought you might want to find the girl a suitable husband?" Harry grinned mischievously.

"Now we're getting to the truth," Petyr said, his face cold as stone. "A girl with no title but a wealthy benefactor is quite the prize, not to mention her beauty. Tired of the old, widowed countesses and baronesses with sagging breasts and pungent quims?"

That wiped the grin off the boy's face and Petyr smirked.

"It must be tiring work for such a small sum they give you to gamble away," Petyr said smoothly

knowing he hit a nerve.

“How long will you be in favor now that everyone knows you have the Stark girl in your house?” Harry held his cards close and Petyr grinned. He wasn’t a very good gambler at all. “I see Miranda did not accompany you tonight. How long until you are completely disgraced?”

“So this is blackmail,” Petyr chuckled. “I pay you a handsome dowry for the lady and you save my foundering reputation? Is this the game you came here to play?”

The boy fidgeted for a moment but it was enough for Petyr to see his hand.

“You say you know my future wife?” Petyr asked simply. “Not as well as I. In fact, she is quite a fantastic fuck, isn’t she? Did you know she fancies women as much as men? Why would I marry off my delicious ward when my wife and I can share her every night? I think you forget who I am, Harry. You can’t blackmail a man that already has the worst reputation in Kings Landing. As far as Lord Royce, he doesn’t care. He’s happy someone has finally agreed to marry his daughter, whom we both know is not virtuous by any means. I get a respectable name and children, and Royce becomes wealthier than he’s ever been. My dear boy, know your opponent before you ever attempt to play against him.”

Harry stood and seemed to collect his thoughts and Petyr had to refrain from laughter. Oh, these young men really didn’t know what they were getting into. A shallow plan based on very little information and they still felt it more than enough to collect their winnings. Perhaps a man with a reputation to lose would be an easy target but Harry truly was an idiot for coming here tonight.

“It will be an interesting conversation tomorrow when I go to see my childhood friend, along with her father... *and her Grace*,” Harry threatened and seemed to gather his wits.

“Go right ahead, Harry. Ask her,” Petyr goaded. “It is no secret among the ton as to why we are marrying each other. Which makes you, funny enough, the last to know. Do you think she’ll give up Harrenhal, my wealth and titles to play along with you? And before you quip about my age, I found it very easy to make her come multiple times. In fact, I do recall Miranda mentioning you were lacking underneath your small clothes. As far as the king, let’s see whose word weighs more in gold. Sansa is nothing to him. Do you really think he will care that I’ve made the girl my mistress? If I was attempting to marry her myself, you might have had a bargaining chip.”

Harry smiled and Petyr knew he was about to play his last card.

“Do you really expect me to believe that lovely, innocent girl is fucking you?” Harry quipped sarcastically. “I would bet my life she is a virgin.”

“Ah, quite the loss. How would you like to be buried?” Petyr laughed heartily as he moved to the doorway. “Too bad you’ll never know the rapture of her milky white thighs wrapped around your waist. I do believe you told me just moments before that she had quite the reputation in the Vale. Yet, now you’re defending her honor? Oh Harry, aren’t there more young girls in the city to bear your growing number of bastards?”

The boy looked perplexed and wasn’t leaving. Harrold paced a bit as if trying to remember something and Petyr had the sickening feeling the boy wasn’t here on his own accord, not fully, and then he smiled. So, Harrold did have one more card up his sleeve after all.

“As I said before, why would a man like you take a Stark as your ward?” he asked smugly and Petyr’s stomach knotted a bit. “You, who have had many young women, why her? Why your ward if not just use her as a whore and be done with it? No one would think less of you, for that’s all she is.”

Petyr wanted nothing more than to kill him right here and now but just smiled, hiding his fury.

“Hmm, well, there is no love lost between Edmure Tully and I. He certainly, by his old family honor, wasn’t going to let me take the girl as a mistress, no matter who he father was,” he jested. Edmure wouldn’t say a damn word to anyone for Petyr paid him well and it wouldn’t be a surprise if Lysa was angry. It was clear to anyone at the Eyrie, that she detested her niece and fancied Petyr for a long time.

Harrold grinned and before Petyr could say a word, it was too late.

“Or it could be that no one really knows how you fancied the late Duchess of Winterfell and how her daughter is practically a perfect image of her. Speaking of childhood friends, Hoster Tully fostered you did he not?” Harry smirked and toyed with his cigar, sniffing it as if he had won something.

“How do you think I knew Lysa so well? It’s no secret,” Petyr said flippantly.

“Oh, but your affections towards, Catelyn, that isn’t well known, is it?” the boy grinned in satisfaction. He knew he hit the motherload and there was only one person he could have received such information.

Petyr didn’t bother to deny it; he knew Harrold knew too much. He walked right into it, in his over-confidence.

“Quite in love with her, is what I’ve been told,” Harrold japed as he circled Petyr like prey. “How would the king like to know about his faithful servant, whom he has bestowed such title and power... that this man was in love with the traitor’s wife and now has taken the daughter into his home out of a sentimental need to protect her? Perhaps, he was in league with the Starks all this time?”

“You forget, Harry,” Petyr said with nonchalance. “The Starks were defeated. A defeat I helped in great detail, I might add.”

“Ah, but you know Joffrey and Cersei, they’ll forget everything if they *think* you’re you favor the girl for reasons other than your bed. It was really quite stupid of you to bring her here, in front of everyone,” Harrold laughed and Petyr had to think quickly to end this before it destroyed everything.

"And why would Joffrey or the Queen Mother believe you?" Petyr asked skeptically, betting who was really behind this.

"Me? Oh, I have quite a good friend that the king is surely to believe. Someone very powerful," Harry smiled and Petyr knew who it was without needing to ask. "Someone who knows you very well, Lord Baelish."

Petyr kept cool. He knew Hardyng. He wanted money. He wasn't going to gain title or power through denouncing Petyr to the king. Lysa surely wasn't going to pay much, he gathered. He knew Petyr was very wealthy and would pay dearly to keep this quiet. A man that could lose everything was quite the winning card game, and sadly, the boy and *his* benefactor, who was not the elderly Lady Waynwood, played it well. Now it was time to kill two birds from the Vale.

Petyr sighed and looked down, playing his role.

"So, Hardyng, how much to make this little problem go away? I'm assuming no one else knows, or you wouldn't be here," he grimaced.

Harry chuckled at his good fortune, "My, my, my... how the mighty have fallen. Did you not say that you would teach me how to gamble and win? My friend, I don't need your instruction."

"So it appears," Petyr said evenly, and looked around nervously for Harry's benefit. "Come now, what do you want and let's settle this."

"Well, I am only knighted and cannot marry above my station, yet there is no money in the ladies I'm allowed to court. No wealthy father would give his daughter and her inheritance to me, a gambler and philanderer, as you have said," Harry began confidently. "You were right, I'm tired of old widows and want to... settle down with a comfortable life. I'm sure you can be reasonable, Baelish."

"I gather you no longer care if Lady Waynwood disapproves of your marrying, not only below your meager class, but to that of a traitor with no title or social standing? You won't be invited to many dinner parties, Harrold," Petyr smiled sarcastically. He needed to play along a little to be shrewd, as it was his reputation as well. He was a businessman after all.

"It won't matter with the money you're going to pay me, generously of course, for her dowry," the boy countered back and Petyr smirked. Now, they were just down to haggling over price, were they?

"And how much will it cost me, to sweep our little problem under the rug where it belongs?" Petyr asked.

"It certainly isn't my problem, Baelish," Harrold laughed. "She is beautiful and I'm quite sure I'll enjoy fucking her every night while I'm receiving... oh, fifty-thousand guineas? It's a nice round number, don't you think? I feel, a man of your wealth, could easily come up with such a sum rather quickly."

Petyr pretended to think it over, "And where, and when, should this business deal take place?"

"I'm willing to bet a man like you has money stashed someplace for special occasions, and this is a special occasion. Think of it, a quiet wedding where the bans will not be read. A young girl, forever out of your social climbing agenda," the blonde grinned. "And if the king were to ever bestow a new and wealthier title on your head, I think a little compensation now and then would be a kind gesture to your new... hmm, what would I be to you? She's not your daughter, obviously. If you had a daughter, I'm sure you'd give her quite the inheritance."

"Enough, Harrold," Petyr sighed in false defeat. "You have your price. Eighty-thousand and let that be the end of it. It's more than enough for you. Leave me to my new bride and let's be done with this. Where shall we meet, later tonight? Why don't I take you to Black's. We'll settle it there. You can say you cleaned me out."

"You have eighty-thousand guineas? Just that easily?" the boy scrutinized.

"Harrold, I have gambled as much before. I am able to retrieve such a sum, but don't get greedy or it will appear suspicious," Petyr eyed him with disdain. "If suddenly you have acquired my home and business earnings, people will wonder where you got it and no one will believe you won that much from me and we both lose. I want this to be the end of it. Take the damned girl and your money. You've beat me, that's what you wanted, isn't it?"

Harrold lit his cigar and pondered the deal mockingly.

"Fine, eighty-thousand. Tonight," he grinned, exhaling a ring of smoke.

"Let me take the girl home and I'll meet you there with contracts and money in hand," Petyr grumbled looking at his pocket watch. "Meet me in two hours."

Harrold took Petyr's hand and shook it vigorously, laughing to himself in victory.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Baelish. I never knew it would be so easy to become rich," he smiled. "If you're not at Black's in two hours, I'll be sure to have a lovely conversation with two important ladies of influence."

Petyr watched the boy walk casually to the stairs and smiled. He knew who was behind this little con artist and both would be dealt with accordingly. First, he had to get Sansa home and draw up the necessary documents and gold. He walked back in his box where she waited impatiently.

"I was beginning to think you left me here," she sighed. "What did Sir Harrold want?"

"Oh, your hand in marriage," he said lightly and watched her face change from shock to curiosity and distrust. "For a rather handsome dowry, I might add. Not that he has any feelings for you, in case you were wondering about his true intentions."

“You’re impossible,” she rolled her eyes. “I don’t like your games.”

“It’s not a game, sweetling,” he said seriously. “What do you think we were talking about for so long out here? The opera?”

“But – you – you wouldn’t... would you?”

The fear was real as the muscles in her throat clenched. So, she truly wasn’t interested in the young and handsome Hardyng. How interesting, Petyr thought to himself.

“You think I would marry you to such gutter trash, my dear?” he mocked her, feeling a bit upset that she would think that of him. “I do believe I have better taste *and* judge of character than that buffoon.”

Sansa cracked a half smile but then her eyes dropped down to her lap where she twisted his handkerchief apprehensively.

“Are you... I mean, do you intend to marry me off? You’ll be a married man soon,” she whispered so softly, he almost did not hear her.

“Do you wish to marry?” he asked curiously.

She chuckled, but there was an underlining sadness as she refused to look at him.

“That buffoon... was probably all I’m going to get,” she smiled but Petyr couldn’t see her eyes. He knew she couldn’t be serious. Was she desperate enough to take a man like Hardyng? “It doesn’t matter what I want anymore.”

“What do you want, sweetling?” Petyr truly wondered, tilting her chin up.

She was silent for a long time as she continued to avoid his eyes. She was hiding something, Petyr knew. Whatever it was, she did not want to tell him.

“I want to go home,” she said solemnly and finally looked at him with a smile that broke his heart. “Will you take me home, Petyr?”

Petyr nodded and took her hand, before escorting her out. He avoided the men who wished to speak with him, or more likely wanted to get an eye full of Stark’s daughter on his arm. Thankfully, most of the gossipmongers had left or stayed in their little hate-filled circles speaking behind gloved hands and lacy fans. Briefly, Petyr would glance at Sansa and he couldn’t help but feel pride in how she held her head high. She was a true wolf, brave and sure as her family sigil suggested.

Once they were back in the cold carriage, did she finally let her guard down and sigh in relief. She enjoyed the opera, he knew, but it did not come without a price. The ride home was quiet, down the dark streets with faint lamp lighting their way. They passed Black’s, the city’s most affluent and exclusive gentlemen’s club. If not for Petyr, Harrold wouldn’t be allowed to step one foot inside tonight. Petyr smiled to himself, it was going to a long night. Once, he used to gamble all night long, take a lover or seduce a man’s wife just for fun as other lords made generous use of the brothel next door. It was not advertised as such, keeping in with the exclusivity and secrecy of its prominent and wealthy patrons. Petyr would know, because he owned both which was not known as he kept many of his lucrative business dealing in the shadows. Marcus Black ran the club, as his wife handled the brothel, both paid handsomely to keep Petyr’s name out of it, the silent partner that kept the wheels well-oiled and moving. He knew the man and wife skimmed off the top, but so much money flowed through every day, Petyr didn’t harp on them about it. The place made him filthy rich, moreso than his other endeavors in Westeros. It also was the key in gathering much needed information. Petyr learned most of what he needed to know from drunk lords losing their inheritances at the tables and whispers to whores. The ton had no idea how many pots Petyr had his hands in.

He was brought out of his thoughts when the girl leaned against his shoulder and Petyr wondered how much champagne she drank while he was haggling with Harrold. One of the emerald earbobs fell off as she nestled more into him with sleepy haze. He pocketed the little jewel and smiled wrapping a warm arm around her as they were nearly home. She would go to bed and he would deal with the bothersome blonde.

The soft clapping of hooves against the cobblestone and the beautiful girl snuggled into his side was almost enough to make him drowsy. If he could, Petyr would take her away tonight, but he knew it wasn’t possible now. Too many years and gold invested with long plans laid to turn away when he was so close.

Her hair was softly scented and like satin between his fingers as he played with a ringlet that had come loose from its pins. Sansa was so soft nestled against him and wondered if she realized the intimacy of it. Right now, he didn’t care as he relished in the feeling. This is how he wanted it to be. Petyr looked down at her ivory hands and could visualize at gold band on that lovely finger.

All too soon, the carriage stopped in front of his townhouse and Petyr gently nudged her to wake. Her eyes were in dire need of sleep but a small smile formed on her lips as she blushed at him. She looked so young in this moment and Petyr could see a daughter in the woman before him. He could see taking a girl with her eyes and perhaps his dark hair to her first ball. He would be an old man by then, but he would enjoy it just as much at taking Sansa to her first opera tonight.

“You’re staring,” she blushed again.

“I am. If I forgot to tell you, you look beautiful tonight. Thank you for joining me, my lady,” he smiled and felt his heart lighten when she returned his smile.

There were times when he complimented her and she would have a strange look on her face. Sometimes she would blush prettily and others... he couldn’t place it. He wasn’t sure if his compliments made her feel uncomfortable or actually liked them. Perhaps, she wasn’t used to getting compliments anymore.

“It’s a shame Myranda missed it,” Sansa finally looked away. “Do you think she would have liked

the story?"

"Honestly, I don't know," he mused. "I think she would have enjoyed mingling more."

Sansa's face changed and her words, cut him in a way that wasn't an insult.

"It was a good thing she didn't go," she began and Petyr hoped that Sansa had liked that it was only the two of them tonight. "The heckling and gossip would have embarrassed her terribly. I hope she doesn't hear of it."

"Do you really care for her happiness so much?" he asked curious if Sansa was being honest.

"She cares for you and I don't want her to have the wrong impression. She's trying to fix her reputation find some happiness and I think she's found it with you. I just don't want to ruin things," she said sadly and Petyr wanted to tell her the truth but knew he couldn't. Now wasn't the time.

"Don't worry about Miranda and I," he smirked. "We have this sorted out. It will be alright. That heckling was more about me, not you. They know I don't play by their rules and love to try and tear me back down to where they think I belong. They are envious, Sansa. They see a strong and beautiful woman like you and can't stand that you exist. By insulting you, someone who has done nothing to them, they are only showing what they truly are... petty, miserable and bitter old corpses because their own lives are boring and meaningless. You are a reminder of what they cannot have nor can ever be."

Her breathing hitched as she stared at him with wide eyes. Dear God, he wanted to kiss her in this moment but held still and let it pass. Clearing his throat, Petyr stepped out and took her hand once more helping her from the carriage. He removed her cloak handing it to the footman before giving her a little peck on the cheek, bidding her goodnight.

"Where are you going?" she asked when he did not remove his cloak and gloves.

"I'm going to Black's tonight. I have some business to attend to," he replied smoothly with a smile.

All the tenderness from her in the carriage disappeared as she frowned.

"You're going to gamble, you mean," she huffed taking off the earbob and then realizing the other was missing from her ear as she scanned the floor in horror.

Petyr chuckled and handed her the emerald and diamond jewel.

"Gambling is a standard business of gentlemen, sweetling," he reminded her of who he was. "Especially, considering the kind of business I'm involved with."

Was it disappointment he saw in her? Had she assumed they would sit by the fire in the library as they were accustomed to most evenings?

"Don't stay up late, and no more brandy," he grinned when his words shocked her knowing that he had been a keen observer.

She couldn't deny it and instead of fighting with him, she scowled and marched up the stairs to her room. Petyr wanted to laugh, but it did concern him. She was drinking, more than she should and trying to hide it. Had it been Miranda, he would not have cared but with Sansa... it was not good for her. Alcohol numbed the mind of things it did not want to think on and Petyr had to admit that much of her problems were caused by him. Once he got her back to Harrenhal, it would be better, he thought. He needed to get her out of Kings Landing as soon as he could.

Petyr wrote up a document that would appease Hardyng, awarding him the eighty-thousand as bribery and set out to the club to meet the young man that, who with confidence of youth, believed he had won quite the prize with a little trickery. Harry, and all the rest, just did not know who they were dealing with. Petyr won on most occasions and allowed himself to lose only to gain something better. He was willing to wager many lords thought he was mad or reckless. Petyr made bets and moves that seemed to work against him, as he was using Sansa now, or just to baffle and amuse himself. It was all a part of the game and the illusion he had created. Lord Petyr Baelish was a harmless fop, a rich and talented fop in matters of finance, but harmless all the same.

Entering the club, the footmen brought him the whiskey always asked for and found Marcus. The two men conversed quietly in a way that was unassuming to anyone watching. He advised to admit one, Sir Harrold Hardyng and direct him to a private lounge for more important men of the ton. Business was booming this week as many of high society was in the capital for the king's upcoming ball and Petyr smiled. Even if he lost the eighty-thousand, he would triple his profits from this week alone. The club was filled with father's and their sons, some Petyr had not seen in months or years. These men frequented gaming hells in and around their estates but were not used to the high stakes of playing at his establishment. Judging by the looks of some, Petyr was certain he was going to make a killing tonight.

The clock struck one, and Petyr frowned as he took his winnings from the last card game, to the dismay of Lord Tyrell and his son. Hardyng was late. Petyr detested tardiness in business affairs. It showed a lack of respect and judgement from the other party and it tended to irritate him. Harry was the one that set the time even though Petyr chose the place. He wanted to get this over with and go home.

Marcus tapped Petyr's shoulder, signaling him to the blonde that strode over to his table. Hardyng was all pompous with his grin as he sat down next to Petyr.

"Baelish, thank you for inviting me. Her Grace will appreciate your letting me experience the capital during my *short stay*," the boy smiled and Petyr played along.

"Of course, Her Grace and I are childhood friends, I would not deny her wishes. Robert is too young and Lady Waynwood surely would prefer the company of the ladies. I hope she doesn't feel her *ward* will be influenced by a man of such ill repute?" Petyr jested making the Tryells laugh.

"It shouldn't be much of a contest tonight, I do not have the funds of the gentlemen here," Harry japed with a nod of his head in acknowledgement. "Perhaps a sherry and I'll observe how rich men win their gold."

Petyr chuckled at that offering him a chair at their table.

"Then have a whiskey, my boy. Sherry is for the women," Petyr said signaling the footman to bring another round of drinks.

"Be careful, Harry, Baelish here, takes no prisoners when gambling," Loras laughed. "I've already lost ten-thousand."

"You mean *I* have lost ten-thousand, my son," Lord Tyrell grumbled looking at his cards.

"No, you've lost twenty-five thousand to me in just the last hour, Mace," Petyr smiled setting his cards face down watching the old man seethe.

"I'm father to the queen, Baelish, and yet you seek to bankrupt me," Tyrell frowned as he placed his bet in the center of the table.

"The queen's father or no, it doesn't excuse what a terrible player you are. Loras, my boy, pay attention. This is how you win without trying," Petyr goaded tripling the bet with his gold after taking two cards.

"You're bluffing, you don't raise that much taking two cards after a meager first wager," the man huffed and matched the gold. "I'm calling you out tonight, *finally*."

Tyrell smirked laying down the two small pairs of nines. Loras patted his father on the back and Harry congratulated the man on his win. Petyr raised his eyebrows and grinned as he turned over his hand on the table revealing a small flush.

"Damn it, man, do you ever lose?" Tyrell complained as Petyr scooped his winnings to his side of the table. "This game from the colonies is for crooks, I tell you. Crooks and thieves."

"Oh, come on, Tyrell, it is a simple game but it's not so much the cards but the players in how you win," Petyr chuckled. "Harrold, the key is to either figure out what your opponent is holding by their bets, facial expressions, ticks and so forth. You can tell if they hold something significant and fold if you don't have anything good, or fake your own terrible hand if you know they don't have anything either."

"Baelish, your reputation is you never lose," Tyrell frowned. "Never should have attempted playing you tonight."

"I lose occasionally, Tyrell, and believe me I wasn't happy about it," Petyr laughed heartily looking at Harry next to him. "Sooner or later, I gain it all back plus some."

"Well, I must bid you gentlemen goodnight, my old bones are aching after such a long journey from Highgarden. Baelish, you'll have to steal someone else's money tonight," the man grumbled as he and his son stood, collecting their personals. "Come along, Loras."

Petyr and Harry sat quietly until they were relatively alone.

"So how will this work?" the boy asked, anxious for his winnings.

Petyr handed Harry a heavy purse of fifty-thousand of what he originally demanded under the table.

"We will play for a while and you will win. Simple as that," Petyr said as Marcus brought over a new deck of cards. "It is stacked in your favor. You will win my thirty-thousand with beginners' luck and be on your way. The contract to my ward is inside the purse. You decide on the date and I will bring her to you. I would suggest that it wait until after his majesty's ball. Quietly and away from Kings Landing would be the right course of action for both of us. You will be positively wealthy and do as you please as long as it no longer involves me."

Petyr dealt the cards and made a small wager of one-thousand guineas. Harry was about to lift his heavy purse to the table when Petyr kicked him hard from underneath.

"Ow," the boy yelped. "What in blazes was that for?"

"Do not show how much money you have, you fool," Petyr spat quietly. "You'll be accused of stealing, a man of your means. Put two thousand on the table and nothing more. If they see that purse, they'll be wondering where you got it."

Frowning, the boy sifted through the gold coins and paper notes from the purse hiding it inside his coat. Eighty-thousand was too high a sum in just gold, and added enough bank notes to even it out. Petyr always kept money hidden away in many places, but easiest was here where it flowed so heavily from night to night. Harry, did however, pull out the document in regards to Sansa to see if it was legitimate, as Petyr believed he would, and then quickly tucked it away.

The men played quietly as Harry built his winnings steadily. Luckily, it was very late and many men had already left for the night, teasing Petyr that he was finally losing for once. Petyr japed and said he would win it back soon and hoped they would leave and not stay to watch the game unfold into the wee hours of the morning. Petyr was yawning already and could see this last hand would seal the deal. It was practically three, and he needed to finish this.

"Well, Sir Harrold, it seems that finally I have met my match," Petyr grinned, pocketing the remainder of his coins from the table. "It's quite late and I'm not the young man I used to be. Be wary of those men left, they will not be so kind in letting you leave with such a lucky purse, I would recommend retiring for the night and certainly don't let it sit unwatched if you take a whore to bed next door. She'll suck you and your cock dry."

Harry stood and held his hand out to Petyr.

"It was a pleasure playing you tonight, Baelish," the boy grinned. "I hope I may always be so lucky. Lady Waynwood and Her Grace will be pleased to know I didn't lose my inheritance."

Petyr took his hand and smirked, "The pleasure is all yours."

"I'll be sure to call on you and your pretty ward... *after* the king's ball, as you suggested," Harry said smugly and Petyr let him have his moment of victory.

Petyr smiled and nodded curtly before explicitly making his exit known to the rest of the gentleman still gambling and drinking. Marcus handed him his cloak and gloves and Petyr gave the man a knowing glance as to the boy. The man nodded in agreement and bid Petyr goodnight.

He saw two gentlemen outside debating on the whether to enter the brothel when Petyr offered a quick goodnight, climbing into his carriage. *Good*, he thought, as the driver took them around the city block slowly and then parked near an alley.

An hour passed, when he finally spied Harry, drunk, walking down the street having left Black's. Petyr ordered his manager to let the boy gamble and drink but kick him out before four and make sure no carriage would be at his disposal. Petyr knew the boy took a cab to get here, since he did not own his own carriage and riding in Lysa's with her crest would have been ludicrous, even for her.

The streets were empty and the lamp were dying as it would be dawn soon. Even the most die-hard gamblers had left for the night, and now Harrold Hardyng, victorious and arrogant schemer was on his own, just as Petyr had planned for it. Petyr exited his carriage, wrapping his cloak around him to hide the white of his shirt and made his way to the street corner under the cover of darkness.

Two 'thieves', in Petyr's employ, waited patiently as the man in question passed and Petyr gave the order with the nod of his head. It wasn't long before Harry realized he was being followed and darted down another alley. The man was an idiot even if Petyr had not planned it. Leaving Black's all alone with a full purse was a beacon to any thief looking for a quick pay off.

He turned down an adjacent alley and waited in shadow. His men would herd the boy right to him, in a place where not a spec of light nor eye belonging to a creature with less than four legs resided. He heard the boy scrambling down the alley and turned around only to see the men had given up their hunt. His men were well paid, loyal and did not care for what their boss had planned for the boy. For all they knew, he stole from the club or something worse.

Harry stumbled down the dark alley and Petyr stood still against the cold and filthy brick.

"Fucking bastards, lowlifes... think they can mess with me? I'd show them both," the boy muttered drunkenly before a hand gripped him tightly and a dagger threatened to slice his throat.

Petyr didn't say a word and let the cool blade do the talking as the blonde stopped struggling and whimpered like a child.

"Here, take it," he mumbled holding a small leather purse and Petyr chuckled darkly. Perhaps a dumb thief might take it and run, but Petyr knew better and disguised his voice.

"You jingle like a man carrying a bag of coins ten times that size, m'lord," Petyr jested. "Let's find out."

Petyr reached inside the boy's cloak and felt his purse tied and hiding inside Harry's coat.

"Shall I release you of such a heavy burden?" he laughed, yanking the purse away. "Not very wise to walk alone at night after winning so much at such a wealthy man's club?"

"You fucking bastard, I'll find you. You hear me? I'll kill you," Harry swore and struggled before Petyr put pressure on the dagger and heard the man curse as the blade cut his skin.

Petyr tutted next to the boy's ear reverting back to his normal voice, "What did I tell you about knowing your opponent?"

"You!" the boy choked in fear and Petyr wanted him to know that he bested him.

"I know you did not come up with this little scheme on your own, Harry," he whispered with a deathly tone. "Tell me and I'll let you take the money and go."

The boy didn't waste any time at all and coughed out her name. Petyr already knew it, but for some reason he wanted to hear Harry say it. *Confirm it.*

"Thank you, my boy," he said and with a deep swipe, the dagger sliced through the blonde's throat spilling his blood down onto the gutter. The boy shook as his life drained away. "There are two things you never fuck with, Harrold. A man's money and his beloved..."

Petyr let the boy drop into a filthy puddle, tucking the purse inside his cloak. He picked up Harry's small purse and emptied the few coins into his hand, throwing them down the darkened alley. One would think the boy was chased and then robbed. Marcus would vouch that Harrold left with huge winnings and very drunk. He would also vouch, not that Petyr would even be suspected in such a terrible murder, that he left long before in his carriage in the view of several well-known patrons. Petyr wiped his dagger clean on the bottom of Harry's cloak and pocketed it out of sight.

Petyr stared at the dead boy on the ground covered in blood and shook his head. He detested getting his hands dirty, but this had to be done himself. Petyr did not trust anyone else with the money and documents in the purse. It was more an annoyance he had to waste his time on when he had more important things in play. Harry brought it on himself and Petyr felt no remorse for the arrogant and stupid boy. Joffrey's ball was a day away and Petyr had one more to deal with. Someone far more important, whose death would be questioned and investigated. She was always in his plans to die, but now it would much sooner than he had anticipated. Now, it was just a matter of how.

Chapter End Notes

Tristan & Isolde - by Richard Wagner (German libretto)

"Wild IRISH maid" is what the sailor actually sings, but I changed it since I'm not using "irish" but "northern" instead.

Black's is a spin on White's, a real gentleman's club in London. Very famous and well known.

Whiskey & Brandy

Chapter Notes

Shorter than my usual chapters ... oh well. It's all I can get out right now. Next will be Joffrey's ball. :D

I'm sorry for the delay but I've been very sick lately and in fact, going into surgery soon. I'm not sure when I'll have another chapter out. If my recovery goes well, and I can actually sit for periods of time (even with my laptop), I'll have time to write. Then again, I'll probably be so doped up on pain meds, you'll get a chapter that is literally "jfadjkljlk;;;llkjldaddd" for forty pages. LOL

I'm not abandoning you or this story. I love this story too much and I think I have put together some major twists and turns that will keep you guessing until the end. I hope you stick with me.

BTW

Disappointment with no Petyr in S6 Ep.1. Figures. At least Sansa got away and is protected by Brienne. I'd prefer Petyr to ride in with the Vale army and save her all the while she beats his arse for leaving her and his atonement is giving her pleasure for the rest of her days but I digress. <3

She was twirling. Her gloved hand pinched her skirts as the faceless man swung her around in circles with the other dancers. Gilded masks covered their faces as they laughed, dressed in their finest. Silks, satins, lace, glittering jewels with sheens of gold and silver seemed to fly around in a whirl.

“Whore of Harrenhal!”

A woman laughed maniacally but Sansa could not see where the voice came from. She looked down and her hands were no longer gloved but dirty and bare as she was pulled along the wet cobblestone. The soles of her feet scraped along the road while the King's Guard hauled her through a screaming crowd of townsfolk. Men ahead held their rifles at attention when a wolf howled in mourning.

The cold ruffled her skirts as the full moon rose over the forest trees. Sansa could hear the gentle lapping of the water on the shore of the lake when a twig snapped and Lady stood at the entrance of the forest. She was full grown and white as snow. The wolf softly padded to her mistress holding something in her mouth that sparkled in the moonlight. Reaching out her hand, Lady dropped an emerald and diamond ring in her palm. Glancing up at the wolf, they were back at the tree where the mother and sibling were buried. A strange fire glowed from behind the huge oak tree while the shadow of a man stood holding his hand out to her desperately.

“Mine for yours,” his voice said sadly holding something that glistened gold in the firelight.

Gold was revealed as her hand swiped a thick layer of dust away from the painting's ornate frame in Harrenhal's gallery.

Duchess of Harrenhall, the engraving read and Sansa glanced up at the enormous portrait. It was covered in dust with a heavy cloth protecting it. A slender hand rested on the woman's lap and Sansa stared at the same emerald ring gracing her finger.

Suddenly, Sansa was outside near the labyrinth and her eyes grew wide at the hedges. They were so small. In fact, the hedges barely came to her own height as she came closer. It wasn't a maze of any sorts, it was a small cemetery with a stone structure in the center. Scared, Sansa glanced back at the house and could see two figures, a man and woman embracing in the second floor window. It was him, she knew it was him and felt a pang in her heart.

A little girl, ghostly in her fiery curls pointed to the entrance of the little cemetery guarded by an iron gate. Lady came to sit at the girl's side, giving her the jeweled ring.

“You don't belong here. You must go,” she said in a voice very much like Arya's at that age.

Sansa backed away until her arm touched the rusted gates. Opening one, she stepped inside with her hand still resting on the metal scrollwork. Only then did she look at her hand. A gold ring, too large for her finger glimmered in the moonlight. Sansa turned and saw all the beautifully carved headstones.

One after another, and another bore the same name...

Baelish

She began running through the maze of headstones to the mausoleum when the doors opened to a bright and burning light. Just then the earth opened beneath her feet and Sansa felt herself falling into a deep pit. She screamed and clawed at the roots to halt her descent but it was too late.

Sansa sat up in a cold sweat, gasping for each breath. She was in her room. Lady yelped in concern and came to her mistress, sitting in her lap. It was dream, she told herself. Just a stupid nightmare. Sansa hadn't dreamt at all since coming to Kings Landing and her first had to be some terrifying riddle. She sighed and plopped back down into her soft bed, pulling up the duvet. It had to be near dawn, surely, she pondered. It was still dark outside her windows and Sansa knew she was never going to get any sleep.

Perhaps she should not have drunk so much champagne again, she giggled. The bubbles went right to her head. After her maid helped her undress, Sansa practically fell asleep before her head hit the pillow. Now, she was wide awake.

Sansa lit the candle next to her bed and looked at the porcelain clock. It was very late or very early depending on the way you considered it. She wondered if Petyr had come home at all tonight. Maybe he went to see Myranda after playing cards. Maybe he spent the night.

Brushing that ill feeling away, Sansa slipped on her dressing gown, tying at her waist. She shouldn't care what he does. He's to marry her. All in all, Sansa was glad Myranda did not come to the theatre last night. Sansa was certain she would have talked through the entire performance and more importantly been offended by all the crude comments. Sansa and Petyr certainly weren't helping the girl's reputation tonight.

Petyr

He was very charming and tender this evening, she smiled sadly. He truly seemed to have wanted her to enjoy the opera. Enjoy it she did, minus the heckling and cruel stares. Other than that, it couldn't have been more perfect. A northern love story. Of course Joffrey and the ton would loathe it but she didn't care. The music and singing made her heart soar.

He held her hand and she imagined his lips brushing her fingers, but Sansa couldn't be certain. The dress was so beautiful. She felt like a queen on his arm. Petyr must have taken great care in its making and the thought made her tummy flutter. He shouldn't be giving her such gifts. Sansa touched her neck where the stunning jewels rested only hours ago. She would never wear them again, she presumed. Perhaps they were meant for Myranda. A ward, even one from a wealthy house wouldn't wear such expensive things.

Sir Harry popped into her mind. He was very handsome but that's where any beauty of his ended apparently. Petyr said he wanted to marry her but only for the money he hoped to receive. Petyr could have agreed and no one would have thought ill of him for it. How much was she worth, Sansa wondered? How much would Petyr pay to get rid of her when the time was right? She wasn't sure what she could believe anymore. If he didn't want to marry her off, then either he was a miser or Sir Harry was asking for too much to take her off his hands. Surely, no man would marry her for love. They would expect compensation. Or after the bloom was off the rose, Myranda would probably get sick of her and tell her new husband to send the scandalous girl to a convent somewhere.

Walking down the stairs, Sansa knew she wasn't going to get any sleep tonight without help. Lady sprawled out on her bed knowing her mistress would return soon. She wished Petyr would just send them both back to Harrenhal.

The Whore of Harrenhal, she laughed bitterly and tried to recall her dream but it had drifted away. Lady was in it and the labyrinth... No, her mind was too addled with other worrisome thoughts of the present. Soon they would have to marry, she wagered. It made more sense to take his new bride home in the spring and not during a cold and dreary winter.

The library was still warm when she entered silently. Did the footmen forget to snuff out the fire when she retired? Or Petyr came home and only recently went to bed, she thought. His chair was empty and the embers still glowed hot as they crackled in the hearth. She went quietly to the sideboard and found the brandy, smirking at his remark earlier tonight. So, he had noticed she was drinking, did he? Why did he care, she frowned, pouring herself a small glass. She needed a night cap tonight. Tomorrow, she could just blame it on the champagne. He didn't know she drank almost the entire bottle while she waited for him in his box while he bargained with Sir Harry.

A voice from the sofa in front of the fire startled Sansa, making her scream.

"At this point, why don't you keep a bottle in your room? Saves you having to sneak down here," Petyr's slurred voice echoed from behind the high back of the sofa.

"You're home," she stuttered stupidly.

"Yes... I see you weren't expecting me," he drawled as Sansa moved and could finally see him laying sideways on the cushions with a decanter and glass on the floor next to him. Clearly, he needed a drink too, she frowned. The charlatan.

"I - I thought that... perhaps..." she stalled coming around to stand near the fireplace.

"I should have gone to bed already, yes, yes, of course," he smirked, downing his glass while watching her.

Petyr was drunk. He must not have done well at Black's, she smirked. Sansa hoped some novice divested him of thousands tonight. It would serve him right.

"Did you lose Harrenhal this time?" Sansa said exactly what she was thinking.

"I never lose, sweetling," he chuckled, pouring another glass.

"Then why are you lying here drunk at this hour?" she added with a twinge of disgust, taking his glass away from him. He was liable to drink the whole bottle if she let him.

"Oh, my little hypocrite. A better question, why are *you* here?" he sat up smiling. He was dressed in only trousers and shirt sleeves. The lace cravat hung loosely on his unbuttoned shirt.

"None of your damned business," she retorted, wanting to throw the brandy in his face.

"Everything is my business, sweetling," he sighed leaning into the back of the sofa and grunting. She could smell the whiskey on him from here. Sansa was about to ring for a footman to help Petyr to his room when she stalled. "How often do you come down here... *every night*?" he raised an mischievous eyebrow.

Petyr wouldn't even remember this conversation in the morning and Sansa did not feel like answering him anyway. The servants would wonder why both of them were down her so late and frankly, Sansa didn't need any more gossip about the two of them. She would help him to bed. Making her decision, Sansa downed her brandy and set the decanter and two glasses on the credenza.

"Come on, you need to go to bed," she sighed walking over to him.

"You have no idea what I need," Petyr chuckled again. He leaned forward as his fingers found the sash to her dressing gown, pulling Sansa towards him.

Petyr had tugged her so close that she now stood between his legs. His fingers had not relinquished their hold on the silk belt and she debated on stepping away. All thoughts of that left her mind when his hands untied the silk, letting her dressing gown fall open, exposing her night dress underneath.

Sansa's breath caught in her throat when Petyr's warm palms rested just above her hip bones. He didn't seem to see her in his glazed and empty stare. Petyr's head bowed and suddenly his arms wrapped around her waist bringing his cheek to her fluttering tummy. Sansa could feel his breath and wondered if he could feel hers. Her heart was pounding as he held her. She knew she should move away but her feet refused to obey. Petyr's hair was thick and shiny while his head rose and fell with her stomach. Sansa was so very tempted to run her fingers through that hair, that she willed them to stay at her sides. Tonight he had been hers. Not once had he mentioned Miranda of his own accord. It was Sansa that kept bringing the woman up. Now, he was holding her as if he never wanted to let go. It was too intimate. She had to back away from this. Nothing good would come from it.

"Oh, my love," he murmured and Sansa stilled.

She didn't know what to say or do. Petyr was clearly drunk and he couldn't know what he was saying. Before she could push him away, Petyr had yanked her onto his lap straddling his hips. The nightdress constricted her movement as she struggled but he refused to let go. When his mouth found her breast through the thin silk, she felt a quiver below her navel. All her struggling was fruitless as he held her tighter and lavished attention on that nipple that suddenly became hard.

This was wrong but it felt so good. Sansa was whisked back to that night in the spring when Petyr did all sorts of sinful things to her body. She responded to him then and those same feelings of pleasure quickly spiked again now with him underneath her. Petyr was stronger than he looked as he kept a vice grip while his mouth suckled her dampening the silk. What she would give to have him pull it down and have that sensual contact.

"Petyr," she mewled unconsciously. Sansa wasn't sure if it was an objection or...

His hand was suddenly in her hair pushing her head down to meet his lips in a fierce kiss. Sansa could taste the whiskey and her mind kept telling her to stop, but his mouth was so addicting. She had almost forgotten what a good kisser Petyr was, even in his inebriated state. It wasn't gentle or teasing, he was ravaging her mouth like a man starved and she met his intensity too eagerly.

Petyr's hands were everywhere. In her hair, as one massaged her breast, then the other cupped her bum. It was then she felt it. He was aroused. The drink had not affected him completely. He groaned into her mouth as she reflexively pressed down on him. That throbbing was building between her legs like before and she ached to find that release.

His hand traced her bum down to her thigh and Sansa could feel him gathering her nightdress. She needed to stop this before it went any further but once his fingers found her, she melted into him. No, she couldn't stop it, her body wouldn't let her.

Petyr's mouth traveled down and feasted on a sweet spot under her jaw while she ground down hard on him. His fingers curled and pumped and Sansa knew it was going to hit her fast. Her core was pulsing to almost the point of pain. She needed it and needed it badly. She latched onto him riding it out and felt him thrusting his hips up to meet her.

Sansa was panting as she felt the beginning of the end and his voice moaned incoherently into her neck.

"Oh, yes my love. I can't wait to make you my wife... make love to you on our wedding night," Petyr groaned and writhed under her.

It was too late, he hit that spot and Sansa was lost for a moment as his words rang in her ears. Her body was convulsing from the pleasure and felt him grunt deeply into her chest as he met his end just as a quickly. All of a sudden, Sansa pushed herself off the man as if he had burned her.

She was wet between her thighs and that dull ache still resonated deeply. The man sprawled out on the sofa completely disheveled and thoroughly sated, stared at her with drunken and heavy lidden eyes.

Make you my wife...wedding night...

The tears stung her eyes but Sansa refused to let them fall. Petyr thought she was Miranda in his drunkenness. He frowned slightly in comprehension of what just transpired and that's all it took. Sansa ran from the library up to her room and bolted the door. What had she done?

Her heart ached and all the pleasure from moments ago was long gone. Petyr hadn't touched or tried anything like that since Miranda arrived at Harrenhal. A physical reminder of who he belonged to. The night at the inn did not count because he was sick and there was nothing to be

done about the sleeping arrangements.

Petyr had been so charming and sweet recently with the trip to the gallery, the beautiful gown, jewels and the opera. If he wasn't engaged, Sansa would have thought he was courting her but it was not to be. He didn't want her after all. That night at Harrenhal was lust, a mistake. Tonight he was so drunk he thought he was kissing his bride to be. Sansa let him touch her, she actively participated in it all. She wanted to kiss him, touch him and feel that pleasure again. She wanted to make him hers again but he was never hers.

Sansa felt so shameful as she laid on her bed as Lady sniffed at her curiously. Petyr was going to marry Miranda and she knew now... she was jealous. The man she never would have given a second glance, the man she hated for so many reasons. No, she couldn't be in love with him. Not a man like him. He wasn't a good man like her father would have wished for her. Petyr was nothing of the sort.

Petyr was a social climber, gambling, unscrupulous rake and everyone knew it. Sansa knew it and yet...

Oh God, it was hopeless, she cried softly. She had been treated so dreadfully these past few years that the attentions of this man must have seemed like a welcome dream. Petyr wasn't a fairy prince stealing her away to his castle in the clouds. She knew what he was but there was always something between them, when no one else was around that was different. Most of the time he made her feel beautiful and wanted, intelligent and witty. Surely, they clashed and often but there was always that underlining tenderness from him that Sansa never expected nor could understand.

She had often wondered if Petyr truly fancied her over Miranda and now, tonight, she knew. He wanted her. He dreamed of her as his wife. All these little outings were just... kindness. Perhaps, Petyr was trying to give her a little of what she dreamed of before he...

That must be it, she cringed. Petyr was going to marry Miranda and very soon. Despite whatever the brunette had proclaimed before, Sansa knew now that she wasn't returning to Harrenhal with them. If the heckling at the opera didn't open his eyes to the problems of keeping Sansa, then he was an obtuse man. Petyr had to know it. He was going to send her away and appease his peers before his wedding.

The frown on his face downstairs was enough. He must know that it wasn't his beloved bride he was kissing and fondling earlier. Drunk as he was, he had to know it was her. A man of his position couldn't let that happen again. Harrenhal was far and away, but rutting with his ward in the capital was much worse. She saw it in his eyes for that brief moment.

Lady licked her hand and Sansa sighed at the little wolf and a part of that dream came back to her. The little girl... and the figures embracing in the window.

You don't belong here

The dream girl was right. Sansa didn't belong here or Harrenhal. She was falling in love with a man that would soon be married. It couldn't be out of the realm of impossibility to think Petyr might truly fancy or love Miranda. Many men had mistresses, including married ones. Petyr was a notorious libertine before his engagement. Perhaps he was having trouble letting go of his past to marry into a good family.

Whatever it was, Sansa's heart ached and ached. For what was worse than loving someone who did not love you back?

Living with him and his wife.

If Sansa had not cared for him, it would not have been a terrible situation. A lovely home, food, shelter and maybe a little kindness far away from the ton.

Now, she cared and it hurt more than she could have imagined. Tomorrow, Sansa would ask Petyr to send her away for good.

The Pawn

Chapter Notes

It's been a long wait, I know. Here's part one of Joffrey's ball. Hopefully, I'll have the rest written very soon. I need some sleep and I'll be back to writing later today. I will be switching between POV's in this and the next chapter because of how this part of the plot unfolds.

The bright morning light made Petyr's head throb as the footman poured him a cup of coffee. He shouldn't have drunk so much. There were many things that were nagging his mind from last night. Harrold would have been found by now and the inquiries into his death would undoubtedly begin. The boy wasn't anyone of importance except to Lady Waynwood and of course, Lysa. Young Robert had been such a sickly boy, that had he perished, arrogant Sir Harrold Hardyng would have become the new Duke of the Vale. Perhaps, Petyr could use that to his advantage today, for today was going to be long and hard. Frankly, Petyr couldn't wait for it to be over with.

He had to play his cards very carefully. Joffrey was an idiot but a cruel and ruthless idiot. Cersei believed she was far more clever than she really was but it still was very risky. Lysa wouldn't trust in Waynwood to divulge her little intrigue, Petyr surmised. Myranda was so vain and narrow minded but Petyr knew Lysa wouldn't trust a Royce to save her life.

Hardyng, Waynwood, Arryn and Royce. The answer was here. The conspiracy he was going to create was here. Who would kill Harrold? What would be the motivation? Hopefully, it would simply appear that the boy had won big and foolishly left alone to be robbed and murdered. However, Petyr always had a contingency plan for everything.

Robert. The young duke was the key. Perhaps he could tell Lysa he sniffed out a plot to kill her son. The woman was ridiculously jealous and her eyes seemed to be only on her niece. Would the woman go public with her knowledge in order to break the marriage contract with the Royces? Lysa was a thorn but not completely obtuse. Petyr losing his titles and fortune would be just as bad for her. He would never be allowed to marry her even if he were free. That appeared to be her goal and could not risk it, hence sending Harry to woo and buy off Sansa instead.

Bringing Sansa to the ball tonight could send Lysa into a rage. If he was going to deal with Lysa, it would have to be tonight. It would be too suspicious if he came to her before then and he needed to keep Robert on his side.

He needed a plot. A plot to kill Robert that backfired. That's how he would play to Joffrey and Cersei. It could be another explanation into Harrold's death considering the arrogant boy's claim if Petyr needed it. That would be more important and hopefully put Sansa to the side, but not completely. He had to be prepared for what to do with her as well.

Petyr would play the social climbing fop as he knew they viewed him. She was just another pretty young girl in his bed. Certainly of no consequence. Petyr knew Myranda was playing her game as well and the ball would be perfect for her to garner sympathy for once in her life. Showing up with Sansa, *at young Robert's request*, would anger the brunette and her proud father. Robert made no secret of his affection for his pretty cousin and Petyr was positive the boy would be overjoyed to dance with her all night. That would infuriate Lysa further, Petyr smiled. The woman was having a dreadful time finding the boy a bride and would use this night and all the southern houses to parade him around like a prize calf.

Petyr sipped his coffee and sighed. He loved the chaos of it all but it still weighed heavy on his mind trying to tie up loose ends. With Lysa dead, he could conceivably lay blame to Harrold's demise on her. Perhaps, Lysa found out that the boy and Lady Waynwood stood to gain from an unfortunate accident befalling Robert. How could he tie the Royces into this?

He drummed his fingers on the table piecing the lineages of the Vale. Robert, then Harrold... and there it was, Petyr smirked. Lord Royce stood to gain everything from both boy's untimely death. Why did he not think of it before, he cursed himself.

Because you didn't have a gorgeous young man vying for your sweetening before.

Yes, this could actually work, Petyr thought. It would make sense that Royce would marry his daughter to a Marquess in the Riverlands. An alliance would increase the wealth of the Vale, which is exactly what Petyr told Lysa over a year ago. In this case with Royce, it would now be a family connection as well and held merit. That alone would make Cersei break the marriage contract. Petyr knew a marriage to Lysa would have never been granted and he was grateful for it. Marrying Myranda kept him in close contact with her and the young duke but nothing more. That was the angle he played to Lysa, wooing her that is was all a ploy for him to be near her.

The next course of action would be to send Robert home with Lady Waynwood instead. She was an old bird and would take it as an advantage to fostering the new duke but Petyr had his people everywhere in the Vale, especially the Eyrie. Sooner or later, the boy would be under his direction. It would be too much to suggest to Cersei at this point in fostering the boy, so offering up the poor Lady Waynwood, who tragically lost her ward yesterday would be the best play.

Petyr's thoughts returned to Sansa. There would be a few ways it could go. Obviously, the Lannisters would wish her gone from the capital. A convent? Possibly. However Joffrey and Cersei were equally cruel in their own ways. Joffrey would chortle about the idea of throwing her

in a brothel. The girl hadn't done anything wrong. Nothing treasonous. They would have no real reason to kill her. Petyr had to play this card very carefully. He knew Cersei would love to insult him with the girl and to her misjudgment, she would construe it as such. Petyr would just want to wait and see where the conversation led them. It was always about outwitting his opponents and quick thinking. There would be so much chaos tonight, Petyr had a slight thrill anticipating it.

It was almost arousing to see his plans and pieces come together to do his bidding. The very feeling had Sansa filling his thoughts again. God, he had almost forgotten how lovely her mouth was. Her nipple stiffening with his tongue. The way she clenched him and gasped as he felt her release. It was heaven to him. It wasn't until she pushed away with the look of hurt on her face that finally brought him out of his drunken lust.

She did struggle, his foggy mind tried to remember. He practically raped her last night as the night in the hot spring under the house. Sansa's beautiful face was painted with anger and shame. She submitted to him for a time but the after effects seemed to show her true feelings. Perhaps she really did not want him after all.

When did a woman's refusal ever stop a man or an arranged and loveless marriage, he frowned bitterly. Petyr promised himself he would not force himself on her again. Once they returned to Harrenhal, he would try again to woo her, gain her trust. They were making progress before Myranda arrived. Even the past few days would have been wonderful had it not been for the politics of the ton and the fact that he was already engaged to marry.

Petyr saw it in her eyes before he left for Black's after returning from the opera. She was disappointed. The girl had assumed they would spend the rest of the evening together. Perhaps there was still hope. It would only take more time, he sighed. He would just have to refrain from wanting to kiss her every waking moment and touching her. The scent of her was still on his hand when he eventually went to bed. It was that musky honey that he couldn't wait to delve into.

"You're awfully deep in thought this morning," her angelic voice rang as she entered the dining room.

Petyr smiled warmly and stood politely as she took her seat adjacent to him as she always did.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked not trying to embarrass her but was curious as to how she would play this.

"I do believe I need to be careful with champagne, my lord," she smiled with no hint of a blush that he expected. "You were right. The bubbles went right to my head."

Ah, so the girl was going to pretend their little tryst never happened. Fine, he conceded. He could play that game. He needed her to go to the ball tonight and embarrassing or enraging her would not bode well for his plans. He had too much to drink as well and Petyr bet that's exactly what she thought.

"Champagne has never been my drink of choice," he smiled tucking into his eggs. "If it makes you feel any better, I had too much whiskey at Black's last night. It's the first time I've lost in ages."

That made her smile, even though she tried to hide it. Petyr could tell she was piecing it together on possibly why he was drunk last night.

"Perhaps it is your conscious telling you to be a better man and stop gambling," she offered quietly and then added, "since you'll be a married man soon."

"Quite," he grinned. "Black's is notoriously filled with husbands wishing to get away from their wives. Do you see me as a domesticated man?"

She refused to look at him and Petyr thought he caught a little smirk on those rosy lips.

"Definitely not," Sansa replied and quickly forked a bit of food into her mouth.

Petyr smiled drinking his coffee and loved teasing her. The sooner they left Kings Landing the better.

"Alas, you're right, my dear," he mused. "I need to attempt to be a better husband from the start. That would be the honorable thing to do for my lovely wife to be."

That silenced her as she frowned a little, trying to avoid the topic. Petyr sensed something was troubling her and he sincerely hoped she wasn't about to question him about what happened last night.

"I was wondering," she began timidly. "Obviously, you won't want me around when you marry. You'll want privacy with Myranda..."

"Yes?" he inquired softly and she winced a little.

"Am I to assume, you'll send me back to Harrenhal soon? Unless, that's where you plan on taking her, of course," she stuttered.

"Do you wish to return home?" he asked curiously.

The girl did not hesitate and a small pang hit his stomach.

"Yes," she answered.

"I see."

Petyr finished his coffee in contemplation. "Do you wish to leave before or after the wedding?" he prodded not even reflecting with satisfaction that she just referred to Harrenhal as 'home'.

She toyed with her cup debating on what she really wanted or what she thought he wanted to hear.

"Before," she finished softly. "I do not like the capital. They clearly don't want me here and... well, you and Myranda need to be alone. I'm in the way and I don't want to bring any more scandal to either of you."

You don't know how right you are, sweetling.

"How soon do you wish to leave, my dear?" Petyr said nonchalantly picking up his paper noticing Harry's murder wasn't mentioned yet. It would be front page news of course.

"As soon as possible?" she muttered shyly as if she expected him to deny her.

"Very well," he said scanning the periodical and caught her surprised stare. "You can leave tomorrow but I require you to accompany me tonight."

"Tonight? Surely, my lord, you should take your bride with you..."

"Oh she'll be there, escorted by her father, as it would be proper for such an event," he interrupted and flipped the page avoiding her eyes.

"What event?" she asked nervously.

"The King's Grand Ball, of course," he chuckled. "As Marquess and advisor to the king, I simply must attend."

"But – but," she stuttered, "Why would you want *me* there? Joffrey and Cersei would be insulted... and Myranda..."

She was an astute girl, Petyr had to give her that.

"His Grace has asked for you to attend," Petyr supplied easily and saw... was it a flash of hurt in her eyes? "Young Robert is quite taken with you and I daresay he will have a fit if I do not bring you along."

"But, Aunt Lysa..." Sansa gulped. "You saw how she stared at us last night, I couldn't possibly..."

"You can and you will," he said with a hint of coldness. "Lysa, with all due respect, is Dowager Duchess. Young Robert is the Duke of the Vale and he is beginning to understand it. His request supersedes that of his mother."

"If you say, but the duke's desires do not supersede that of the King or Queen Mother, surely they do not want..."

Petyr tried not to smile. Sansa was putting up a good defense and he knew she absolutely did not want to attend.

"Sansa, it is a silly and sickly boy's wish. The Lannisters will understand. Everyone will gossip and most likely ignore you for the evening but I'm positive you'll have your dance card filled with Robert and myself. The boy hasn't seen his beloved cousin in over a year and may not get another chance... are you really going to be that selfish?" he finalized seeing her face change from so many emotions.

She faltered a bit in thought. "So if I accompany you tonight, you'll allow me to leave tomorrow?"

"Heavens, girl, you make a ball sound as if I'm leading you to the gallows," he sighed. "You've never been to a royal ball. I'm betting you always wished for one since coming of age."

"But it's different now."

"Yes, you recanted. Your family is dead and have not attempted any further treason against the crown. The king pardoned you," he rambled in irritation. "The ton are a bunch of overstuffed and frivolous idiots with nothing better to do than drink and gossip. Pay them no mind. It is the duke's and my wish that you attend. That is the end of it. You can scurry away to Harrenhal tomorrow and hide like a little coward."

That ruffled her feathers and Petyr knew it.

"I am *not* a coward," she seethed.

Petyr put down his paper and smirked, "Then prove it."

He had spent most of his day in the study preparing to leave. Sansa wasn't leaving by herself tomorrow. He needed to finish up important business and already had maids readying both of their belongings. Petyr had sent up the other box from the boutique to her room and had not heard a peep from the girl all afternoon. Madame Berkins had promised it was the most beautiful dress she had ever made and tailored exactly to Petyr's request. He couldn't wait to see Sansa in it. She would be the belle of the ball and outshine every woman there, even the new queen. Margery was beautiful but she paled in comparison to Sansa.

Surely, the rumors had been flying since last night about them and it would be a terrible evening for Sansa, but the last she would ever have to endure. Myranda had no idea Petyr was going to bring the girl tonight, nor did Robert. It wouldn't matter though. It was a lie, but Robert would be ecstatic to see Sansa. Petyr didn't need to worry about the boy. It was really a matter of what would Lysa and Myranda do. He had received news from sources that Harrold had been found and it would be all the talk tonight. Petyr just had to deal with Lysa quickly and decisively and then the rest should fall into place.

The day passed too quickly as they dined and retreated to their rooms to dress for the night. Petyr, once again, found himself waiting impatiently in the parlor. Why in God's name did it take

women so long to dress? Two maids helped her tonight and she should have been ready faster than for the opera, Petyr grumbled. Oh well, he was used to being fashionably late.

A little cough made him turn around to find Sansa with her cloak already on and ready to leave. The girl could make a sackcloth fashionable. Her face was lightly powdered and her auburn tresses pulled up into the most elegant style, piled on top of her head with perfect ringlets cascading down. The maids fixed little diamond jewels in the shape of stars with eight points all through her hair that twinkled in the soft light. Petyr wondered why she already donned her cloak. Did she not approve of the gown?

He moved towards her and unfastened the dove grey and soft green cloak, pulling it away. Petyr couldn't contain his praise as he took her in from head to toe. He would have to send Madame Berkins a very grateful gift for this perfection. It was better than he ever expected. The girl was an angel without wings.

The fairest of lavender silk hugged her slim frame, covered with something finer than any lace he had seen before. It was so thin and delicate that you could see right through it giving the material an iridescent sheen. The dress wasn't overdone with bows and flowers like so many ladies wore nowadays. Its simplicity was the elegance and purity of the girl that wore it. The seamstress had sewn hundreds of little pearls and crystals making Sansa shimmer like a spring's morning's dew. She was breathtaking. The woman had made a matching ribbon and silk rose tied around her slender neck and suggested simple pearl earbobs. The dress was the jewel she advised, and Petyr had to disagree. The girl was the brilliant jewel and the dress a magnificent setting.

Petyr's eyes finally found hers and he smiled at the blush on her tender cheeks. She knew how beautiful she looked and yet that shyness was still there. They both knew all eyes would be on her again tonight.

"You are... *exquisite*, my lady," he breathed. "Goddesses are green with envy tonight."

She blushed hard at that and cast her eyes down. Petyr's gloved finger tilted up her chin forcing her to look at him.

"It won't be a terrible as you think," he lied. "You'll be with me, Robert and Myranda. I won't leave you alone to fend for yourself."

Sansa reluctantly nodded and took a calming breath. Going with him tonight promised her freedom in a strange way and she was willing to do it, if it meant going home. Petyr gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek and felt that porcelain skin burn. This girl was too precious and too good for this world, he smiled.

Petyr returned her cloak to her shoulders, fixing the pearl clasp. This time she didn't hesitate at the door, but followed him dutifully to the awaiting carriage. The dress was so delicate and fragile, Petyr lifted her skirts a bit to keep it from snagging as the footman helped her inside.

It was a chilly night and Petyr could only imagine the weather upon returning to Harrenhal in the coming days. He was not looking forward to it and loathed the winter. After living in the south for so long, he had grown accustomed to its warmth. As he climbed in, a maid rushed out with a fur muff for her lady, handing it to him. Instead of sitting across from the girl, as etiquette dictated, Petyr sat next to her and she did not seem surprised at all.

The ride to the palace was quiet and the evening turning cold. Petyr could feel a slight shiver as the dress' material was so thin; it would have been better suited for summer months. His cloak was lined and heavier, as he shifted to bring it around her. Luckily, she didn't reject the offer and let him pull her closer to share the warmth. He might as well enjoy it, Petyr grimaced. This was as close as she was going to let him get for some time after tonight.

As they neared the bright lights of the palace, he felt her stiffen and in that moment, Petyr knew she was afraid. He did not doubt her courage and was only egging her on this morning, but he knew she was smart. Sansa knew what lay behind those walls tonight as he gave a reassuring squeeze of her arm.

There were many carriages and Petyr knew he was later than he wished to be, but there was no changing it. All eyes would be on them the moment they were announced regardless of whether they arrived first or last.

Petyr stepped out first and helped Sansa down. The footmen gawked at the beautiful girl on the older man's arm and Petyr was sure she would have every man's attention this evening. Guiding her up the massive stone steps, their cloaks were taken and Petyr presented his card and Sansa to the Lord Steward for announcement.

They walked through the grand foyer and Petyr felt her tremble once more and the guilt hit him in the gut. He took her arm and smiled warmly as the herald could be heard ahead near the ballroom.

"The Earl and Countess of Blackhaven," the herald projected.

Whispers had already begun as Petyr and Sansa made their way to the entrance of the ballroom. Sansa held her lace fan and gripped his arm a little tighter.

Petyr touched her hand on his arm as they stood at in the doorway looking down into the royal ballroom. This was it. There was no turning back now. Anyone who was anyone in court came to pay homage to the king and his new queen.

"His Most Honorable, the Marquess of Harrenhall and his ward, Lady Stark," the herald belted over the chattering crowd.

As if lightning struck them dumb, the room fell into silence as the ton stared at them. Sansa's hand quivered again and Petyr whispered from the side of his mouth, "Chin up. Courage, my dear."

Petyr heard the girl take a deep breath as he held her hand walking down the stairs into the what seemed like a sentence to hell. She was his Persephone and he Hades, that kidnapped this lovely girl of the spring, only to drag her down into his depths.

He glanced around the room and met disapproving glares and whispers with a smile and nod as if it were any other evening in the capital. Joffrey was nowhere to be seen but Cersei was seated next to the thrones with an unreadable look on her face. Manderly grinned, raising a glass in acknowledgment. Other lords, Petyr knew well from gambling and business, had many expressions ranging from smirks, envy and mocking. Of course, they would think him the greatest of fools for bringing this girl with him to the palace. Only a fool would make such a daft decision. Petyr knew they were all secretly awaiting his downfall and tonight's social blunder would most likely be the last straw to those in power.

Petyr could hear them whisper as they passed by. Those delicate fans did not disguise the horrible things said and he felt Sansa stiffen. To the girl's credit, she stood tall and pretended it had no effect on her. Sansa was stronger than she knew.

"Uncle Petyr!" he heard a voice shout in the crowd. The music began but no one was dancing yet as the show paraded through the ballroom. Young Robert bounded through the people unapologetically until he practically ran into Petyr, hugging him. The boy looked ridiculous. Lysa had dressed him up like a little prince. His clothes were embroidered with heavy gold brocade and looked more like a puppet painted in bright colors with a material that was too bulky for the young boy's frame.

"Your Grace," Petyr smiled and hugged the boy in return. "You look very handsome tonight. Have the young ladies been swooning yet?"

"Don't tease me," he whined until he saw Sansa and a huge smile appeared. "Sansa! You came! I hoped you would."

Petyr breathed a sigh of relief. Sansa wouldn't ask Robert about why he wished for her presence, for it would be rude. Robert wouldn't think of it. Just as Petyr hoped, Robert was thrilled to have her here.

"I wouldn't miss it, Your Grace," she smiled softly as she curtsied to the boy.

Robert took her hand and kissed it, leaning in closer. "I should address you as Lady Sansa here, shouldn't I? You're my cousin but mother said this isn't like balls back home. We must be proper."

"Yes, we must, your Grace," she replied politely and whispered in return. "But if no one is listening to us, we can call each other by our given names. It will be our secret."

Petyr was proud of his little sweetling. She truly was sincere and kind. Robert could be burdensome and obnoxious but he responded to Sansa's gentleness. Something he surely never received from his over-bearing and smothering mother.

"Lady Sansa was just telling me that she hasn't danced with you in over a year, Your Grace. Hopefully, your mother hasn't filled your dance card completely?" Petyr smiled and watched the boy's face light up.

"She's trying to marry me off tonight, I just know it, Uncle Petyr. Will you convince her to let me dance with Sans – I mean, my cousin tonight? Please?" the boy pleaded.

"Anything you wish, my boy," Petyr said patting Robert's shoulder. "Do not fret. I will not disappoint you. As long as you save at least one dance for me with Lady Sansa?"

"Oh yes!" the young duke practically bounced in excitement. "You're a much better dancer than me." Robert leaned in to whisper in Petyr's ear, never taking his eyes off his pretty cousin. "Promise me, she won't dance with any other gentlemen tonight, Uncle. Just you and I. I don't want them near her. Mother will never agree, but I want to marry her. I'm hoping to change her mind. She looks so pretty tonight. Surely, mother will see she is fit to be my bride. She is family after all."

Petyr half smiled at the boy. "Well, it may take more time to convince your mother, Robert. Don't push too hard just yet. This isn't the time or place for this conversation. We'll speak more about it later. But don't worry, I will act as chaperone and keep the other men away from our lady."

"My Lord Marquess," a stern woman's voice sounded behind him. Petyr didn't need to turn around to know whom it belonged.

Sansa immediately curtsied and tried to remain calm under the nose of her frowning aunt, the Dowager Duchess.

"Your Grace," she muttered.

"Ah, my dulcet darling," Petyr kissed Lysa's hand with a formal bow. His greeting was too familiar; he knew but needed to attempt to keep Lysa from creating a scene. "You are ravishing as ever. You must save me a few dances, for I will be eternally jealous of all the younger men vying for your attention tonight. Do you believe my future bride will think me wicked if I spend most of the evening with you?"

Lysa tried to keep her frown, but he could her mask falter just a bit. She just as pompous and over-dressed as her son. She wore a royal blue dress, cinched so tightly her bosom was just about ready to pop out from their confinement. Lysa was covered in bows and pink flowers and that sickly sweet perfume she always wore. She glared at the beautiful niece as she rose and removed her hand from Petyr's arm.

"I wish to speak to you... privately, Lord Petyr," she whispered trying to ignore Sansa.

"Of course, of course. Anything for you, my angel," he grinned, pecking her cheek with a lingering kiss. "I must greet Lord Royce and my future wife first, or *they* might gossip about us."

"They're already gossiping about you, Petyr... *and her*," she sneered in his ear. "Are you mad? Why would you bring her here?"

"Her?" he raised his eyebrows in confusion. "Oh, she's harmless. They'll be talking about her,

and never notice when I steal you away into a dark corner. Robert's happy to see her. They're cousins after all..."

"But, you..."

Petyr spied a very angry Miranda across the room with a few other ladies and he smiled at her. She did not smile back.

"Hush, my darling," he whispered seductively. "We'll talk soon... *privately*, I promise you. I do see my fiancée and must keep up appearances."

"Ladies, Your Grace, I'll return shortly. If you'll excuse me for a moment," Petyr bowed gracefully and saw true fear on Sansa's face at the thought of being left alone with her aunt. "My beautiful bride requires my attention."

Sansa's throat clenched, watching in horror as Petyr left her. She could hear Robert babbling about dancing or something of the sort but she didn't really hear a word. Petyr glided across the room bowing to Miranda and kissing her cheek tenderly. The ladies had moved away gossiping behind their fans watching the couple. Miranda was upset, that was clear enough. Sansa's heart dropped at the sight of them arguing quietly. This was a terrible idea. Sansa knew they were arguing about her and why he brought her.

"Sansa!" her aunt reprimanded harshly but not loud enough to bring attention to them. "Look at me when I'm speaking to you."

Out of her stupor, Sansa glanced fearfully at her aunt that was red with anger.

"Yes, Aunt Lysa," she mumbled stupidly.

"Do not call me that here, stupid girl. You will address me formally," the woman demanded.

"Yes, Your Grace," she whispered looking at the floor and felt Robert slip his hand into hers with a light squeeze that hid behind her skirts.

"I said, why did he bring you here?" Lysa asked filling Sansa with dread. She knew Petyr never should have brought her tonight.

"Lord Baelish said that... that he wished..." she stuttered not knowing what to say. Did Petyr want Lysa to know that her son requested her presence. Sansa couldn't believe that Lysa would have approved by her manner right now. If she told the truth, it would only get Robert into trouble and the boy looked miserable as it was.

"He wished for what?" her aunt asked.

"That His Grace could have a companion and dance partner, of course," Petyr's voice echoed as he returned with Miranda on his arm.

"That was thoughtful of Uncle Petyr, wasn't it mother?" Robert smiled happily.

"Robert, you cannot spend the evening with... Lady Sansa," Lysa began. "It's completely improper. You have many young ladies to dance with tonight. Your cousin is beneath your station. You are the Duke..."

"Yes, mother, I know," the boy interrupted. "But I don't know anyone here. Sansa is my cousin and I will spend my time with her if I wish."

Sansa stood shocked at the young duke challenging his mother. She glanced to Petyr but he only smiled congenially as Miranda frowned at her. The brunette had daggers for eyes and Sansa suddenly felt naked in her beautiful gown. There were many beautiful and well-dressed ladies here tonight and Miranda looked stunning in her mauve damask dress. It was a perfect color for his skin tone and rich hair. Miranda wore a pretty pearl choker and when Sansa glanced down, she saw a sparkling diamond on her ring finger. Since arriving at Harrenhal, Sansa had never seen a ring signifying her engagement until tonight. Petyr must have given it to her just now.

"Robert," Lysa uttered dangerously trying to control her son. "I won't have it. You cannot be seen..."

"No," the young duke retorted hotly. He was close to throwing a tantrum right here in the middle of the ballroom and that seemed to scare Lysa more than anything. "I am Duke of the Vale. I am of age. Lady Sansa is my cousin and the king knows it. I don't care what they think. She didn't do anything wrong. She's not like her traitor family... is she Uncle Petyr?"

"Well, if she was, she wouldn't be standing here right now, would she?" he laughed. "Your mother wouldn't have taken her in if that was the case. Isn't that right, Lysa?"

Lysa frowned at Petyr and bent down to her son. "Robert, you will come with me this instant. I'll not have you ruining your reputation..."

"I will not. I'm tired of you telling me what to do all the time. I'm not a baby anymore," Robert replied with a strength that surprised Sansa. People were beginning to whisper and Sansa knew Lysa saw it as well.

"Fine, do as you will. When they shun you, then you'll understand and I'll have to work twice as hard to find you a suitable wife," Lysa spat and turned on her heel walking into the crowd.

"Well done, Your Grace," Petyr grinned. "Spoken like the strong duke you surely will become."

"Really?" the boy sighed as he watched his mother disappear into the next room. "Will they really shun me?"

"No, of course not," Petyr laughed. "You are the Duke of the Vale, not some lowly knight. You are a very important person. Your mother tends to over-exaggerate. She's only being protective of her baby."

"But I'm not a baby!" he almost shouted until Sansa squeezed his hand noticing the attentive eyes and ears around them.

"Indeed you are not, Your Grace," Petyr bowed. "Your mother tends to forget how much you've grown into a man."

Sansa thought it best to stay silent. She knew Petyr was only placating the boy and Myranda rolled her eyes more than once. She had no patience for the young duke's whining.

A servant passed by as Petyr handed glasses of champagne to Myranda first, then Sansa and Robert.

"A toast, to His Grace," Petyr offered sincerely. "On his newfound strength and boldness."

Robert smiled wildly at the compliment and sipped the champagne only to make a face afterwards. This was his first taste of any wine, Sansa gathered. Lysa didn't seem to permit him alcohol before.

"And to my beautiful wife to be," Petyr gazed at Myranda adoringly and Sansa felt her stomach clench.

They raised their glasses again and Sansa caught Myranda smirking at her. Petyr was wrong. Myranda was not happy he brought her. Her demeanor told Sansa she did not expect nor want her here tonight. She couldn't blame the woman. If her fiancée showed up to a royal ball with a woman the ton had been gossiping about all week... she would probably feel the same resentment. Did Myranda hear about the opera, Sansa wondered. Would she believe the gossip of others or believe her fiancée.

"You will dance with me tonight, won't you Sansa?" Robert asked nervously.

"Of course, Your Grace," she smiled. "I can't think of anyone else I would rather dance with."

"If you'll excuse us, I see Lord Royce," Petyr gestured more to Robert than her but Sansa acknowledged him all the same with politeness.

"I don't like waltzes. I'm not very good but I do like reels and minuets," the boy rambled as Sansa's eyes followed the couple as they mingled their way to a very stern Lord Royce. Clearly, he wasn't happy to see Petyr's choice of companion either.

She and Robert were all but ignored by the ton, except for the gossip. Petyr was a different man in public. He was charming and lavished attention on his bride while they mingled with other lords and ladies. Robert was talking but Sansa wasn't listening as she watched them. Not once did Petyr look in her direction. It was as if she wasn't even here.

Sansa glanced around the room and almost wished that Sir Harry was here. She knew he was a cad, if Petyr was to be believed but at least he would talk to her and she wouldn't be stuck with Robert all night. For that is exactly what was going to happen. Myranda would make sure she monopolized Petyr's time. Sansa couldn't believe that she would allow her future husband to dance with his scandalous ward in such a place where her reputation was at stake. Things might be different at Harrenhal out of the view of the ton but not here. Petyr never should have insisted she come, no matter what Robert wanted.

The boy took her arm and lead Sansa to where a group was dancing. She was surprised Robert stood up to his mother and he didn't seem to hear or care about the gossipers who didn't try to hide their disdain. The duke was young, she heard them say. He didn't know any better. Lord Baelish was a buffoon for bringing her.

Young men leered and smirked at her just like they did at the Eyrie. It was no different here and Sansa felt transported back to that night of Robert's ball. If she wasn't thrown out, Sansa felt she was going to find herself alone once again when she wasn't dancing with her sickly cousin. Petyr promised he wouldn't leave her alone. He lied.

She danced three times before telling Robert she needed to rest for a bit. She regretted that decision instantly when she saw Joffrey make his way toward her. She had not seen him since that day in Winterfell when he executed her family. Sansa wanted nothing more than to kill him. If she had a dagger right now, she would do it even though it meant her death. Searching for Petyr desperately, she finally stood and bowed low to the king she hated.

"My, my, my," Joffrey smirked as he stood before her and they onlookers gossiped madly. "So it is true. Lord Baelish brought his little whore to Kings Landing."

Sansa didn't know what to say and only muttered a simple greeting instead.

"Your Majesty."

Joffrey walked around her slowly and Sansa felt sick with fear. He was going to publicly throw her out, she knew it. There was nothing Petyr or Robert could do to stop it.

"The last time I saw you, you were laying in the mud," he chuckled. "After I had your family shot, of course. Who knew a little traitor could be made to be so beautiful. Baelish certainly spent a lot of gold on you didn't he?"

"I - I ... he made me his ward, Your Majesty," she said stupidly.

"So I hear," the blonde king laughed as courtiers stared at them. "Is that what keeping a mistress is called now in the Riverlands? The rumour is, your own family doesn't want you. How lovely."

Sansa willed the tears not to come but she could feel them welling in her eyes. All she wanted to do was run away. Run away from Joffrey, Robert, Petyr... all of them. She kept quiet and did not try to defend herself. It would not do her any good.

Joffrey leaned in close as she felt his breath on her ear and tried not to shudder.

"What I should do is fuck you in the next room. I don't remember you being this beautiful," he sneered viciously and Sansa trembled. "Tell me, how do you like that old cock of his? Do you let him do degrading things to you? Does he fuck you like the northern dog you are?"

"Lady Sansa?" she heard Robert's voice.

Joffrey stepped away and smiled horribly at the little duke who was half his size. Petyr's laughter was coming closer as he was drinking and joking with two men she did not recognize.

"Oh, there she is," he laughed and suddenly took notice of Joffrey. "Your Majesty, congratulations on your marriage. Queen Margery is beyond compare. A true queen worthy of our king."

A true queen.

That hurt. It hurt because Petyr said it. She knew that's what everyone thought. She was never worthy to be his queen. Petyr sounded as if he was drunk already and having a marvelous time. Now he was insulting her, even if he didn't know it.

"Lord Baelish," Joffrey smirked at the drunken lord. "You and I must speak privately. I will send for you shortly. I need to speak with my mother."

Sansa released the breath she was holding. He was leaving. At least he wasn't throwing her out at this moment. If she had the chance, she would run. Petyr be damned, but Joffrey's next words filled her with dread.

"I will deal with you later, *Lady Sansa*," Joffrey offered with malice before he walked away.

"Now you've done it, Baelish. I never took you for this such a fool to bring a girl like that here. I don't care how pretty she is," one man chided.

"Especially, in front of Lord Royce... and the king," the other japed. "Are you trying to get exiled? Harrenhal can't be that terrible, man. For God's sake, keep your mistresses where they belong."

That was it. That was her breaking point. Sansa gathered her skirts and ran outside to one of the terraces. This time Petyr did not follow to comfort her. It was Robert that slowly made his way outside and sat down next to her.

"I don't like King Joffrey," he whispered afraid someone might hear. "He was very rude to you." He hesitated for a moment, but Sansa knew what he was going to ask. "You're not really Uncle Petyr's mistress, are you?"

Sansa sniffed and wiped her eyes finally looking at her little cousin.

"No," she told him what she thought was the truth. Frankly, she didn't know what she was anymore.

"Good," he breathed. "Because I want you to marry me. I knew you weren't a whore like mother said. If Uncle Petyr marries Lady Royce, then you can marry me and we'll be happy. You'll see. I won't let anyone say bad things about you."

Sansa couldn't help but smile. Robert could be a spoiled little brat at times, but he did seem to genuinely care about her.

"Come, we'll go find mother and take you home," Robert offered and Sansa smiled sadly, following him back into ballroom.

They wandered into a few different rooms and couldn't find Lysa anywhere. Everywhere they went, ladies giggled and gentlemen leared. They whispered and gossiped at the young boy and the Marquess' mistress. She saw Petyr and Miranda briefly as he danced with his new wife and all of the sudden the rooms became too hot. Robert said he was going to look for his mother and Sansa told him she would wait for him out on the terrace. She was certain she was going to vomit and wanted him to leave her alone.

Sansa didn't know how long she had been out there when the cold finally forced her inside wondering where Robert disappeared to. Maybe he had changed his mind or Lysa forced him to leave abandoning her here.

She tried to sneak back in hoping not to attract attention. She did not have a chaperone now and wandering around alone wasn't proper. She shouldn't care about etiquette now but being alone was safe. Not for someone like her. Joffrey's threat loomed over her and Sansa prayed to avoid him. If she could just get out, and run, she would walk all the way back to Petyr's townhouse. She didn't know Kings Landing and it was a good distance by carriage. She'd never make there on foot without freezing to death in this dress. Not only that, she would probably be raped and murdered before getting halfway there. Where the hell was Robert?

A gloved hand pulled her making Sansa yelp. When she saw who it belonged to, she tried to yank her hand away.

"You haven't danced with me yet, tonight," the man said as he dragged her through the crowd onto the floor where couples were waltzing.

Knight Takes Queen

Chapter Notes

Whew.... here it is. I hope it reads the way it played out in my head. I guess we'll see.

This is nowhere near finished... there is so much more happening once they get back to Harrenhal. I hope you're ready for another crazy ride to WTF Town located in Dumpster County. Love you guys!

Petyr practically yanked her into his arms, forcing her to dance with him. It was a waltz so he could keep her close. Petyr knew every eye would be on them and that's what he needed. Witnesses. He glided her around with the other dancers and she flowed like an angel. No woman could compare to her. Her dress glittered like the sun on winter's first frost. The gossip was everywhere and they didn't attempt to whisper. Petyr could see Robert's smile for he seemed to be happy that only the two of them danced with Sansa. Myranda and her father glared as other lords and ladies shook their heads in disapproval. He felt her stiffen and try to pull away, knowing she knew it the same as he.

"Am I such a terrible dancer, sweetling?" he breathed into her ear and she smelled like sweet honeysuckle.

"They're staring. You're already in trouble," she muttered. "Why are you doing this?"

"How could I not dance with you tonight? I cannot let young Robert take all the enjoyment," he smiled.

"Lord Royce... Myranda. They're not pleased," she whispered as he spun her around. "I saw you arguing."

"Is that what you saw?" he grinned and held her tighter. "I do believe she was quite happy with the ring presently adorning her finger. I told her the duke requested your presence and you wouldn't keep me monopolized all night."

"None of them want me here," she stiffened in his arms. "Joffrey... he – I want to leave. I can go now and send the carriage back for you. *Please.*"

"Robert will be very displeased," Petyr pressured. It wouldn't be long now. He just needed to keep her with him a little while longer.

"I don't care. I'll make my excuses that I feel ill. Please, Petyr, please," she whimpered again and Petyr looked down at her blue eyes brimming with tears. It tore his heart out what he was doing, but it was done now. Before the night was out, he will have put on his best performance before leaving this dreadful city.

He wanted so much to kiss those tears away but held himself in check. Gratefully, the timely interruption came as a few guards came rushing in requesting the king's presence. All of the ballroom was a chatter with some sort of accident. Joffrey and Cersei left down a long corridor and the music stopped. Robert bounded over to them and took Sansa's hand as everyone waited and gossiped about what had just transpired.

Petyr waited with baited breath as Myranda came to his side pulling him slightly away from Sansa. Then it came and the crowd of lords and ladies came alive with shock.

"She's dead!"

"The Duchess, Lady Arryn has fallen from the balcony!"

The whispers became louder and louder and Petyr looked at Robert. He was holding onto Sansa as if his life depended on it. The two locked eyes and Petyr felt a twinge of regret for the boy.

"Uncle Petyr, what are saying?" the young duke cried with fear written all over his face. "It is a mistake, isn't it?"

"I don't know, Robert. Surely it must be a mistake," he knelt down taking the boy's hands.

The Lord Chamberlain made his way towards them, followed by Cersei and Queen Margery. Yes, Joffrey would send women to tell the young duke his mother was dead.

Cersei stood staring at the terrified boy and glanced at Sansa then Petyr. Her face was unreadable once again but Petyr kept still and quiet. Queen Margery however was a kinder soul and knelt down near the boy.

"Your Grace, I'm afraid there's been a tragic accident," Cersei began without tenderness until Margery interrupted.

"Your mother, she fell..." the queen said but couldn't finish as the boy cried out and wrapped his skinny arms around Sansa's waist.

The girl didn't falter as she knelt down and hugged the sobbing young duke. The crowd whispered non-stop as the scene unfolded before them. The gossip of the night other than the Stark girl was the murder of Sir Harrold and now the duchess was dead. Petyr had not seen Lady Waynwood anywhere and guessed she had stayed home tonight. Lysa had been drinking heavily and to Petyr's luck, was seen flirting heavily with younger men. The gossip had been something to the effect that she was drinking her sorrows away over the death of the handsome, young ward. Robert clearly had not been told considering his demeanor tonight. All the men were japing at the Dowager Duchess' desperation by her appearance and obvious intoxication. Others were talking about the insult of her niece being here tonight and clearly trying to get her claws into the young and naïve duke.

Petyr rested a comforting hand on the boy's head and looked to Miranda with a look of shock.

"Your Royal Highness, it cannot be... what happened?" Petyr asked gently as the boy sobbed.

"Lord Baelish, we're not certain. She was found on the terrace below. She must have fallen from the balcony from one of the empty parlors. Her... neck was broken. There's nothing that could have been done," Margery explained as she watched the boy cry in his cousin's arms. At she attempted to look caring as Cersei stood motionless.

"Lord Baelish, has Lady Sansa been with you all evening?" Cersei finally asked and Petyr knew it was a possibility but before he could reply Robert cried out.

"She was with me all night. She would never do such a thing," he wailed forgetting etiquette altogether of whom he was speaking to.

"I attest; Lady Sansa has been with either His Grace or me this evening. We were just dancing a moment ago, in fact," Petyr bowed.

Cersei was about to speak again when Margery put her hand on her mother in law. "Of course she couldn't, my dear boy. I can't imagine this girl hurting a soul," Margery smiled. Whatever Joffrey and Cersei were, at least Margery had a breath of heart and decency. "Lord Baelish, the boy seems to know you well and is comforted, perhaps you should..."

"Your Majesty, your husband the king, wishes to speak with Lord Baelish, and I don't think it's fitting that..." Cersei over spoke the queen and looked directly at Sansa. "Well, the duke needs someone more, *trustworthy* given the circumstances. A mistress is hardly the companionship the boy needs. First, the Hardyng boy and now Lady Arryn..."

Petyr saw Sansa's head pop up at that and looked at him with a questioning and Petyr willed her be silent. However, Lord Royce came to rescue as Petyr hoped he might. This was a perfect opportunity for Royce and Petyr knew it.

"Your Majesty, Your Grace," Lord Royce bowed deeply. "If I may be of service. I've known Lady Arryn and His Grace for many years..."

"Yes," Cersei smiled, "Thank you Lord Royce. If you would take charge of the boy for now."

Lord Royce pulled at Robert making him wail louder as he held onto Sansa.

"No!" he cried. "I don't want to go with him. I don't like Lord Royce at all. I want to stay with Uncle Petyr and Sansa!"

Petyr knelt down and ran his fingers through the boy's hair and shushed him softly but he wouldn't budge from his cousin.

"Your Grace... Robert, look at me," Petyr spoke softly and the boy finally looked at him, his face red and puffy. "I need you to go with Lord Royce right now."

Robert shook his head violently and Petyr tried to calm him again, pulling the boy into his arms. He chanced a glance at Sansa and she was visibly shaken by the ordeal. Sadness for Robert but also fear in her eyes as everyone stared at them. She knew they were suspecting her right now. Her chest was wet from Robert's tears as he gave the boy his handkerchief.

"No, I want to go with you," the boy cried again.

"I will see you very soon, I promise," Petyr shushed him quietly. "The king needs to see me and we'll need to take care of your mother. Bring her home."

The boy wailed again and Petyr patted his back, seeing the impatience on Cersei's face.

"Come now, you're a grown man now," he whispered to Robert. "You're the Duke of the Vale. You need to be strong. Do it for me and Lady Sansa. There will be plenty of time to grieve, my boy."

Robert raised his head and sniffed. Looking around the room made it all the more clear to Petyr that only this boy cared that Lady Arryn was dead.

"Will you do that for me?" Petyr asked wiping his tears. "Be a good lad and go with Lord Royce. I will see you when the king is finished with me."

"You promise?" Robert sniveled.

"Yes, I promise," Petyr smiled sadly. He pulled the boy up and guided him to Lord Royce who appeared just a little too smug at his good fortune. Petyr had to refrain from smiling.

"Lord Royce, would you be so good to escort Lady Sansa home," he asked politely after giving

Myranda a kiss on the cheek.

“No, Baelish. Haven’t you insulted my daughter and I enough for one evening?” Royce retorted and the whispers struck a chord and Petyr saw a smirk on Cersei’s face. “I have no room in my carriage for a whore. Come, Myranda.”

“Father, I do wish to stay until Petyr returns,” Myranda smiled sweetly. She knew if she left now the engagement would surely be over and she was pushing to keep that title and money. They were all playing their carefully crafted parts.

“Actually, I must insist no one leave for the moment,” the Lord Chamberlain spoke up. “There must be an inquiry, of course.”

“Surely, you can’t mean His Grace would be involved in his beloved mother’s death. Nor I for that matter, I have been...” Lord Royce objected and Petyr smiled on the inside.

“Lord Royce, take the boy upstairs and I’ll have the doctor see to him,” Queen Margery insisted sweetly. “You may take him home afterwards.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Royce bowed again and pulling Robert with him. “Myranda, come with me now.”

Myranda glanced at Sansa than took Petyr’s hands, kissing him lightly. “I’ll come back down once he’s calmed down,” she whispered and frankly Petyr didn’t care at all. He certainly didn’t like leaving Sansa all alone to fend for herself but he couldn’t bring himself to ask Myranda to watch her. Not after her father’s public denouncement of him and his supposed mistress.

Sansa stood dumbfounded and Petyr knew he shouldn’t say a word to her in front of everyone and betray himself. Myranda followed her father and Sansa froze in fear. Petyr felt terrible for the girl. He hoped this meeting would be quick but he couldn’t rush this. She stared at him, silently begging him not to leave her.

“Lord Baelish, if you’ll follow me. The king is waiting,” Cersei stated as she turned and walked from the ballroom.

Petyr gave Sansa a look telling her to stay put before he followed the Queen Mother replaying tonight’s events in his head.

He drank heavily but it was mostly for appearances. Petyr perpetuated the air of his foppish persona all evening. Japing with the gentlemen about his lovely wife and yet the stunning young woman he brought with him. They all thought he was mad of course.

When he mingled with Myranda, it was completely different. He was suave and lavished great attention on his bride. He tried to charm his way with the lords and ladies that openly objected to him and his boisterous ways. Myranda played her role brilliantly as the woman that would conform him into a decent and courtly husband. She desperately wanted to rid herself of her own distasteful reputation and they both found few to socialize with as they, as a couple, were politely shunned. Once she was on her own with other ladies or with her father, Petyr noticed the attitude towards Myranda greatly shifted.

Petyr imagined they were telling her and her father to break the engagement. They couldn’t ruin their name by marrying with someone like him. A disrespectful man that would have the audacity to bring his mistress to a royal ball, parading her in front of his future wife no less. It was shameful and surely the king would put a stop to it. It wasn’t just bringing a mistress, it was a Stark in their midst and they couldn’t stand it.

He danced a few times with Myranda and mingled with more gentlemen before telling them he needed to check on the young duke and his ward or go back to his future bride. Petyr made sure that he was seen and telling people where he was going and playing the joyful drunken dandy.

Keeping a watchful eye on Lysa, she was deep in her cups. She hated he was marrying Myranda, but showing up with Sansa now on two occasions was clearly too much. She glared at him from across the room but Petyr smiled and winked back pretending not to see her anger.

Later, he purposefully brushed by her, seductively stroking her hand and flashed a brilliant smile. She was drunk already and Petyr knew her too well. He whispered in her ear to meet him in an empty parlor at the end of the corridor in twenty minutes. She wouldn’t refuse him, he smiled to himself. Glancing at the clock on the mantel as he japed with three men, Petyr excused himself to go find his ward and the young duke in the next room.

Ducking out of sight, he waited until the hallway was empty and opened the last door on the left, quickly hiding himself in the shadows of the room.

“You bastard! Your ward? You made her your bloody ward?” Lysa yelled and through a book at him from across the dark room.

“For God’s sake woman, lower your voice. Do you want the entire court to hear?” he admonished her taking long strides to her side.

“You just had to do it, didn’t you? You couldn’t have Cat, so you fucked her damned daughter instead,” she sneered and tried to pull away when he grasped her arms.

“Think of it as a little revenge,” Petyr smiled, kissing her powdered cheek.

“I’m not stupid, Petyr. I saw the way you looked at her that night at the Eyrie,” she pushed at him but he wouldn’t let go.

"She is beautiful, Lysa, but that's all she has in her favor. Plus, she became my responsibility quite by accident, I assure you. Edmure had lost Riverrun to a couple of ruffians when I was on my way home from Lannisport. She ended up coming with me. Edmure clearly didn't want her but he didn't want me to take her either. You should have seen the look on his face. There was nothing he could do. I took everything from him. You know he wanted to help Cat against your wishes. But in the end, he was the coward we always knew him to be. He needed your money more... to gamble away. Your family home is a wreck, Lysa," he explained bringing his mouth very close to her jaw.

"Edmure was always a sentimental fool. I don't care if he drowns in his own urine. Why did you bring her here?" she demanded but her breath hitched slightly and Petyr smiled.

"You didn't tell me Sansa and Myranda were friends. The Royce's came to Harrenhal and apparently Myranda thought it was kind of me to take the girl in. I was going to send Sansa to Sisterton but when Myranda insisted I bring Sansa to Kings Landing, I wasn't quite sure what to do with the girl. You can't believe how thrilled I was to hear Harrold was interested in marrying her. I thought you might had put him up to it," he kissed her neck softly.

"That ruddy brunette made friends with her just to make sure she had more access to my home. That still doesn't explain what you're doing with her. Why make her your ward?" Lysa growled.

"Come now, darling. You know I've had mistresses in the past. What's one more? I'm to be an old married man, soon," he peppered kisses along her jaw and felt her weaken just a bit. "I was so bored at Harrenhal. I needed a little entertainment and you were so far away. I was planning to get rid of her before Myranda came but she said they were old and true friends. Myranda is so naive of these things. I told her the ton wouldn't approve of Sansa in the capital but the woman wouldn't hear of it. She wanted a friend here since she doesn't have any, given her reputation, of course."

"You brought Sansa here to prove to your future wife that befriending her was a mistake?" Lysa scoffed. "What revenge was that?"

"Mmmm, revenge on Cat and Edmure for treating me... and you, so terribly," he chuckled against her sickly sweet and wrinkling skin. "I divested Cat's precious daughter of her honor and swindled Edmure out of his inheritance. He was not pleased."

"How do you know I sent Harry to ask for her hand?" she stared at him suspiciously.

"Oh my love, I know you so well. We think alike. Myranda was supposed to join us at the opera last night, but felt ill. I saw you were unhappy seeing me with your niece. Not to mention you were sitting with Lady Waynwood in your box. When Harry suddenly showed up, granted he had met Sansa a week ago by accident and had been wooing her ever since, I figure he wouldn't have asked if he did not have permission from Waynwood or yourself," he smiled and pulled Lysa back to him. "I did agree, you know. I invited him to Black's that night and we had it all settled. I had the papers all written up. Such a tragedy he did not heed my advice."

"What advice?"

"He was winning by a fair margin when I left last night. I told him to be careful of the other patrons, that they would rob him blind. Beginners luck only goes so far. From what I hear, he drunkenly tried to go home on his own." Petyr frowned. "A fatal mistake. These thieves, why must they resort to murder? They should have just taken the money and run. Now, I suppose I'll have to send Sansa off to a convent after all. I rather was hoping I could get a good price for her tonight. There's always some man that wants a pretty girl."

"So that's why she's dolled up tonight?" the woman chuckled slapping him playfully.

"Had I known Robert would be here tonight, I would have thought against it. I forgot about his affection towards the girl," Petyr lied.

"He is young and mawkish, but that willfulness will be dealt with later," she seethed and Petyr knew the boy would be better off without her in the end. "He's never spoken to me like that before. That damned girl always brings trouble. I didn't want to cause a scene in front of the king and queen."

"No," he japed. "I seem to have done well at that tonight. A huge mistake on my part. Let's not talk about anything else." He kissed her roughly and quickly she responded. "This is all I want right now. Soon, I'll have an excuse to travel to the Vale more often."

"You're a lying devil," she sighed as he moved behind her, kissing her neck and massaging her breasts. "You'll be fucking that Royce girl like the little whore she is."

Petyr grunted, not from lust, but from the scent of her perfume. The scent made him sick.

"I wouldn't put my cock in her for all the gold in the world," he chuckled. "I know who and how many she's been with. She can fuck whomever she likes. We have an agreement. If she gets with child, then I'll call it mine. I just don't want to die from Syphilis, thank you. I have better uses for my cock."

Lysa rutted back against him as his hands moved from her breasts to caress her collar bone and the base of her neck.

"Did Lady Waynwood know her ward was vying for Sansa's hand or was that just a brilliant move by you and dear Harry?" he inquired as he continued his ministrations.

"No, it was my move. Anya knows nothing. Never did. I told Harry I'd pay him well if he spirited her away. Harry is nothing and no one. Who would care if Waynwood's ward married my niece? Nobody. I was angry at you when I heard you brought the damned girl with you," she moaned.

"Why not just have her killed or ask me to get rid of her myself? Have you lost all your faith in me?" he smiled.

“Well, it’s me or her, my love,” Lysa breathed heavy in lust. “Without me, you’re nothing. Remember that. I hold the power here and I’m tired of your games and trysts with other women. You’re mine, do you hear?”

“Oh yes, you do hold a power over me. You could break me with a single word. There is one thing, my dearest,” his voice soothing as he kissed her earlobe. “When you wage a war against me, you best know the consequences of losing.”

Before she could react to his words, Petyr’s hands jerked Lysa’s head breaking her neck instantly.

Petyr followed Cersei down a hallway that led to the throne room and where the king’s advisors met along with the Privy Council. He was quite familiar in this part of the palace. He spent years in Kings Landing finding ways to finance the realm and Joffrey’s war against the Duke of Winterfell. He had made Joffrey and many high lords of the court very wealthy indeed and was one of the masterminds of blocking all aid to Lord Stark’s rebellion. Petyr’s trade agreements with other countries only brought more wealth and goods to Westeros, expanding their empire even though they lost the western colonies across the sea. They were nearing the king’s council chamber and Petyr steadied himself.

When he quickly pushed Lysa’s dead body over the balustrade not waiting to see where she landed, Petyr had very little time to get back to the ballroom to be seen and find Sansa. Myranda would question why he suddenly wished to dance, Sansa would not say a word unless she was already with Robert. It was best to be seen by everyone and making a scene with Sansa was a better option.

Luckily, he found her alone and dragged her with him. Since Lysa was already dead, she made no scream for help or such. It only depended on how quickly she was found. Dancing with Sansa, took his mind off everything for a moment. She was the loveliest creature. The ton hated her, but they were also envious. If the girl had been plain, they could have ignored her, but she was more than beautiful. The ladies loathed her for it. The men would have taken her to bed if they had the chance despite her traitorous family. They knew it and so did Petyr.

With Robert’s outburst and so many witnesses, Petyr hoped it was enough to keep suspicion off him. No one would truly believe he could murder so easily, especially a woman. He was about to find out just how well he could lie and maneuver out of this.

They entered the empty chamber where Joffrey sat with a decanter of wine and it seemed to Petyr he had quite a bit to drink. Cersei however, as she sat next to her son, appeared sober for once in her life. Joffrey gestured for him to sit across the table and Petyr smiled and sat down as if it were any other meeting with either of them.

“Lord Baelish, there are a few things that must be discussed that are quite troubling,” Joffrey began and Petyr was right, he was already drunk based on his slurred words.

“Yes, a terrible tragedy tonight. Please tell me what I can do to be of service to you, Your Majesty,” Petyr offered sincerely.

“I really don’t care about the duchess to be quite honest but mother says we must be thorough,” he groaned as if this bored him to pieces.

Petyr looked to Cersei for more since this wasn’t Joffrey idea to meet.

“The king is curious to the nature of her death, of course. Lord Baelish, you knew Lady Arryn well, from childhood I understand. Do you believe her capable of suicide?” Cersei asked pouring herself a glass of wine.

“As you stated, I fostered with Lysa and her siblings as a child. I knew her as well as anyone, I would suppose Your Grace,” he said. “Suicide? I honestly don’t know. She has become more melancholy over the years since her husband’s death, if I had to think about it. Could it have been just an unfortunate accident? She had been drinking heavily I noticed tonight.”

“Possibly,” Cersei said deep in thought. “But why would she be in that parlor in the dark?”

Petyr shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows slightly.

“I can’t say, Your Grace. I did not spend much time speaking with Lysa tonight since I was with my fiancée most of the time. Perhaps she wanted to be alone... or” he paused on purpose and waited.

“Or what?” Cersei pressed him.

“I would rather not besmirch the duchess’ reputation now that she is gone,” Petyr hedged.

“She’s dead. What does it matter now?” Cersei crossed.

“I knew she took lovers after the duke died,” Petyr started cautiously. “Could she have been meeting someone for a tryst? With whom, I haven’t the faintest clue, of course.”

“Young Robert seems quite taken with you and calls you *uncle*,” Cersei added. “I’m rather surprised you had not attempted to marry her. You seem to spend enough time in the Vale.”

“Lysa?” he acted surprised. “Oh no, we’re only childhood friends, nothing more. Any affection I

had for her was brotherly. God knows her own siblings were never supportive. Well, if you had a drunken, gambling fool for one and a traitor for the other..." Petyr shrugged and sighed. "I adored Lysa. Poor Robert's never really had any father figure in his life. I can see why he has formed an attachment. Lysa always treated me with kindness and respect despite my lowly beginnings. I owe a great many things to her, in fact."

"Yes, I do remember it was the duchess that heralded your achievements in the Vale before you came to Kings Landing," Cersei smirked. "You have proved yourself to be very useful in many ways Lord Baelish other than finance. I don't pretend to care about your personal habits, but that will be discussed momentarily."

Cersei paused but Petyr remained silent and did not attempt to defend himself.

"We have two deaths in a short frame of time, Lord Baelish," Cersei began. "You seem to hear enough whispers and gossip in your travels and dealings. You've been very useful in finding our enemies over the years including, of course, Stark's rebellion, for which the king has shown his great generosity."

"And I am eternally grateful for the favor you have bestowed on me. I live to serve," Petyr nodded to both mother and son.

"Did Lady Arryn throw herself off that balcony tonight?" Cersei asked.

"I admit, I made a mistake regretfully bring Lady Sansa here tonight... at the young duke's request. He has been rather fond of the girl for some time. He doesn't, ahem, perform well socially speaking. In fact, he makes himself quite ill from the stress of it. He feels at ease with his little cousin," Petyr admitted. "Lysa was not pleased and I feel I insulted her by the gesture. She never did like her niece even after agreeing to take her in, hence sending her to foster at Riverrun with her brother over a year ago. I didn't know until tonight that Robert had formed such an unhealthy attachment to her. He is young and doesn't know any better. Lysa is a strong woman, I can't imagine her committing suicide out of embarrassment over her son and Sansa."

"Then a lover?" she inquired.

"As I said before, I wouldn't know. I say, you will have trouble finding any man admitting to it," Petyr told her.

"Would anyone have reason to murder her? With Sir Harrold's death, it seems rather odd that suddenly the duchess would befall such an accident. Since there are no witnesses, and it isn't just some nameless courtier. This is the death of the Duchess of the Vale," Cersei pushed a little harder.

Petyr held his cards close and decided on his options.

"I quite agree, Your Grace," he said. "No man is going to admit a romantic involvement that turned badly, even if it were an accident. Did no one hear a scream or a struggle? There must have been someone outside?"

"A footman found her body. No one heard anything, it appears," Cersei offered. "She was still warm, I was told, so it must have happened recently."

"Appears so," he played as if deep in thought.

"Are we finished yet, Mother?" Joffrey whined. "I going to die of boredom and then some other twat will inherit my crown."

Petyr smiled to himself, Joffrey just gave him the perfect timing.

"Hardyng..." he muttered, tapping his fingers on the lacquered table.

"What did you say?" Cersei asked.

"Your Majesty, I believe the duke's life may be in danger," he said with an expression as if he just figured out a big clue.

"Lord Robert? It was his mother than was murdered..."

"Exactly," Petyr expressed seriously. He watched the interaction between mother and son before they asked him to explain himself. Are you ready for this performance, he laughed on the inside. Joffrey had not read a book in his life and Cersei certainly didn't bore herself with history and lineages of the aristocracy. It was all beneath her.

"Who we should be looking for is who stands to gain from Lysa's death?" Petyr asked them directly already knowing the answer. "Who would benefit for it looking like an accident?"

"Her sick and stupid son, of course," Joffrey piped up gleefully as if he were the smartest person in the room.

"True, Your Majesty, but Robert loved his mother very much as we all could see. He is devastated. No, this isn't Robert's doing. The boy can barely handle a ball let alone plot a murder," Petyr explained. "I, like you, Your Grace, would be more inclined to believe a tragic accident but it's Sir Hardyng's murder that troubles me."

"Sir Harrold's murder was just a botched robbery," Cersei waved her hand nonchalantly. "That's what Captain Harrington concluded."

"Yes, it could be that simple, but the two together? No, I think we may have stumbled upon something greater. It can't be a coincidence," he pretended.

"Sir Harrold is nothing," Joffrey laughed. "Who cares about him?"

"Other than Lady Waynwood, probably no none, but that isn't the point, Your Majesty," Petyr sighed. "If the young duke were to die, Sir Harrold was next in line to the dukedom. Lord Arryn's

family has all but died out leaving the young knight to inherit everything in the Vale.”

“What does that matter now, Lord Baelish, he is dead,” Cersei sipped her wine and Petyr knew he’d really have to explain it as if to a dim-witted child. All the better.

“There are a few things that are coming to mind. Lysa fostered young Harrold years ago hoping he would be a good influence on Robert. It wasn’t long before she sent the boy away on a pilgrimage. She told me Robert was unusually ill and tended to sustain injuries around Hardyng. Lysa had no proof, but even though Robert has never been a very healthy child, he appeared to do better once the Hardyng lad was sent away. Doctors have told Lysa since the boy’s birth that he wouldn’t live long and she practically imprisoned him at the Eyrie to protect him. She was always convinced someone was trying to harm or kill him. At the time, I thought it was just paranoid nonsense and her over-protectiveness...”

“That still doesn’t explain anything, Baelish...” Cersei interrupted.

“Ah, forgive me, Your Grace, but I think it does, if you’ll allow me a moment,” he pressured with ease.

Joffrey rolled his eyes and Cersei leaned back in her chair and nodded her head for him to continue.

“I didn’t quite put it together until now,” he drummed his fingers again. “I attended the opera last night...”

“So everyone has heard,” Cersei smirked.

Petyr knew that part was coming soon after and didn’t respond to it.

“Lysa was seated in her box across from mine. Young Robert and Lady Waynwood were in attendance,” he started. “I did not know Harrold was even in Kings Landing until I saw him in the park the other day where he became quite infatuated with Lady Sansa. He came to my box that night to ask, well, more likely to take Sansa off my hands. I must admit at considering it since I’m to marry very soon. The point is, he wasn’t in Lysa’s box even though Lady Waynwood was which would be strange if not for the bad history between Lysa and Hardyng. She did not want him anywhere near her son. And now he’s dead.”

“Are you suggesting his ghost killed the duchess?” Joffrey chortled.

“No, Your Majesty, I think there is another player in this game who stands to gain a great deal by both Hardyng’s and Lysa’s death,” he pointed out. “It’s possible Lysa found Hardyng’s reappearance a threat and hired some thief to do the deed? She didn’t appear to be emotional over his death considering Lady Anya is a close friend. Lysa is many things, but I don’t think she would do something like this.”

“Would she have known or Lady Anya about Sir Harrold’s interest in the Lady Sansa. I can’t imagine either one of them would be accepting of such a match,” Cersei scoffed.

“Lysa said nothing to me. Believe me, I would have heard about it immediately. Hence why I was surprised about his proposal. Originally, he lowly title bears him nothing... I just did not think about the line of succession. It makes more sense now,” Petyr thought aloud, piecing his lie together for them. “Lysa was sure there were some lords still loyal or sympathetic to Stark. If Hardyng knew or was connection... it would explain why he asked for her. That is if he was planning on removing Lysa and her son. Any truth or knowledge died with Lysa tonight.”

“Well, if that could have been the plan, someone thwarted it,” Joffrey sniggered missing the point entirely.

“It seems someone else was knew about this as well, someone close to the young duke and Lady Arryn. That is if your theory is proven correct, Baelish. Lady Waynwood might want revenge on her dear ward, perhaps? Cersei asked with a smile. “After all, she did not come tonight.”

Petyr leaned back and shook his head, “No, Lady Anya is as harmless as a kitchen mouse. She’s an honorable woman. I can’t imagine she would have approved any such intrigues. She would gain nothing from Hardyng’s succession or Lysa’s death. Not to mention, the woman is practically on her deathbed considering her age.”

Petyr made a play of showing them he was thinking it through as Cersei was getting impatient for some kind of answer and Joffrey clearly had something else on his mind.

“I don’t know how I could be this stupid,” he muttered softly making sure they heard him.

“I can imagine,” Cersei smiled and straightened up. “If Lord Robert were to die, who inherits?”

Petyr sighed dramatically and lowered his head.

“Lord Royce, Your Grace,” he breathed and leaned his head back against the chair, playing his part well. “God, why didn’t I see it sooner? Even Lysa told me years ago that Nestor had asked to marry her and was quite put out when she refused him. She was furious with me when I announced my intentions towards his daughter.”

“Lord Royce was very quick to take the boy away tonight,” Cersei recollected. “He would gain not only the Vale but a family alliance with his daughter in the Harrenhal. That’s a connection that’s a little too close for comfort. You said there were lords sympathetic to Stark in the Vale?”

“Your Grace, I can’t be sure. It’s was Lysa’s paranoid ramblings I attributed the gossip to,” Petyr sighed. “It was good thing for the king that Jon Arryn died when he did. He likely would have supported Stark. Lysa, thankfully was smarter than that. House Royce has been very close to the Arryns and Starks in the past but Nestor has not given me any inclination to think he shared those views. However, if Robert dies from his illnesses or some accident... I’d have to check the Vale lineages to be certain, but I’m most positive he stands to inherit the dukedom. Unless, of course, His Majesty names another successor, loyal to him.”

Cersei poured herself another glass and stared at Petyr mulling it over.

"Hmm, no proof that Lord Royce is involved. There is no real other motivating factor in murdering Lady Arryn that I can see. The next successor murdered as well. As you pointed out, whatever truth died with the duchess tonight. Lady Arryn was loyal and I'm sure the king will give protection to her son... find a suitable lord to foster him. That is if he lives long enough to even be a proper duke. I'm assuming you would want that role since the boy's affection is evident," Cersei watched him closely.

"Not to seem heartless, Your Grace, but I don't think I would be suitable at all to foster young Robert. I've just begun making changes in the Riverlands and plus, I'm marrying soon. Not to mention, I'm not at all very good with children," Petyr hedged nervously. "I think it would be safer to have Lady Waynwood take him... for now at least. I do have a fondness for the boy, but he deserves someone with more... patience. There would be an uproar in the Vale giving the lad to me. Lysa and Miranda were my only true reasons for travelling there, other than business in Gulltown."

"Well, Robert Arryn will either grow to be loyal and a decent duke or he will die young. I'm not to overly concerned since we can simply name a new successor if Royce is indeed guilty of such charges of conspiracy and murder. Then again, he may be the strong man we need to control the Vale. He seemed insulted by you and your little whore tonight. Why would he let you marry his daughter if he believes to become duke?" she smiled.

"Your Grace, I think we all know that my and Lady Miranda's... reputations are far from... socially acceptable. It's quite well known of his difficulty in finding a suitable match for his daughter and he has no sons. I, myself... " he chuckled, "No lady of quality would marry me. I'm not as obtuse to believe otherwise even with my new title. I've actually grown quite fond of Lady Miranda and I believe she feels the same -"

"You're marrying her because you want an honorable family name for your children, regardless of her virtue," Cersei supplied smugly and Petyr didn't meet her eyes in defeat. "After your... parading that dolled up whore tonight and I can't see why Lord Royce would want even his most disreputable child marrying you."

"Your Grace, I do admit it was a mistake. I thought I was doing Lord Robert a kindness..." Petyr stuttered on purpose.

"But you clearly forgot of the insult to the rest of us bring a Stark here of all places," Joffrey retorted hotly. "A bloody traitor."

"One that you pardoned, Your Majesty. The girl did recant publicly and as far to my knowledge has not said a word against Your Highness or done anything to rebel," Petyr offered. "I made a mistake in making her my mistress. It was not out of malice. I have - an addiction to beautiful things. I have no love for Tully or his traitor sister, Catelyn. I rather thought it was funny to divest her daughter of her virtue, perhaps make her a maid in my home."

"Yet you have escorted her around my city, to my opera, insulting me with her presence," Joffrey huffed like a child denied a sweet. "I may have pardoned her but that doesn't mean I want her anywhere near civilized society. She should go back to the North where her wild kind belongs."

"I apologize if I have offended you, Your Majesty. I wasn't thinking clearly. I've had many mistresses before... and Lady Miranda did not wish to go to the opera last night. She expressed her anger with me and I vowed to find the girl another home. I rather hoped to find Lady Sansa a suitor last night and Sir Harrold almost answered my hopes in taking the girl off my hands..."

"She is very beautiful, Lord Baelish," Joffrey sneered and this was the topic he was clearly waiting for. "I almost forgot since the last time I saw her covered in mud. It's a sin for a traitor to be that beautiful. I believe I may have a solution to your problem."

Petyr paused in fear and dared not show it. Joffrey thinking for himself was not a good thing. The blonde smiled wickedly and downed his glass of wine.

"As you know, I have made Lord Bolton the new Duke of Winterfell. Lady Sansa would make a perfect gift for his son as wife. As I hear it, he has quite the... ruthless reputation with the ladies," the boy laughed and Petyr's heart sank. He needed to think quickly.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty. I don't know Lord Bolton well and honestly don't care what happens to the girl, but wouldn't that be a poor gift, a soiled girl, to the man that has been loyal to you and your cause? He did betray Lord Stark and enable you to capture him and his followers. There will be Northerners, undoubtedly that are still loyal to her family. I would hate to think of an uprising after all this time. Not to mention, when his son succeeds him, their children will be marred forever with her as a mother. I doubt he would be able to make any decent marriage contracts. I'll just send Sansa to a convent. Seems a waste to have a beautiful nun, but there doesn't seem to be anything else to be done with her."

"Do you love your future bride, Lord Baelish?" Cersei cut in with a sickly sweet smile.

"Your Grace?" Petyr's eyebrows rose expecting this from her and hoped it would lead in the direction he wanted. "We - have a... fondness, I believe for one another. Something I didn't expect at the time Lord Royce and I made the arrangement..."

"You see, I think you made a brilliant point, Lord Baelish and I do agree," she grinned wistfully and turned to Joffrey. "Darling, it would be a bad idea to send the girl back north. I think Lord Bolton deserves a better bride with a good name for his son. Keeping the north under control is difficult and we need to keep our alliance strong. I have a better idea."

Here it comes. Petyr tried his best to look confused and nervous and it seemed to work because Cersei was very pleased with herself.

"Something must be done with Sansa. However, I don't think a convent so near the north is a good idea either. She must be watched closely by someone loyal to the king. Someone who would never use her against us in fear of losing everything he's been given," she grinned. "You see,

Lord Baelish, you have insulted the king and the loyal lords and ladies with your new little plaything. Your... *weakness*, and reprehensible behavior needs to be punished. You have been loyal and your deeds have not gone unnoticed. The king has granted you a great title and Harrenhal. That title and power, however, does not give you leave to do whatever you please, no matter how pretty she may be."

"Your Majesty, in my defense..."

Cersei raised her hand to halt whatever else he was about say and Petyr took a deep breath awaiting the sentence he pretended to fear.

"Don't worry, Lord Baelish, we will not strip you of your title and lands...for now. You're more valuable to us doing what you do best. You will return to Harrenhal with your new wife," she smiled and paused for moment. "You will wed your little mistress."

Petyr acted shocked and offended by the suggestion.

"Your Grace, I am already engaged to Lady Myranda. We are to wed next week. I beg of you, please. I cannot marry that girl. What of my own children? They will never be received by any honorable house," he pleaded.

"But you will have your wealth, position and a pretty little wife, with luck, may already be with your child," she laughed and Joffrey smiled at the idea. Perhaps he thought marrying her to a much older man was a good punishment. "You have risen high these past few years and that rise has made you arrogant and rather willfully ignorant to our ways. You will marry your whore and return to Harrenhal. There she will stay. You will never bring her to Kings Landing again. She will never be permitted at court. She may hold the title of Marchioness but it will grant her nothing. The king expects to see progress in the Riverlands next harvest. You must be punished for this slight. We will not grant you the honorable name you seek."

Petyr lowered his head and nodded.

"Don't look so glum, Baelish," Joffrey chided. "You came from nothing and are now a wealthy lord. I have been very generous with you for all that you have done, but my mother is right. You are not of noble birth and have gone too far with these depraved ways of yours. Many men have mistresses, but at least they have enough sense not to bed traitor's daughters... she should be in a brothel, but I agree with my mother. This is a much better answer. Now you can do what you like with her. Just keep her out of my sight."

"Your Majesty," Petyr asked solemnly. "May I inquire what is to become of Lady Myranda?"

"Oh, you do care for her, how lovely. It makes this punishment all the sweeter," Cersei smirked. "I think she will be thrilled to know the king has arranged to make her the future Duchess of Winterfell. A far more prestigious title than Marchioness. Not only that, she'll have a younger husband. I'll leave it to you to tell her the wonderful news. For someone so smart in business and making money, you've never mastered the intelligence to thrive in court. Perhaps, you thought you could outwit me with this ploy to marry into a honorable house. Perhaps, you hoped Royce could become duke which certainly would have given you more advantages with his daughter. Now, you are back where you belong, in our control. You may be the Lord of Harrenhal, but you'll never be one of us."

Joffrey stood up and clasped his hands in merriment. "Good, that's finally settled. This has been a waste of my time, when I could be fucking my own wife. I'd say enjoy your wife, Baelish, but obviously you already have."

The boy king strutted out the door and Petyr waited for Cersei to excuse him.

"Lord Baelish, you have the look of a man that was just sentenced to the gallows," she laughed, finishing the last of her wine. "I will send Lord Robert to foster with Lady Waynwood. I'm sure Lord Royce may be more loyal now knowing his daughter will become a duchess. If Robert dies, he dies. It's of no real consequence. You've told me everything I needed to know, thank you. Lysa was a horrid woman, I doubt many will mourn her."

Cersei stood and Petyr followed suit bowing to the Queen Mother. "You will wed the girl tomorrow and leave the capital. No bans will be read. Say your goodbyes to the young duke if you must and tell him to go into Lady Waynwood's care. I don't care how you tell him. Continue to prove yourself useful and perhaps you'll keep your title and lands for your sons to inherit. They will never garner respect as other houses, but no one has truly respected their father either. They'll learn that one day. They could be living in the gutter or working as peasants. Be grateful for what we've allowed you to have. A special license will made and you will go to directly to Bishop Harcourt tomorrow morning."

Petyr kept his head down as Cersei walked around him and out the door. He waited for a few minutes and couldn't stop the smile on his face. This had worked out better than he planned. His people would look out for Robert and watch Royce. Petyr wasn't lying when he told Cersei that Nestor had asked for Lysa's hand. He knew the man wanted power. With Lysa gone, he would have control over the boy and it wouldn't surprise anyone if the sickly little duke died suddenly. Petyr did not want Royce as duke though. He would do his best to keep Robert safe or his long terms plans would suffer.

It would have been better if Cersei believed the man was guilty of murder but it didn't matter. Petyr would make it work in his favor as always. What scared him was Joffrey's horrific idea of sending Sansa to the Boltons. Good God, she would be better off dead than with any of them. Thank heavens he was able to convince them otherwise. Both Cersei and Joffrey thought he talked his way into his own punishment. They didn't understand how to play these games. Making moves that make no sense or seem to work against you were some of the best ways to play. They had no clue of his motives or intentions. They truly believed he was burdened with the girl, when in fact they played right into his open hands. Petyr got exactly what he wanted.

Making his way back to the ballroom, the gossip had already spread. Everyone was whispering and a few didn't try to hide their amusement. He got what he deserved, they thought. Before he took more than three steps into the room, Myranda strode across the floor with a look of fury on

her face.

"Is it true?" she demanded taking in his dejected look of shame.

"Yes," he said. "The king is forcing me..."

He didn't get it out when she slapped him hard across the face and the room went silent.

"You are going to marry that little slut?" she seethed.

Petyr kept his voice low. "Do you think this is what I wanted? I've been *ordered* by the king. I have no choice."

"And what becomes of me? Hmm? I suppose I'll end up nurse maid to that stupid little boy or worse," she wheeled around on her heel and marched over to where Sansa stood afraid by the wall. Petyr could barely catch up when Myranda slapped the girl for all to see.

"You treacherous little whore! You knew what you were doing! You've ruined my life, do you hear me? Ruined it! You think he cares about you? He doesn't. You should have died with your traitor family. Now, you're taking away the man I love!" she yelled for everyone to hear. Petyr knew she was lying. She didn't love him but she knew everyone was watching and used this moment for all it was worth. Every person here would feel sympathy for the insulted girl.

Petyr grabbed her, trying to pull Myranda away but she yanked from his grasp. "Please, I need to speak with you," he pleaded and reluctantly she followed him to an empty corridor.

"I knew this would not end well, you bastard. I can't believe you were this stupid to bring her here at all," she hit him in the chest.

"I told you, the duke requested her presence..."

"I don't give a damn about the boy. You should never have brought her to Kings Landing, now everything is ruined," Myranda spat and Petyr could see Sansa watching them from a distance. He needed to get her out of here before it got any worse.

"Maybe not for you," Petyr tried to calm the brunette down. "The king has arranged a marriage for you."

"Oh dear God, please don't tell me he's marrying me off to some lord older than my father," she groaned and shook with anger.

"No, you're going north to marry Ramsay Bolton. You'll be the future Duchess of Winterfell. A title I could never give you even if you married me. He's your age, I understand. Your father will most likely foster young Robert now. You both are coming out of this better than I. The king almost stripped me of my title and lands. Sansa is my punishment," he explained hoping she would calm down and let him leave with no further drama.

"And Lysa?" she wondered in curiosity.

"Who knows," he lied. "Probably suicide or just an accident. It doesn't matter now."

He glanced at Sansa again and she was shaking with fear alone and surrounded by the lords and ladies of the court. She knew it was bad whatever it was.

"I've been ordered to leave the capital. I must go. Goodbye, *Your Grace*," he teased and gave her a light and tender peck on the cheek so the others could see.

He walked towards Sansa but felt Myranda follow him several steps behind. He heard her crying, and refrained from rolling his eyes. Oh, she was a good actress apparently. Myranda was going to make sure to milk every bit of this in her favor.

"My – my lord," Sansa stuttered fearfully. "What is happening?"

Petyr knew damn well she heard the gossip. Her eyes told him the truth. She looked over his shoulder at a crying Myranda being comforted by a lady in blue.

"The king has ordered us to leave the capital," Petyr grimaced.

"Us?" she muttered and pulled away when he tried to take her arm in order to leave.

"Yes, come along," he whispered but the damned girl wouldn't budge.

She couldn't take her eyes off the brunette giving a stunning performance of heartbreak. She would be the new belle of the ton after tonight and the thought made him groan inwardly.

"It's my fault," she breathed.

"No, it's mine. Come along now. We don't belong here," Petyr tugged her arm again.

Joffrey strolled in full of laughter at the scene before him and made his way towards them. Petyr winced. Why didn't she leave with him when he told her? This would only get worse with that damned boy. The king looked at Myranda crying her eyes out, while two ladies sat her down on a chair and then to Sansa frozen next to Petyr.

"Well, it seems you didn't let her down easy, Baelish. You're not doing well with the ladies tonight, are you?" he chuckled viciously.

"I did as you commanded, Your Majesty. We were just leaving," Petyr bowed deeply and took Sansa's hand roughly trying to convey his meaning to follow him.

"Have you?" he smiled at Sansa's frightened face. "Does she know?"

Sansa looked terrified at Petyr and before he could say a word, Joffrey slowly circled the girl snickering.

"Tell me, Sansa," he breathed in her ear. "Did he tell you the wonderful news? I've found you the perfect husband. You don't have to be a whore anymore. I don't detect any gratitude for the gift I've bestowed on you."

Petyr saw it in her face, she knew. Between the gossip, Myranda's dramatic show and now Joffrey's malicious game.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she whispered in horror.

Her face changed with several emotions. The idea that she would have to marry him made her pale and Petyr worried she might retch in front of everyone.

"I pardoned you and now have given you a suitable husband, even though you deserve to be wed to the lowliest gutter rat, and this is the thanks I receive?" Joffrey jeered nastily.

Sansa bowed deeply and softly cried, "I'm eternally grateful for the honor you have given me, Your Grace. I don't deserve your kindness."

"That's more like it. Now, go with your new husband. I never want to see your face again," the king snapped and pushed her into Petyr's chest.

Petyr practically hauled the girl up the stairs and into the foyer. Every single eye stared at them as they walked to the doors in disgrace. He signaled the footman to take their cloaks to the carriage as they made their way outside. The chill in the air hit Petyr like a punch to the gut. The girl was silent as the grave and she was deathly cold. He took one step down the massive granite stairs when she collapsed completely almost taking him with her. With the aid of his footman, Petyr lifted the girl into his arms and walked down the steps to the waiting carriage.

Once inside, he covered her with his cloak and held her tightly. The remorse and guilt he felt for this girl was overwhelming as the carriage drove them back to his home. Tomorrow, it would be official. They would be married. It was sooner than he expected. Petyr thought they would leave tomorrow and handle the details once they reached Harrenhal. Perhaps, Cersei thought he wouldn't go through with it after all and made the arrangements. She was positively gleeful at the idea of her little punishment for the both of them.

Touching her icy cheek, Petyr debated on using smelling salts but decided to let her sleep. Sansa had been through so much and it wasn't over yet. Tomorrow, she would be forced to marry him and then they would return to Harrenhal. She didn't know it, but it was for the best, Petyr convinced himself. She would be safer with him than anywhere in the country. Once he made his last move, none of this would matter anymore. There would be no more kings and queens to ridicule or hurt them. There would be no more aristocracy. In the end, it would be worth it. In time, she would come to understand it. At Harrenhal, he would find a way to show her what she meant to him. He would do everything in his power to make her love him. All he needed was time.

Lady Ice

Chapter Notes

This is shorter, sorry... but there's a lot happening in the next chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The snow glittered the countryside in the afternoon sun as they headed north on Kings Road. It was getting colder and Petyr insisted she dress warmly and the servants placed extra blankets and warm furs in the carriage for the Marquess and his new wife.

Lady was wide awake and watching everything that passed with sharp interest. Sansa half smiled at her wolf that was growing bigger by the minute. Even she knew they were heading home. The excitement was unmistakable. Lady couldn't wait to run free around Harrenhal. Being cooped up in that townhouse was driving her mad just as Sansa was dying to leave, but this wasn't what she expected at all.

Today she was travelling home with her husband and Sansa still couldn't believe all that had happened in less than a day's time. Her aunt Lysa was dead along with handsome Sir Harrold and now she was married. During her stay at Harrenhal, Sansa dreamed of being the lady of such a grand house.

Be careful what you wish for...

What did she really want? Sansa knew she did not want Petyr to marry Myranda. At first it was because she hated Myranda but then it became not wanting to see them blissfully happy every day. She did not want to raise their children. There were nights, especially after having kissed or touched by him, Sansa wondered if just maybe he might feel something for her other than lonely lust.

The look on their faces as they fought last night and when he told Myranda that he could not marry her, gutted Sansa. The woman's tearful face is all she could see. She did care for him, perhaps even loved him and now Sansa ruined it all. Petyr's face was stone and unreadable. He didn't marry Sansa by choice this morning. He was forced and that was a knife to the heart.

Sansa didn't recall the ride home or who undressed and tucked her into bed. She woke in the middle of the night and held Lady as she cried and cried. Not like this. She didn't want it like this. That morning, Sansa dressed in her blue and lace dress. The first one Petyr saw her in the day he returned after purchasing all those beautiful clothes. Sansa could see it clear as day the way he looked at her in Harrenhal's ballroom. Her heart fluttered and she thought he was going to kiss her. She didn't want him then. She really didn't know him at all. At some point and time it changed and Sansa really could not pinpoint the exact moment she started to fall for him.

She hardly remembered the ceremony, the spoken words or even his chaste kiss. It was as if it happened to someone else. Her heart was pounding the entire time as the elderly clergyman spoke of love, devotion and obeying her husband. Other than a waifish altar boy and man dressed in colors of the king, no one else was present. No doubt Joffrey sent someone to make sure the wedding took place. Her voice was so soft when she spoke the words and could barely look Petyr in the face. Sansa avoided his eyes for so many reasons. She was afraid of what she'd find there. Even when he smiled half-heartedly at the end, it never reached his eyes. There was sorrow there no matter how he tried to hide it. He was making the best of what the king had decreed for him.

She glanced briefly at Petyr in the carriage. It didn't matter if he was feigning sleep or not, it gave her a moment to look at him. Sansa couldn't shake the image of him consoling Myranda even after she slapped him. When Myranda railed on her, Petyr didn't stop her, he simply stood in sadness. Sansa couldn't have expected him to come to her aid. Regardless of what he said, it was her fault. Petyr was blaming himself for bringing her to Kings Landing. Perhaps he regretted ever taking her from Riverrun. Whatever his plans, they were smashed with his laissez-faire attitude, not to mention Lysa's death.

Poor Robert, Sansa sighed and returned her gaze out the window. Lysa was a beastly woman, but she was still his mother and the boy was shattered. She didn't ask nor did Petyr tell her the details of Lysa's death. It probably didn't matter if it was an accident or not because it didn't change Sansa's present situation at all. Robert was still the duke; he would now be fostered by some lord or lady in the Vale. Robert served as her sweet and sickly knight protecting her and she was fond of him for his kindnesses toward her. The boy was spoilt and quite a handful more times than she cared, but his protectiveness even to the point of rebelling against his mother was of some sweet comfort.

A few times, Petyr tried to start a conversation but Sansa had no desire to talk. He was trying hard to be pleasant and the very nature of it was hurtful. He didn't want to be here. She was supposed to be on her way back to Harrenhal alone today. He didn't get to marry the woman he wanted and now was stuck with her. Sansa knew what it meant for him. There would be no invitations for them, no one would reply if he wanted to host a party or anything at Harrenhal. As his wife, Sansa had made him a social pariah. Even with his rakish reputation, he would have still been received and welcomed. She saw the people conversing with him and Myranda last night. A happy couple with terrible reputations but still acceptable. Now, he wouldn't be welcomed anywhere with her at his side and their children would be shunned as well.

That thought made her cheeks flame. *Children*. Would Petyr want to have her bear his children?

He desired another woman, how would it even work? He lusted after her before Myranda came to Harrenhal and mistook her for the brunette the other night. Now that they were man and wife, would he still consider it a duty to bed her? The very idea of it being a duty, a chore, made Sansa ill. Would he fantasize about someone else? She would never know.

The wedding happened so fast and before she knew it, they were packed and ready to leave for the Riverlands. This was not the wedding she dreamed of. Her father did not give her away. Her family and friends were not there. No wedding dress or feast. No romance or love. It was dry and emotionless and over within a matter of minutes. Petyr did not even have a ring under such short circumstances. Instead he took off his pinky ring with a tiny emerald and placed it on her finger.

She could feel that cold metal under her gloves and muff. Would he care enough to get her a proper ring? Sansa saw the gorgeous diamond he gave Myranda in which she flaunted all night. She couldn't imagine Petyr giving her something like that. No one in the Riverlands would care what she wore. There would be no lord or ladies visiting them. No dinner parties or balls. No one to impress. That stunning ballroom would collect dust and nothing more.

Petyr had given up long ago when she ignored him. Public humiliation, threats, death and a forced marriage was more than enough for her mind to chew on. She didn't want to hear whatever tender or false apologies he felt the need to give her. He probably assumed she didn't want this anymore than he did. Hearing him say it would be too much. It was better to let the truth lay silent between them. They both knew it, what good would it do to talk about it? She couldn't tell him now she cared for him. He loved another and it broke her heart. Sansa did not want his pity.

All too soon, they arrived at the same inn they stayed at on their way to Kings Landing. It was snowing lightly but not much was on the ground here and Sansa wondered how deep it could be at Harrenhal. Sansa walked around with Lady as the footmen unloaded one of their trunks, taking it inside.

Their trunk.

It was all so surreal. She was the Marchioness of Harrenhal now, Lady Baelish, and it didn't feel like she thought it would. The sun was low on the horizon and her breath billowed on the crisp air. It would be a very cold night and many locals were moving inside. The small village was practically empty and she almost asked if Petyr would have any trouble getting a second room this time before holding her tongue. She was his wife, of course they would share a room, she winced.

"Sansa," Petyr called from behind but she didn't move as she waited for Lady.

She heard his footsteps crunch on the frost and felt his heat before he even spoke.

"Come inside," he whispered. He whistled for Lady and she came straight to him. At least Lady didn't know of these things. She liked Petyr and obeyed him. Sansa thought she should be jealous, but pushed it away.

Walking inside the inn, Sansa was right. There were very few patrons today. Most of the ton had moved south for the winter and many people other than commoners did not travel in this cold. Sansa was used to it after living in Winterfell. A winter down here was nothing compared to northern ones. She smiled for a second at the idea of Myranda seeing Winterfell for the first time. She was from the Vale, but it was different. She would probably hate it so far north and cut off from the world. She may become a duchess, but she would be a world away from what she expected to get with Petyr.

Sansa felt sorry for the woman for now she was to wed a man she didn't know or love. Winterfell wasn't as grand as Harrenhal and she couldn't imagine the Boltons had anywhere near the wealth Petyr did. No wonder Myranda was sobbing last night. Even if she didn't love Petyr, she was getting the short end of the stick, duchess or not.

Petyr took her arm and the same man came bounded over to him in greeting.

"My lord!" the innkeeper boasted. "I did not expect you again so soon. Usually your kind can't wait to move south."

"I am needed home, I'm afraid," he smiled thinly and looked around the tavern. "I gather your best room should be available to my wife and I tonight?"

The man grinned from ear to ear, "Oh yes, my lord. My very best room, indeed. Martha!" he shouted at a round woman serving ale. "Make sure our bridal suite is ready for the Marquess."

The woman frowned but headed up the stairs as Petyr's footmen followed.

"I must apologize last time not being able to give you my best accommodations, my lord. Lovely to see you again Lady Baelish," he smiled at Sansa.

It was odd to hear it said aloud. Lady Baelish. Sansa couldn't come to terms with it. She smiled politely and allowed Petyr to guide her to a table near the fire.

"We're famished," Petyr pulled out a chair for her and followed to sit down himself. The fire was blazing and very warm. Sansa was dying for a drink. Anything would do, even the ale and whiskey she detested.

"Of course, my lord. We have a fine venison tonight. Wine for your lovely wife?" he asked.

"Wine for both of us," Petyr instructed.

The venison was chewy and tough but Sansa ate it without complaint. Lady chewed on a large bone by the fire and Sansa fed her morsels from her plate but Petyr didn't say a word. She finally asked about Lysa and the rumors about Sir Harrold for something, anything to talk about. Now that they were married, she didn't have the slightest clue what to say. Petyr said they were both dreadful accidents and were being investigated. For some reason, she didn't believe him. Mystery always surrounded Petyr and it seemed rather odd that both had died suspiciously within a day of each other. She drank the cheap wine and tried to find something to say or do. She stayed away from speaking about Myranda and focused on what needed to be done at Harrenhal instead. His

answers were as perfunctory as her questions. It was getting rather late and Sansa was extremely tired but she did not want to go upstairs yet. In fact, she was doing everything to avoid it. Sansa knew what was going to happen in that room and was dreading it.

Petyr lightly drummed his fingers on the wooden table and finished his wine. He was deep in thought, and gave her a half smile when he noticed her staring. He seemed to be stalling too. Sansa fought to stifle a yawn but he caught it and sighed. Only three men remained in the tavern, drinking their ale and Sansa knew what he was going to say.

"It's late, my dear. We must leave early in the morning before the weather turns for the worse. I want to be home well before nightfall," he said in hushed tones.

Sansa stood and Petyr offered his hand. She took it and called for Lady to follow. The wolf picked up her bone and obediently followed her masters up the stairs. To say Sansa was nervous was an understatement. She fully understood what was expected on one's wedding night. Petyr opened the door and allowed her to enter the room. It was much bigger than the one they shared weeks ago. Lady trotted inside and found a spot near a small fireplace, stretching out.

She didn't hear the door close as her eyes stared at the bed. Sansa shared a bed with him twice before but this wasn't the same. Now she was his wife. He was allowed, no, it was his right as a husband to touch her as he pleased. She would be expected to perform her wifely duties.

"Is there... anything else you needed?" he asked softly breaking the deafening silence.

A fresh pitcher of water, the trunk with no doubt her nightdress inside, were near the wall by the small window. There wasn't a screen in this room though. Why would there be? A man and wife would not be shy in a bedroom.

"No," she breathed and opened the trunk, sifting through the clothing. It gave her shaking hands something to do and Sansa didn't have to turn around to know he was watching her intently. The nightdress in her hands, she closed the lid and laid it on top.

Petyr already removed his coat and was working on the buttons of his waistcoat when it finally hit her. She was going to have to undress in front of him and it scared her to death. She wasn't ready for this. It could have been much worse. She could have been married to an old man or a cruel man and Petyr was neither. He had a gentleness with her and Sansa couldn't fathom he would purposefully hurt her tonight but it didn't quell her fears. Her mother told her what the expectations were and Miranda had filled her in on the more naughty details. Petyr had given her a taste, twice, on what such intimacies might be. Would he be the same tonight?

Her hands trembled when she untied the ribbon from around her neck. Sansa turned around and couldn't face him. She tried to reach the back of her dress but her maid laced it to where she couldn't find the tie to pull. Sansa struggled for a moment until a pair of hands made her freeze.

Petyr's hands were deft and sure as he made quick work of her laces without a word. Sansa wondered briefly how many women he undressed as the action seemed to come easy to him. She didn't want to know. She didn't want to picture him in bed with any women but Miranda's face popped into her mind again and it made her flinch from his touch.

Immediately, those hands stopped as her dress was completely open to him. Sansa waited for what would happen next. Would he continue undressing her or was he waiting for her? She could feel his breath and it made the little hairs on the back of her neck stand up. The air was thick and time seemed to slow down almost painfully. Would he fantasize about Miranda tonight? Would it hurt? Her mind was racing with terrible thoughts when his hands touched her bare shoulders and her body responded before her mind could control it. She felt her back tense and her shoulders recoil from those soft hands and Petyr pulled away instantly.

The silence was deafening except for the crackle of the fire. She heard him step back and the a soft rustling of clothing. Dear God, was his undressing? Sansa dared not turn around. She had already seen the man naked but she still felt like a shy little girl. It was her wedding night and they were in a dirty and dingy inn. She was in love with a man that didn't love her. Sansa could hear her mother's words as she educated her about men, duty, lust and marriage. A woman was lucky if she was able to marry a man she loved or was attracted to, but that wasn't always the case.

She told her the first time would hurt but if her husband was considerate enough, it could be pleasurable in time. Mother and father loved each other and Sansa thought that was how it was supposed to be. Joffrey ruined that notion for her completely. He would have been a horrible husband. It was something her mother warned of as well. Men, for the most part, could find pleasure in any woman. They did not need love or affection to bed a woman regardless if she was a wife, mistress or anyone in the street. A woman tended to need those things from a man and rarely ever found them. Lysa had married an old man she didn't want or love. Sansa heard many ladies speak of such things or how they loved their husband and then were heartbroken upon learning he had taken a mistress. Being a woman was hard, her mother said.

In this moment, Sansa didn't know which was worse. Unrequited love and knowing that every time he took her to bed... or marrying a man she didn't love. She could turn off her heart and pray he took a lover and then deal with the time she would have children. But to love a man and know that if and when he took her, it wouldn't be making love as her mother called it. He wouldn't be thinking of her and somehow that felt worse to bear.

Petyr cleared his throat and Sansa took a deep breath before turning around staring at the floor. He had not removed his boots and Sansa glanced up. He had buttoned his waistcoat and pulled his coat back on. She must have had a look of complete surprise and confusion on her face. She didn't have the slightest clue what to say. Was he leaving?

Petyr walked to her and gave her a little kiss on the cheek. When he pulled back, his eyes were unreadable.

"I'll give you leave to change," he spoke softly. "I will be downstairs for a few minutes."

Sansa was speechless. She didn't know if he sensed her nervousness and was trying to ease her fears. She thought she should count herself fortunate that he was being considerate. He would still

have to undress in front of her when he returned... and then he would climb into bed with her. Yes, perhaps that's all he was doing... offering a kindness. Or worse, he did not want her.

"I don't understand," she stuttered and couldn't meet his eyes. "Aren't you – I mean aren't we – supposed..."

"Nothing is going to happen tonight, Sansa," he said solemnly. "You needn't worry."

Petyr feigned a smile and walked out closing the door just as tears threatened to spill down her cheeks. She didn't wait as she pulled the dress down and unhooked her corset. Heaven help her. This is not how she wanted it to be. The tears fell and a sob racked her chest as she grabbed the nightdress. She wanted to crawl under the bedclothes and hide. It felt like the first night she spent with him. The night she tried to run away. He left her then out of anger and he left her now out of regret. She cried softly changing into her nightdress and slipped into bed. She had no idea the man could hear her outside the door for he hadn't left as he said.

An hour or more passed when the door opened and closed. The room was dark with only a pale amber light coming from the low embers in the fire. Sansa pretended to sleep as she listened to him undress next to the bed. The tears dried long ago and she laid there with the blankets up to her nose. He folded his clothes and placed them on the trunk before sliding into bed next to her.

Sansa could feel his heat as he rested on his side away from her adjusting the pillow to get more comfortable. The scent of whiskey wafted in the chilly air and Sansa knew he had been drinking. He needed alcohol before crawling into bed with her. Petyr did not touch her or spoke a word. He probably assumed she was asleep but the two of them lay wide awake wondering about the other.

What man refused to bed his new bride? Would he have dismissed Myranda on their wedding night? Surely not and it cut Sansa to the core. Even with the whiskey on his breath, he did not attempt to touch her at all. The bed was small enough that they could feel one another. He had kept his shirt on and his feet were cold as they brushed hers. Sansa looked over her shoulder only to see the back of his head. He told her they wouldn't consummate the marriage tonight. Wasn't that a part of legality of marriage? The rite of passage to make it official?

Truth and reality was a bitter tonic for the senses. Sansa knew it now, truly in her heart. Petyr did not want her. Whether he loved her or not, he was supposed to consummate this marriage and chose not to. Maybe he was just being kind and saving her the physical pain, but Sansa couldn't stop thinking if he would have if she were his beloved. Most men wanted to bed a pretty and young wife, didn't they? Petyr had desired her in the past and the only reason why he was stalling now, was the real truth. She wasn't the one he wanted to marry, to bed, to be his.

Her heart ached but Sansa refused to let those tears come again. She would not cry in front of him or make him feel guilty. It wasn't fully his fault, Joffrey forced him to marry. He did not want her and she knew it now. It wouldn't be first loveless marriage between two people. Every fiber of her being told her Petyr would not hurt her. She would be the lady of the house and that was better than his ward and housekeeper. Perhaps they could go back to what they were before coming to Kings Landing. He would go on with his business ventures, probably take a mistress and she would stay at Harrenhal and be Marichoness. At least she would have a grand home. Plus, there was Mrs. Ames and the servants she have become friends with.

Sansa convinced herself she was getting all worked up over nothing. For nothing had changed. Not really. He did not love her then and he didn't love her now. If he had not sent her away, she would have been nothing more to him anyway. A ward, a housekeeper. Only now, when or if he decided he wanted children, she would be expected to submit to him. That's all it would be. Producing an heir. Women had done it before and would continue to do it... all without love. Perhaps in time, they could find some semblance of happiness. A friendship.

Just as she constantly told herself before... it could have been worse. She would get over this fancy, this infatuation. For that's all it was in the end.

Chapter End Notes

I know this wasn't the sexy times chapter some of you were hoping for but this wasn't a happy wedding conducive to romance. Don't worry it IS coming. I promise. There's just a little hurdle coming first.

The Labyrinth

Chapter Notes

Whew... this was a long chapter to write... a tough chapter to write and I haven't even begun to fuck with you guys yet. :D

I hope you enjoy it. hugs x kisses

It was snowing heavily in the afternoon as Sansa played on the piano in the music room. She glanced out the tall windows that overlooked the lake and the forest nearby. Harrenhal was beautiful in the winter. Lady pawed at her dress letting her mistress know she was ready for her afternoon walk. Sansa smiled and patted her white head and nodded in agreement. As cold as it was, being outside with Lady was a daily comfort.

They had been home little over a fortnight and Sansa felt already confined in this house. *Home*. Such a strange feeling. Winterfell had always been her home. After living in the Eyrie and Riverrun, this was the first time Sansa referred to a place as her home. Harrenhal was enormous but it wasn't big enough to avoid Petyr for long. In the beginning, to his credit, he tried to make her feel contented. He was pleasant and friendly in the manner that she liked but it felt slightly forced as if he were trying too hard to be cordial under the circumstances. Petyr did not pressure her to be intimate and Sansa wasn't sure if that was good or bad. Maybe he was thinking the same thing she was. Maybe that intimacy would come in time when they were both ready.

They slipped back into that routine before the events in Kings Landing had changed everything. The snows were relentless and made travel difficult, keeping them both in the house. Sansa would catch him playing the piano when he thought she was upstairs and it was always a somber tune. Sometimes he would listen to her play but it wasn't like before. That comfortable silence they used to enjoy had not returned as she hoped. Meals were awkward and Sansa had difficulty finding topics to discuss with him. She often wondered what it would have been like if Myranda had never come to Harrenhal, if Petyr had never been engaged to her. Now everything had changed and Sansa did not know what to do about it. Every time he even tried to touch her, she couldn't help her body unconsciously stiffen or recoil. It was an odd sensation. She wanted him but didn't at the same time. She did not want to be a second choice, a poor substitution for what he really wanted. After a while, he stopped touching her all together and then as days passed, she began to see him less and less.

Upon returning, Sansa's things were moved to the rooms connecting to Petyr's. She was the lady of the house now. She wandered to her old rooms and would often sit and wait. Sansa wondered what happened to her ghostly little friend she left weeks ago. She had told Sansa to be strong in lieu of Myranda's foretold arrival. Now that she was home again, the spirit had remained quiet and Sansa felt a sense of abandonment by both her and Petyr.

Wrapped in her fur pelisse, Sansa opened the doors leading to the terrace behind the house. Lady did not wait for her mistress and bounded out leaping around in the deep snow. The wolf practically disappeared in the endless white blanket as she ran playfully around the grounds. The animal's pure delight brought a genuine smile to Sansa's face. At least someone was happy, she thought.

Sansa followed Lady and let herself enjoy the moment. It really was beautiful today. The lake was black but the waters had not crusted over yet with ice. Snowflakes drifted down lazily and Sansa had the childish notion to stick her tongue out to catch as they used to back in Winterfell. The snow was getting deep enough where her skirts needed to be lifted up a bit to walk but Sansa didn't mind. It was peaceful in the gardens and she seemed to look forward to it more and more every day.

Lady leapt through the gardens and headed off to the left. The labyrinth was dusted with snow making it look like a faerie wonderland. Sansa imagined that just beyond the grand arched entrance, it led to some magical place. Whenever she walked the grounds with Lady, the wolf often darted to the overgrown maze. Since her first day, Petyr and Duncan had always reminded her that it was dangerous and Sansa was often tempted to disobey them. The labyrinth was too large to go in by herself not knowing what lay inside those towering hedges. If it was dangerous, no one would know she was in there and with this cold weather, she would freeze to death before they even found her. Sansa yelled at Lady to come back but the wolf barked and growled at the entrance refusing to obey her master.

"Lady! Come!" she ordered again making her way to the wolf as she barked continuously.

Sansa waded through the deeper snow until the arch loomed above her head. She grabbed Lady's scruff and pulled her back.

"What are you barking at?" she giggled but the wolf's hackles were high as she growled deeply and Sansa looked at the entrance partially blocked by wood planks and the overgrown shrubbery.

"Stay, girl," she commanded and let the wolf go crossing over to the thick wood planks and gazed inside a long corridor of the maze. "Who goes there?" she demanded but only silence answered. Sansa tried to move the wood and two planks gave way where she could squeeze inside if she dared. Lady growled again and Sansa paused, fear filling her belly. If someone was inside waiting, what would she do? She looked around and the only tracks were hers and Lady's. If someone wasn't inside, then what was Lady growling at? Perhaps it was an animal that got lost inside from the side where there must be an exit. Yes, that must be it, she thought. Sansa pulled the wood out further so that the deer, or whatever it was, could get out. It was probably afraid with

Lady, almost a full grown wolf, barking at it. Setting the heavy wood down, Lady darted into the entrance before she could stop her.

“Lady! NO! Come back here!” she yelled and followed her inside only a few steps. The wolf disappeared down the corridor that turned left and Sansa didn’t dare follow her. Sansa could hear the wolf bark then followed by a sudden quiet. A soft breeze whispering through the trees and the snowfall were the only sounds for a few moments, but it wasn’t silence that unnerved Sansa. There was something not right with this place. She yelled again when Lady finally came running around the corner towards her in a dash to get out. Something in there scared her and Sansa didn’t wait to find out as she followed the wolf back into the gardens. It must have been a wild animal, she supposed. As soon as spring came, Sansa promised herself she would venture inside before Petyr tore it down. It just didn’t feel safe in the dead of winter. With the only consolation being able to follow her tracks in the snow to get out, Sansa decided this was not that day.

Regarding at the house, Sansa could see the windows to their suites and for a moment she thought she saw someone watching her. It could be the maids or maybe it was Petyr. He spent most of his time in his study nowadays and Sansa didn’t know if it was a curse or a blessing. Before, he would come and listen to her play, they would read in the library or go for a ride. Little had been said between them this past week and it was becoming quite lonely. It reminded Sansa of when she first arrived here from Riverrun. Only now she was his wife. A wife that didn’t know how to speak to her husband, to ask him the questions she desperately wanted answers to... or how to be a wife at all.

Every night, he would walk her to her door and give a chaste kiss on her cheek before heading to his own bedroom. Their wedding night had come and gone and yet he still had not attempted to consummate their marriage. Sansa thought he was doing her a kindness at the inn. Perhaps, he did not want to have their first night together in such a dingy place just as she didn’t. However, since the first night home, he treated her sweetly but never kissed her on the mouth or even flirted with her the way he used to. Only once did he seem to consider kissing her, and Sansa wanted to ask him why he had not shared a bed with her yet or if he wanted to. That first night, she smothered her face in the silk pillow so he wouldn’t hear her cry next door.

Her new bedroom was luxurious and beautiful but it didn’t feel like it belonged to her at all. She remembered Miranda sneaking in that day and gushing over how everything in the house was going to be hers. Before Miranda, Harrenhal had begun to feel like Sansa’s home. Petyr praised her eye for detail and how she was running the house but now she felt more like a stranger masquerading as the new Marchioness.

Everyone was shocked at their early return from Kings Landing, but none more than Duncan. The scowl on his face was obvious and he didn’t attempt to hide it. Mrs. Ames smiled and congratulated them both but the woman seemed to see beyond Sansa’s painted happy face. The old woman tried to get her to talk but Sansa insisted she was alright. The maids were excited that Miranda wasn’t going to be the new mistress of the house and praised Sansa on her good fortune. She could take small comfort in knowing that the staff, well most of them, were happy about the new situation.

Sansa glanced at the window again and it was empty. She just wished Petyr could find some comfort with her again. If he didn’t want intimacy, she could live with it. He hadn’t mentioned Miranda or discussed Joffrey’s orders with her and Sansa wondered if she should ask him about it or give him time. He clearly did not want to marry her and was probably trying to adjust to what was forced upon them both. Sansa hoped that he didn’t blame her for it. After all, she didn’t want to go to Kings Landing in the first place. She didn’t know which would be worse, Petyr’s indifference or hatred.

Lady jumped up on her and drew her attention back to the present. She wanted to play and wasn’t about to be ignored. Sansa clumped a ball of heavy snow and threw it across the garden as Lady chased after it, digging her face in the snow. The clouds were getting darker across the lake and Sansa decided to spend just a few more minutes outside as the man watched her behind the draperies from the rooms above.

Sansa spent the remainder of the afternoon in the kitchens with Mrs. Ames. The scent and warmth was inviting as well as the company. William had taken tea to Petyr in his study and the man had yet to show his presence all day since this morning. Lady was fast asleep in front of the fire while Sansa crushed and separated dried herbs while Mrs. Ames started preparations for tonight’s supper.

“You used to confide in me,” the old woman smiled and took Sansa by surprise. Mrs. Ames always was direct.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t been much of a conversationalist lately, have I?” Sansa returned the smile avoiding the woman’s true meaning.

“Do you want to tell me what happened? It might help,” Mrs. Ames gently pressed as she chopped vegetables on the counter.

“The king dissolved the engagement and forced his lordship to marry me out of spite. I thought that’s what everyone already knew,” Sansa muttered a bit more harshly than she intended.

“Forgive me, my lady. I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just that – well, there’s a change in you... in both of you, if you don’t mind my saying so,” Mrs. Ames apologized.

“Lord Petyr is unhappy with this... with me. Is that what everyone is saying?” Sansa whispered.

“No, my dear. They are quite relieved that Lady Royce isn’t his lordship’s new wife, in fact. It’s just the two of you acted quite differently before that woman arrived here. When you came back

and he announced that you were his wife, we were so happy. However, you are not and I wondered why. Has he been cruel to you?" the woman asked sincerely and Sansa couldn't fault her for the observation. It was obvious that they rarely spent any time together for a man and woman newly married. Sansa wondered if the maids talked as they cleaned the bed linens. Perhaps they thought she lost her maidenhead before coming back to Harrenhal, but with a man and wife sleeping in separate rooms every night... something must seem odd to them. Sansa knew she shouldn't have to care what the servants thought, but she did. Everyone must know that Petyr did not want her as a wife, especially Duncan. The only good thing was that Duncan was forced, out of propriety, to address Sansa with the respect her new title gave her.

"No, my husband hasn't been cruel," she began and paused on whether to say anything more. "I'm sure it will be widely known soon enough that Lord Petyr was forced to marry me. It was cruel joke by the king... a spectacle in front of all the court. He would have married Lady Myranda by now if it wasn't for me."

Mrs. Ames put down the knife and came to sit next to Sansa at the wooden table by the fire. She touched Sansa tenderly. Her hands were weathered and wrinkled with her sleeves pushed up to her elbows. Sansa wondered how old Mrs. Ames was and what she had experienced in her life.

"Oh, my sweet girl," the woman patted her hands softly and stared at her only Sansa couldn't meet her eyes. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

It was statement more than a question and Sansa looked away afraid of betraying herself to the old housekeeper. She shook her head and willed the tears not to come. Sansa was grateful they were alone in the kitchen right now.

"So, you've been married for over a fortnight, at least," Mrs. Ames began, "Has he taken you to bed yet?"

Sansa didn't know how to answer that. She wasn't angry at Mrs. Ames question. Everyone probably knew by now that they were sleeping apart.

"I see," she said after a long pause. "I can't imagine why any man would deny himself when he has such a beautiful and sweet wife."

"Because he loves someone else," Sansa muttered. "He doesn't want me."

"I don't believe for one moment he loves that beastly girl," Mrs. Ames tutted in disgust. "I thought for certain he had feelings for you since he brought you from Riverrun. I didn't think I was *that* bad a judge of character."

Sansa returned to crushing herbs to avoid looking at the woman.

"What kind of good character does a man like him have? A gambler, libertine..." she said under her breath trying to appear unaffected. "A young man tried to court me while in the capital and my lord pushed him away. He said he wanted a large dowry and so forth. That could have been a lie. I could have married someone that wanted me. He was only a knight but the money didn't matter. Now I'm wife to a man that never wanted to marry me in the first place. The only good part is that I can live here with you and the others. Lord Petyr was probably just bored and that's why he flirted with me in the beginning. When Lady Myranda came, that all changed. I saw them together. I'll never forget it. She was grief stricken when it was announced. To make it worse, the king has decreed she marry and become the future Duchess of Winterfell."

Mrs. Ames was quiet for a time and Sansa thought that had ended that conversation before she took her hands, turning her palms up. Sansa saw a mark on the inside of the old woman's forearm. A strange looking birthmark or scar but she dared not ask about it.

"Remember what I told you, my dear?" Mrs. Ames smiled tracing a line down her palm. "It's all right here. You will have a passionate love and two children. Patience, child. I know that..."

"I don't want his children," Sansa interrupted and pulled her hands away sharply. "I know he doesn't want someone like me to be the mother of his heir. What kind of life will they have? A traitor for a mother."

"A better life than most children of this world," Mrs. Ames replied. "You will be a wonderful mother. I suspect his lordship will be a good father. Despite his past, I believe there's a good man in him somewhere. Other men would not have rescued you as he did. Nor would they have left you a maiden all this time. Most men would have had their way with a pretty girl like you and then tossed you in the street. Perhaps, if you just give him some encouragement or in time..."

"How did you know he rescued me? I never told you that," Sansa wondered aloud.

"Oh, the rumors and gossip travel across this county just as any royal court," the woman smiled sheepishly.

"It doesn't matter," Sansa lied with nonchalance. She didn't want to talk about Petyr anymore. He made his choice and it wasn't her. They were practically avoiding each other now. "I don't want him and he doesn't want me. We're just another arranged marriage like so many others. I don't want to have his children. I want nothing to do with him. He can have all the mistresses he wants for all I care."

Just then William, Petyr's main footman, entered with a tray of tea presumably from the study and Sansa resumed her task and pretended that nothing had just happened.

"His lordship's tea?" Mrs. Ames asked the young man inspecting the tray. "He didn't drink much. Did he want a fresh pot?"

"No, he told me to send his supper up to his room tonight," William told the housekeeper with a befuddled look and Sansa sighed silently. They might as well not even live under the same roof.

"When was this?" Mrs. Ames asked with amusement.

"Just now. Didn't he tell you?" William replied setting the tray down to clean it.

"No. I haven't seen him all day. Lady Sansa and I have been in here for at least an hour," the woman said and then the smile died on her face as she looked at Sansa. "Just now, William, or did he tell you this in his study?"

"That's why I thought he had already spoken to you. His lordship passed me on my way to the kitchen," William replied confused.

Sansa glanced at Mrs. Ames and closed her eyes. Dear God, did Petyr overhear their conversation? She felt sick and vaguely heard the housekeeper tell William to leave them alone for a minute. Mrs. Ames made a quick cup of tea that smelled of chamomile flower and mint.

"Drink this, it will settle your stomach, child."

Her hands shook as Sansa brought the cup to her lips and sipped the hot tea. All her mind could think was that Petyr heard what she said. Everything she said. She didn't want him. She didn't want his children. What difference did it make what he heard, another voice said? He was forced to marry her, didn't he? He didn't want her or he would have acted differently. Petyr had not been cruel to her but indifferent and quiet. He was trying to make things alright between them and Sansa just threw it out the door every chance she had unconsciously or not.

Mrs. Ames sat back down and sighed.

"Are you *sure* you don't love him?" she asked again and Sansa couldn't stop the tears this time. Immediately, the old woman embraced Sansa and rubbed her back soothingly. "Sssh. It's alright, child. Everything is going to be alright. You'll see."

"I've ruined everything. I've pushed him away when he was being kind. I've avoided him as much as possible," she sobbed into her chest. "What am I going to do now?"

"Hush, child. Don't cry," Mrs. Ames said giving comfort. "Here's what you'll do. Bring his supper to him tonight. He won't expect it. Don't mention this conversation or that you believe he heard it."

Sansa pulled away, wiping her tears. "Oh no. I couldn't. I just couldn't face him now..."

"Courage, my lady," she said sternly as if she were a mother. "There is not a weak bone in your body. We northerners are brave and strong. We can do anything. Do you love him?" she asked again and Sansa finally nodded tearfully. "Tell him."

"He won't believe me," Sansa sighed. "Why would he? Plus, he doesn't want me anyway. So what's the use? I will not grovel before a man."

"Then seduce him," Mrs. Ames smiled. "Men are men, after all."

Sansa's eyes bulged.

"I will not. I am not – not," she looked around and then whispered. "I am not a whore. I'm not going to beg my husband to make love to me. I told you he doesn't want me. He wants her. He's always wanted her."

"Are you sure? Did you ask him? Does he have any idea that you care for him?" Mrs. Ames inquired knowingly. "Men are less complicated than you think. They need reassurance when it's something or someone they care about. Whether you believe it or not, his lordship cares for you. He wouldn't have gone through this much trouble if he didn't."

"I don't need to ask. I saw them before we left for Kings Landing," Sansa averted her gaze. "I came downstairs to go to the kitchen and heard them in the music room late that night. They were... he doesn't know I saw them like that. And I know they were intimate at his townhome. I *know* he wanted her. He even mistook me for her one night. He called out for her... and I ran up to my room."

Mrs. Ames sighed and Sansa caught the sadness in her eyes.

"My dear, even if that's true, it doesn't mean he can't care for you as well. It doesn't happen all the time but some people in arranged marriages end up growing to love each other or build a friendship. He respects you, I suspect. I thought I saw a friendliness brewing between you. If I may say so, he behaves quite differently around you than he did with her. He seemed more... at ease. Perhaps, if you both stop ignoring one another..." the woman pressed again.

"What's the use. If he heard what I said, then he doesn't have to wonder what I think. He knows now," Sansa groaned into her teacup.

"No, he doesn't. Because you didn't tell me the truth until now. I think it would be best to speak to him about it and clear the air one way or another. At the very least, you could have a friendship. That's more than what most women have in marriages," the housekeeper smiled.

Sansa wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. Mrs. Ames was right. Somehow, she needed to clear the way between them. What's the worst that could happen – tell her what she already knew?

"Hold on, my dear girl. Don't let go yet," the old woman insisted. "You are stronger than you know."

Later that night, after she had taken her own supper with the servants as she tended to do, William carried the tray up the stairs as Sansa followed with butterflies. Standing before his bedroom door, she hesitated and was about to tell William to take it in himself, but Mrs. Ames words of courage

willed her hand to knock on his door.

“Come in,” his voice sounded and Sansa took the tray as William opened the door for her.

Her stomach was in her throat as she walked in and spied him by the window with his back to her. She set the tray on the small table when William shut the door and Petyr turned around at the sound.

Sansa did not know what she hoped for. A smile perhaps? It was a slight frown that greeted her and it made her nerves get the best of her. All she wanted to do was run to her room. It would be so easy since they had adjoining doors.

“I – I brought your supper,” she stuttered stupidly.

Petyr stood in his shirt sleeves and stared at her silently from across the room. Words evaded her and all Sansa could do was stare back at him. Suddenly, he turned around to the window again as if she wasn’t even there.

“I believe I asked William to bring that to me, but thank you all the same,” he said and those dismissive words cut like a knife.

Petyr gave her a way out and she should have taken it but her feet wouldn’t move. He was upset. He must have heard her conversation earlier. If he didn’t care, then why would it bother him? Maybe Mrs. Ames was right.

“I wanted to speak with you,” she mumbled.

“About?” he asked evenly.

Sansa’s mind was suddenly blank and couldn’t think. God, why did she come in here? It was the dumbest idea in the world. She should have never let Mrs. Ames talk her into this.

“I – erm, wanted to know why – I mean, I was wondering...” she muttered incoherently and was dying to run for the door.

“Sansa, I’m tired and hungry. Will you get to the point?” he added testily and Sansa shrank at his tone. He hadn’t spoken to her like that in months, not since they first met and she ran away.

Her courage disappeared when she backed up towards her connecting door. “Nevermind. It’s not important.”

“Obviously, it was important enough to come in here and bring me my supper,” she could almost see the smirk on his face. He turned and raised an eyebrow to her slow retreat to her door.

“I can see you’re not in good spirits. We can talk tomorrow. I have a dreadful headache and should go to bed...” she stumbled.

Petyr laughed darkly at what they both knew was a lie and strode across the room quickly blocking her path.

“What a terrible liar you are,” he chuckled. “You have something to say or you wouldn’t be in my room right now.”

He was so close she could smell the brandy on his breath. Before she realized it, Sansa was backtracking to the other door as he followed her step for step.

“Is it improper for a wife to enter her husband’s bedroom?” she countered nervously.

“No,” he smiled mischievously. “Usually, the reason is for something other than bringing him supper. Do I look ill to you, that you must check on me? Or is there something else you desire?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Sansa lied. She knew exactly what he meant. He was toying with her right now and knew she was scared.

Petyr tutted and kept moving towards her.

“My dear wife, I do believe you’re old enough to know what goes on between a man and woman in the bedroom,” he teased.

Sansa’s eyes widened. Oh God, this wasn’t going well at all like she planned. This wasn’t the gentle teasing she was used to from Petyr. There was a sinister tone to his voice that made her wonder if he planned to do what he was alluding to right now.

“That’s not why I’m here,” she gasped and shoved him away but all it did was make Petyr take her shoulders and push her against the wall, blocking any escape.

“Isn’t it?” he asked with a terrible smile. “I must have misunderstood your intentions, sweetling. Please accept my humble apology believing you desired your husband’s... *attentions*.”

Now he was being cruel and they both knew it. Sansa knew he heard her downstairs and was doing this on purpose.

“Let go of me,” she whispered.

“Why? Am I not allowed to kiss and touch my wife?” he hummed along her neck and Sansa hated that she felt that stirring between her legs. “I have been a terrible husband, haven’t I? Is that what you’re wondering? Why I haven’t fucked you yet? Are you so eager to know the secret pleasures? Or do you want a child so badly?”

All the tenderness he had ever shown her in the past was gone. This man reverted to the one she first met and loathed. She hated he could make her feel such desire and the need to kill him at the same time. Sansa heard the slap before the sting of her palm brought her to her senses. Petyr’s cheek turned a bright pink and the look on his face was furious. Sansa went from surprise to shock and then to anger. How dare he!

“You think I want you?” she sneered. She wanted to hurt him like he hurt her. “Do you think I would have *chosen* to marry a man like you? Why, when I could have had a younger and more handsome man...”

“Oh, like the *honorable* Sir Harrold, is that it?” he laughed bitterly. Was Petyr jealous? “I highly doubt he would have had the ability or stamina to please you. Or have you forgotten our little tryst downstairs? I haven’t.”

Sansa lifted her hand to slap him again but he caught it and grabbed her other hand as his mouth crashed against hers. Petyr pinned her against the wall with his body and the more she struggled the more she pressed against him.

Petyr suckled on her neck, holding her to him so she couldn’t get out of his embrace. “This, I remember... except you were wearing far less. Your wet body against mine. The way your silken cunt writhed on my fingers. You wanted me then, didn’t you? I wanted to fuck you right there in that pool.”

The anger rose up from her belly in fury. She couldn’t have stopped what was about to happen if she tried. “All you want is a whore. Go back to Myranda and your mistresses in Kings Landing,” she spat. “I hate you. I never wanted to marry you. I’d rather be dead than have you rape me again.”

The words flew out of her mouth and there was no taking them back. Immediately, the lust and ferocity was gone from his face, replaced with something that filled her with such regret. She hurt him. She hurt him badly. Sansa could see it in his eyes. Petyr didn’t rape her that night. She wanted him as much as he desired her. She was ashamed that she wanted it... liked it. Ashamed to let a man give her such pleasure and that she wanted him to make love to her and now Sansa made him believe that he raped her that night. Petyr must have wanted her badly that night when he told her to bolt her door. Why else would he have let her go except to allow her to keep her honor? Now those words came crashing down and he let her go instantly, backing away.

Sansa’s chest heaved and couldn’t take her eyes off him as he moved further creating a distance between them. She didn’t know what to say now. If she told him she didn’t mean it, he wouldn’t believe her. All she wanted to do was find out if he cared about her. Maybe tell him she cared or fell in love with him but that moment was gone and she couldn’t turn back time. The look of shame and regret filled his eyes and Sansa couldn’t stop the tears that spilled down her cheeks.

Petyr finally tried to compose himself and cleared his throat.

“My apologies, my lady,” he said formally and it was as if a different man stood before her. “My head isn’t clear and I... well, as I’ve said when we first met. I do not rape women. However, I have horribly misjudged you – ahem, I was drunk that night and consumed with lust – and tonight... There is no excuse for my conduct. I promised once before that it would never happen again and I broke that promise.”

He couldn’t look her in the eyes as he spoke and Sansa felt the sob that wanted to come out but she held it down. She didn’t know what she wanted anymore. Petyr only had lust for her and nothing more. He hadn’t touched her until tonight and it was out of anger. This wasn’t love. Had she let him bed her tonight, he would have regretted in the morning just as he regretted it now. If Myranda was his wife, this wouldn’t have happened. Joffrey’s punishment was cruel indeed.

“I was going to tell you tomorrow, but now would be a better time,” Petyr’s voice strained as he turned his back on her. “I’m leaving in a few days. I know you’ve been melancholy since the ball. There’s nothing you did wrong. This isn’t what you want, I understand. I do. I know now, this... will bring us both nothing but pain and unhappiness. I don’t want that for you.”

He was leaving. That’s all Sansa’s brain could process. He was leaving her here like he had planned weeks ago, before Myranda and everything that happened in Kings Landing. Only now she couldn’t stand the idea of being left behind. Why couldn’t she take back everything she said today? Why couldn’t she speak up now and tell him?

“I’m leaving Harrenhal to you. It will always be your home as long as you wish. I have arranged an allowance. Spend it anyway you like. If you need more money, all you need do is write to me,” he said in a businesslike tone and it reminded Sansa of the offer he gave to Mrs. Cole in Riverrun. “You needn’t concern yourself with anything. I’ll take care of the business aspects for the Riverlands. Any repairs, supplies, anything at all... just let me know and you’ll have it.”

“Petyr...”

He raised his hand to silence her and continued on. “If you... take a lover,” he began softly as if it hurt to say it. “I’d rather not know. It won’t change anything. I would rather you be happy in some way.”

Sansa couldn’t stop the tears and felt faint. Take a lover? She couldn’t even imagine another man in her life.

“Where will you go?” she choked out at last.

Petyr still refused to turn and look at Sansa and it was killing her. She needed to see his eyes. Was he telling the truth or was this just another cruel joke?

“Gulltown... for now,” he replied. “I have a small townhouse there. It will be easier to conduct my business arrangements. After that, I may travel abroad again. I haven’t quite decided yet.”

“Why are you doing this? Why not just annul the marriage? You’d be free,” she muttered.

“Is that what you want?” he whispered with a slight turn of his head.

Sansa didn’t know how to answer him. He was offering her wealth, security, comfort and a life of her own. Any sane woman would take it. He was giving her Harrenhal. It’s more than she could have asked for.

"It doesn't matter anyhow. The King has forbidden any kind of annulment or divorce," he added after a long silence. "I have already drawn up the necessary papers giving you..."

Sansa couldn't listen to another word. She ran to her room and locked their connecting door before bolting the others. By the time she crawled under the covers of her bed, she could hear a faint knocking and Petyr softly calling her name. She didn't want to hear any more of his plan. All she knew was that this was over. Petyr, out of a sense of duty, was going to take care of her but he couldn't stand the idea of living here or with her any longer. Sansa gave him no reason to stay but she felt she would have abased herself to no avail. They were never right from the beginning.

She could hear Lady pawing at her door but Sansa couldn't move from her bed. After a long while of the wolf's whining, she heard Petyr call her to his room and shut the door. He would leave her Lady of course, but that wolf would be heartbroken. It was evident she loved Petyr and it hurt Sansa all the more.

Hours passed and his room became quiet as Petyr had long given up on her door. Lady must have been content with him for her scratching and whining stopped as well. The silence was too much. Sansa did not dare to wander downstairs and drink herself into slumber. She wanted all the pain and heartache to go away forever. She never wanted to feel again for anything or anyone. It would be better if she wasn't here at all.

A gentle humming buzzed in her ear and Sansa thought she was dreaming. The tune was eerily similar to something she had heard before and Sansa was scared to look over the duvet of her bed. When those little fingers sifted through her hair, Sansa almost smiled.

"*Don't be sad, I am with you,*" the girl whispered softly.

Why did she tend to show up when Sansa was having a crisis?

"*You left your room,*" it said in a sing-song fashion. "*This one is pretty too. I was sad when you went away. Are you going to stay for good now?*"

Sansa sniffed lightly, "It seems that way."

"*He is lost on another,*" the sweet voice said once again.

"I know," Sansa answered quietly as the little spirit combed her fingers through her hair.

"*You can come with me,*" it told her. "*You'll never be sad again.*"

"Go with you?" Sansa was confused. She was a ghost, wasn't she? "Where?"

"*Tir Na n'Og,*" it replied serenely.

The land of the faeries. Sansa knew the childhood stories well. Was it possible to enter that world as a mortal? Could she leave this world behind in search of what the little spirit was offering? Her grandmother often spoke of that other place. It was supposed to be beautiful with a faerie queen where time stood still. However, there was always a dark side to anything beautiful. The stories of pookas, banshees and changelings were frightening enough. Faeries were mischief makers and kidnapped human babies for their own. Sometimes mortals were taken or seduced into the other world and never heard from again. Occasionally they came back, the changelings, and they were never the same.

Suddenly, Mrs. Ames warning rang in her mind.

Don't listen or talk to them. They are tricksters and liars. Do not take their help... ever.

Is this what she meant? The daoine sídhe were real? Sansa had thought the old woman was superstitious. It couldn't be. Yet, here she was talking to what she thought was a ghost. Sansa knew she was either mad or these things truly existed. The girl did protect her and Lady in the woods. She told her about Petyr and Myranda.

"You want to take me to the Other World?" she asked incredulously and could feel still it touching her head. The action was meant to be soothing and it was in a strange way, but Sansa couldn't wrap her mind around what was happening right now. She heard Petyr's logic and reason rooted in reality telling her she was imagining all of this. It wasn't real. This isn't how the world worked. At the same time this world was slowly killing her. How long would she last living like this?

The spirit sounded and acted like that of a little girl. Sansa remembered a little girl on fire but some faeries were known to be shape-shifters and even take human form. Did she dare look at her? What if it was something else?

"*You will be happy there. You are special,*" it said.

Sansa's fears bubbled to the surface. No, she couldn't look. She must be dreaming. There was no land of the *Tir Na n'Og*. It was all children stories coming back to free her troubled mind. Faeries, goblins, banshees and ghosts did not exist. There was something about this house, the land that seemed to feed on her dreams, memories and childish fantasies.

Mrs. Ames had asked her if she experienced anything like this back in Winterfell. Sansa told the truth. She hadn't. Maybe it was because she was sad and afraid. She had heard so many stories about Harrenhal that Sansa ended up making them real in her mind. This house was new by comparison for Harrenhal had an ancient history. It wasn't until coming here that these strange things began to happen.

Only once, at Petyr's townhouse, did she have a strange nightmare about her, Petyr and Harrenhal. Either Sansa really was going mad or all she had left was retreat into her fantasies. She no longer had any family. Only an old, northern woman and a house full of servants. How long would it take before those servants would tell stories in the county about their mad and lonely mistress? Her husband abandoned her and left her to dwell alone in old, haunted mansion. Would anyone care if she vanished or died?

"I am not special," Sansa breathed. "Go away."

"Come with me," the voice sang.

Sansa covered her ears willing the voice to disappear.

"Go away," she chanted softly. "Go away."

"He will not come for you," it sang again, slowly drifting away. "But I will. I will always be there to help you. Only I can take away the pain. The burning pain."

Sleep did not come easy last night, if at all. His breakfast tray and coffee untouched, Petyr sat and stared out the snow encrusted window of his bedroom. Winter had come, and his heart froze with it. Somewhere in the lake's black waters, it resided, numb and cold.

Her words echoed in his mind and Petyr felt he had made an impulsive mistake with Sansa. He remembered overhearing her talk to Myranda that day in his townhome. Even then, she said she didn't want him, had no feelings for him. Petyr, out of a sense of seduction and need to bring her to him, practically forced himself on her. Each time she pulled away with the look of hurt and shame. However, he convinced himself that he could make her love him, eventually.

How wrong he had been. Sansa never wanted him but felt cornered because of what he had done. He made her this way and that thought was eating him alive. Petyr sighed and felt Lady snuggled at his feet. He had been so selfish these past few months. He thought he was doing the right thing for her but it was a lie. He only wanted it to be true.

This marriage, unbreakable by the King's decree, left nothing else to be done but to leave. He would give her anything she desired. Sansa would want for nothing, but his heart would die faster every day that he spent in her presence knowing she hated him for what he had done. Furthermore, Sansa did not even know the full truth of it.

I'd rather be dead than have you rape, touch, kiss me...

It pierced his heart to hear it. Petyr thought she responded to him, maybe even wanted him, but it was all an act to protect herself. Submitting to him and hoping it would end quickly or lessen the hurt he had inflicted. He never saw it from her perspective at all. Petyr had tunnel vision only thinking of the future he wanted. Not once did he ask her what she wanted. Would he have cared?

Between the conversation he overheard in the kitchen to her admission yesterday, Petyr knew it couldn't work. He lied last night to her. He hadn't made all the arrangements, he only wanted to regain some control over the situation. It was something to say to perhaps ease her mind. He certainly couldn't turn around to face her. Petyr couldn't bear to see her tears or look of hatred. Today, he would make good on the promise he made her last night. He meant what he said. He would take care of her until her dying day.

Petyr walked to her door and listened for a moment. He didn't have to touch the latch to know it was still locked. What could he even say to her now? No words could mend this wound. He left his room as Lady followed obediently behind. Passing Sarah, her personal maid, the girl told him Sansa had not unlocked her door this morning.

"Use Mrs. Ames key and see to my lady wife," Petyr instructed. "She wasn't feeling well last night."

The maid curtsied, "Yes, m'lord."

Petyr knew Sansa did not want to see him even just to check on her. He let Lady out and gave his instructions to Duncan on the luggage he wished to take with him. By the time he returned to his study to make all the arrangements he needed for Sansa, the maid told him her mistress did not want to be disturbed. Petyr didn't bother to reply and only opened the door enough to let wolf enter her room.

It was mid-afternoon, when Duncan knocked on his study door.

"My lord, a carriage has arrived with Lord Royce and his daughter. They encountered a bit of trouble on the Kings Road and one of the wheels will certainly break before they reach Lord Holloways Town. I instructed men to repair it and shown them into the library to warm up," the butler told him and Petyr refrained from sighing in exasperation.

He didn't need this right now. Not now. Surely, they would head back home before riding to Winterfell. Petyr couldn't believe his bad luck. He never should have become involved with the damned Royces. If Sansa knew they were in the house... he didn't want to know what it could turn into.

"Thank you, Duncan," Petyr replied emotionless and then a thought occurred to him. "Does Lady Sansa know we have guests?"

"No, my lord," the man answered. "I came straight to you, of course. Do you wish me to inform her ladyship?"

"No," Petyr waved him off. "My wife is not feeling well. I don't want her disturbed today. Let her rest. Inform Lord and Lady Royce I'll be down in a moment."

"Yes, my lord," Duncan nodded and closed the door.

Petyr waited a minute or two until he was sure he couldn't be heard and threw his teacup across the room, shattering it to pieces. Damn! He knew Myranda would want to see Sansa and meddle into his new marriage. Petyr prayed Sansa stayed in her room today. If he could get their carriage repaired quickly, she might never know they were here.

Entering the library, he heard Myranda's shrill voice as she complained about the tea the servants brought her.

"Forgive me for keeping you waiting. I wasn't expecting visitors today," Petyr put on his best smile nodding to them.

"Baelish," Royce frowned and sipped his whiskey. "Unlike my daughter, I don't wish to be here any longer than necessary. Once your men make the repairs, we wish to be on our way. The future Duchess of Winterfell shouldn't keep such company."

"It shouldn't be long," Petyr advised, holding his tongue on what he really wanted to say and turned to Myranda. "My lady, what can I do to make you more comfortable?"

"Petyr, ignore my father," Myranda cooed as she crossed the room and pecked his cheek with a smirk. "I'm glad to see you."

"You should spend the next day in Lord Holloways," he said. "By the looks of the sky, a storm will come by evening."

Myranda cooed up to him and grinned, "Or we could stay here for the night, accepting your hospitality once again or do you still need privacy with your new wife?"

Petyr smirked in return, "Not that I wouldn't offer, but I do fear your father is thoroughly against such a notion."

"I could sway him," she tutted. "Send your little wife to bed and meet me somewhere private?"

"Tempting, my dear," he whispered before stepping back. "I fear I'm an old married man now. Plus, you have a new husband that awaits you in Winterfell." Petyr glanced at Royce's disapproving glare and moved a respectable distance away. "You must be hungry after such a harrowing travel. Duncan will see to anything you wish and prepare something for your journey. If you'll excuse me, I'll see how they're coming along with the repairs."

Petyr bowed and was almost out of the room when Myranda called out.

"Will your lovely wife not greet us properly?" she sneered.

"Lady Sansa has been ill this morning, otherwise she would have graciously greeted you," Petyr tossed back casually and didn't wait for a reply. "She asked me to make her apologies."

Petyr walked to the foyer in a fit of anger. The sooner they left this house, the better. Somewhere in his gut, Petyr knew this wouldn't end well today.

Lady was growling at the door and no matter what Sansa said, the wolf wouldn't budge. Sarah had checked on her twice since this morning, informing Sansa it was the master's orders. So, Petyr did not want to deal with her and sent the servants instead. Typical, she thought. Did she expect anything different?

"Lady, stop it. Come here," she ordered the wolf as a knock came to the door.

Sarah came in with Sansa's tea and set it on the table. The girl looked flustered and anxious.

"Are you alright, Sarah?" Sansa inquired.

"Oh yes, m'lady," the maid replied nervously and poured the tea. "Is there anything else I can bring you?"

"That will be all," she answered and watched the girl curiously as she scurried out of the room. What was wrong with her all of a sudden?

That same curiosity had Sansa cracking her door open a little. A few servants were at the end of the hallway near the landing whispering as they looked over the balustrade. Glancing the other direction, Petyr's study and bedroom doors were closed and Sansa debated on seeing what was going on.

Keeping Lady inside, Sansa shut the door and silently padded to the two maids and could hear their voices more clearly.

"The nerve of that woman, coming here," the blonde, named Alice, tutted.

"It's a good thing his lordship didn't tell m'lady," the short redhead sighed and Sansa couldn't remember her name Jane, was it? "I feel awful for her."

"Awful about what?" Sansa asked quietly, making the maids jump in surprise.

Quickly, they curtsied and looked nervously at one another as their mistress gazed at them with a questioning.

"Excuse us, m'lady," the Alice stuttered. "We didn't mean to – I mean..."

"It's alright. I'm not angry with you," she smiled warmly. "What's going on that I don't know about?"

"Erm – you see, it's them again, m'lady," the redhead quivered. "I mean, Lord and Lady Royce. They're downstairs with his lordship."

Sansa's spine stiffened. Myranda and her father were here? Why? They must be on their way home or heading north to Winterfell. Why in God's name would they stop here after all that has happened?

"I see," Sansa frowned in thought. "Why was I not informed of our guests?"

The girls looked at each other in fear.

"His lordship – I mean, Lord Baelish said you were to ill. That you weren't to be disturbed at all," the blonde muttered.

So, Petyr didn't want her to know his love was here, did he? How quaint. The notion made her stomach queasy but did not want to appear weak in front of the servants.

"Well, I'm feeling a bit better," she smiled. "I will receive our guests. Did Lord Baelish say how long they were staying? Are rooms being prepared?"

"No, m'lady," one answered. "Mrs. Ames nor Duncan said a word."

Sansa glanced over the balcony and heard voices at the other end closer to the library and sighed. She couldn't be a coward and hide in her room. Petyr mostly likely apologized already for her absence but something in Sansa wanted to speak with Myranda. To tell her, she was sorry things ended up this way. Now that weeks had passed since the ball, perhaps the girl would listen to her rather than a slap across the face. More importantly, Sansa wanted to know how Petyr reacted to her presence again. She was torturing herself, she knew, but Sansa had to know.

"Prepare two rooms, just in case Lord Baelish changes his mind," Sansa instructed and walked down the grand staircase.

Servants were busy and through the foyer, she could see the carriage with several men attending to it just outside the windows. The voices grew stronger the closer she reached the library and knew where they were. Taking a deep breath, Sansa entered the room only to find Myranda and her father by the fire as footmen prepared a sideboard with hot food and drink.

"Lord Royce. Lady Myranda. I hope to find you both well," she announced herself.

Lord Royce did not reply at all and marched out of the room, making sure she felt the weight of his cut. He would have nothing to do with her, regardless of her new title. Decorum allotted her nothing in her own home with people who blamed her for the change in carefully laid plans.

"Well... *Lady Baelish*," Myranda smirked. "Marchioness of Harrenhal."

The two women stared at each other from across the room and Sansa finally glanced around wondering where Petyr was. Knowing they were alone, she walked slowly towards Myranda trying to find the right words.

"Myranda," she began timidly, "I know what you must be thinking, but..."

"Do you?" the girl chuckled and downed her hot, mulled wine. "Petyr said you were ill. You look it. Does marriage not agree with you? Or are you with child already?"

Sansa didn't know what to say. Any answer she gave would be terrible. Should she lie and pretend everything was alright or Myranda see right through her? Petyr already met with them. Did they know he was unhappy as she was? Sansa cursed herself for coming downstairs. It was a foolish idea. Myranda clearly was not interested in seeing her and had to know the truth.

"Hmph," she sniggered. "How does it feel to trap a man into marriage he doesn't want? I underestimated you. You probably begged him to take you to Kings Landing."

"But I didn't. I didn't want to go," Sansa pleaded. She didn't know why she bothered. Why did it matter now? Myranda meant nothing to her. Just like everyone else, she probably thought she was a whore that stole herself a rich husband.

"Of course," the brunette japed and without another word left the room.

Sansa stood there stunned. She wanted to run back up to her room but Petyr would soon know she was down here and wanted to avoid him as well. He lied as said she was ill. He didn't want her to know they were even here. Petyr would most likely be angry and came downstairs. Myranda did not want to hear any excuses or apologies. Her father was insulted to be in the same room with her and Petyr? God, she couldn't bear to see what he would do or say in front of them. Would they know he was leaving? Sansa didn't want to know.

Grabbing her cloak and gloves she left to dry from yesterday, Sansa walked outside and further down the terrace out of sight. The gardens gave her peace as she sat on a snow covered bench. It was starting to snow lightly and she hoped that they would continue to ignore her presence all together. Maybe she could spend the rest of the afternoon in the stables. Surely, they would not want her to dine with them if they stayed. And what if they stayed the night? Would Petyr and Myranda....

"You're such a little coward, Sansa," a vicious voice sneered.

Myranda walked over to her and stood next to the bench looking out at the lake. She didn't even bother putting on a cloak or pelisse. Sansa expected the woman to be angry and she might as well let her have her say in the privacy of the garden.

"You don't even know what to do with a man like him, do you?" she chuckled darkly. "In fact, I'm betting he hasn't even touched you... has he?"

Sansa didn't look at her or rebuttal. It was true but she couldn't voice it.

"Do you know how I know?" she smirked. "Because I've had him. He's quite the lover, I must say. And if he had bedded you, I don't think you would be sitting out here in the cold. You don't paint the picture of a happy couple. What's wrong? Can't you satisfy him?"

A little fight rose from her belly. Angry or not, now Myranda was just being cruel. There was nothing Sansa could have done to stop what happened.

"If you must know, we've been intimate. We are man and wife now," Sansa replied but the moment the words left her lips, she winced.

Myranda laughed heartily and Sansa knew she said the wrong thing.

"*Intimate*?" she chortled. "That's a lie that would only come from a virgin. Tell me, did it hurt when he put his cock inside you? Did he make you moan and come? Did he groan your name? You naïve thing, you never fucked a man before."

Sansa turned her face away, "Ladies don't speak of such things."

Myranda sat down next to her and couldn't stop snickerink.

"You have no idea. Let me tell you," she sneered. "He likes it when I put my mouth to him and suck him. He fucked me like a champion and I screamed in pleasure in his bedroom. How pathetic that he doesn't even want his own wife. What did he do on your wedding night? Give you a kiss and send you to your room? I think that's the worst I've ever heard. It would be one thing if you were ugly and he didn't want to fuck you. But you're prettier than me and still you can't even get your own husband... one of the most well-known rakes, to bed you."

She couldn't stop a tear from falling down her cheek and quickly wiped it away. This is why she hated Myranda before. She was horribly mean and knew just how to say the words that would hurt the most. She hadn't changed since Sansa time at the Eyrie. No, Myranda put on quiet the show of friendship. Was her love for Petyr a façade as well?

"Tears?" the brunette sighed in annoyance. "Why should you cry? You have the wealthiest husband other than the king himself. You got more than you deserve."

The woman studied her for a moment and Sansa wished she would go away. She did not want to be weak in front of her now. Suddenly, a wicked smile formed on the girl's lips.

"Oh, this is rich," she chuckled. "You're in love with him, aren't you? I thought this couldn't get any better."

"Please leave me alone," Sansa muttered.

"No, no, no. Here I thought you still being a virgin was pathetic, but you love a man that doesn't even want you. That's almost as bad as it gets. Well, I take that back. It does get worse. Not only does he not want you," Myranda smiled wistfully. "He's in love with me. He will hate you for forcing him to marry you, if he doesn't already."

"I didn't want this," Sansa began to cry. "The king..."

"The king," Myranda began, "Oh yes, the king. He wouldn't have ordered it if you were there. It's all your fault. Petyr was only trying to be nice to you. He is unhappy, can't you see it? He's had many mistresses, I know, but he doesn't even want to bed you. That should tell you how much he loves me. Now, I'm forced to marry a man I don't love and he is stuck with a girl he doesn't want... all because of you."

Sansa wiped her eyes and turned away. Everything Myranda said was true. Petyr should have left her in Riverrun. None of this would have happened. She wouldn't have fallen for him and now they were both miserable and he was leaving her in a few days.

"Lucky for you, our carriage is almost fixed. Once everything is arranged, we'll go to Gulltown..." Myranda rambled on and Sansa remembered what Petyr said last night. He was going to Gulltown. Would he meet with her there? Was Myranda really going to Winterfell?

"... and I suppose it could be worse. I'll at least become a duchess. Someone respected and admired, which is far and away what anyone will ever think of you. You've ruined him, don't you see? He'll never be received by any respectable house now that you've latched your claws into him," Myranda frowned.

The women sat in silence and Sansa wished Myranda would go back inside and leave her be. She was growing terribly cold out here and didn't even have the heart to argue with the girl.

"Look at you," the brunette cooed softly. "You really don't have much to live for do you? He'll probably leave you sooner or later. Will you drown your heartache with his money perhaps?"

"I don't want his money," Sansa sniffed. "If you love him, take him. Run away..."

"And where would we go?" Myranda asked sarcastically digging Sansa's wounds. "The king has made it impossible for him to divorce you and I'm promised to that Bolton boy..." she paused. "Unless..."

"What?" Sansa asked curiously.

"If you were gone, he would be free," Myranda said and Sansa understood her meaning completely.

Petyr couldn't just send her away. She couldn't run away. The only way to set him free would be...

"If you love him, wouldn't you want him to be happy?" Myranda asked sweetly. "What do you really have to live for? You could free him right now. You could make amends for this wrong..."

Sansa thought about it.

I'd rather be dead than have you rape me...

She told Petyr never to touch her again, that she hated him. He was leaving and still would be forever shackled to him. He didn't want her, just as Myranda said. The only reason he kissed her last night was out of anger. She would be miserable after he was gone. She would turn into a lonely old woman, if she didn't hang herself first.

"I wonder how cold the lake is now?" Myranda pondered aloud. "If you were to put stones in your pockets, I bet you would freeze faster before gulping any water. I've heard drowning is like falling asleep. So quick and painless and it's over."

Sansa looked out over the black lake. It would be freezing. Dear God, was she really considering this?

"Do it for him, Sansa," Myranda sniffed and dabbed her eyes. "Petyr is too kind and he would feel guilty if he found you gone in the house and such. This way, you would never be found. The stones would pull you down. He would never know... he would mourn you but then he would free. Isn't love making sacrifices?"

Sansa couldn't hold it in any longer and sobbed.

"Go away, please," she pleaded. "Please, leave me alone."

She didn't wait for Myranda to move and ran down the steps into the gardens. It was too much. She couldn't take it anymore. Why did he have to love someone like her? Why did Sansa love him? If she ran away, she knew he would probably find her. Even he didn't, it still did not free him from her. God, she wished she never came to this place.

Trudging through the deep snow, she fell against the hedges of the labyrinth and couldn't catch her breath. Hearing voices far behind, Sansa saw Petyr come out the door just as Myranda was going back inside the house. Sansa ducked behind a shrub and watched them. She didn't want Petyr to see she was out here. They spoke for some time and when Myranda's arms came up around his neck, Sansa couldn't watch any longer. It was too painful. He loved her, that's all she knew.

The entrance to the labyrinth was just behind her, and Sansa quickly squeezed past the wood planks and hid just inside the archway. For several minutes she waited and waited and then finally peeked around finding they had gone back inside the house. Myranda either didn't tell him she was out here or he didn't care.

The lake was still a far way off and Sansa didn't know if she had to nerve to actually do it. Turning around she glanced down the long corridor of the maze. She always wanted to wander through it and maybe now was the perfect time. It was growing late and the snow was falling a bit harder. If she wandered far enough, she could just sit and wait for the cold to take her. The fear of drowning was too much but if she lost her way inside the labyrinth for just long enough – as she thought yesterday, they would never know she was in here. Why would anyone come to look for her here? The snow would cover her tracks soon. She would be invisible.

The decision was made the moment her feet started walking. She turned the first left corner as Lady had and waited to see if anything was there. The hedges were over grown and it was a bit difficult to walk as she tripped over roots and branches but Sansa didn't stop. It was an eerie place and even if it had been trimmed and maintained, Sansa couldn't imagine anyone would want to be in here at all. Just as she felt yesterday, there was something wrong with this place. There were no sounds at all. She feared there might be a wild animal lost in here but when she turned another corner, Sansa stood still.

There were crates everywhere, blocking the path. They were stacked and covered with thick, oiled canvas to keep the weather off them. Further down, it looked like the type of canons her father's army used during the rebellion. Sansa was no expert in warfare but she saw enough in those last days before they surrendered to the king. These crates were filled with firearms, ammunition and everything to start a war. What in God's name was Petyr up to?

What are you hiding? What keeps me from telling everyone what you're doing?

Trust... and treason.

He told everyone the labyrinth was dangerous and never to enter it. William said Petyr was going to tear down the maze in spring. Would he have moved such a huge stock pile by then? Who was he working with? The corridor was packed and Sansa could see another passageway to her left that seemed to be filled as well. Quite the hiding place. Petyr made the household believe it was haunted and keep them from finding his secret place. Sansa remembered the two locked, heavy oak doors. What was he keeping there? What did she get herself into with him? Petyr was nothing but lies and deception. Did Myranda and her father know? Where they in on it too?

If Petyr found her in here, discovering his secret, would he kill her? Would he have trusted her with knowledge? Was he planning on going to war with Joffrey himself or... Sansa couldn't think. The moment she went back, he would know. Petyr was able to read her like a book it seemed. He didn't intend on marrying her. Perhaps Myranda already knew.

You don't even know what to do with a man like him, do you?

Did Sansa know Petyr at all, what he was capable of? There were strange men coming to the house often to meet with him and in the capital. Petyr was either involved, due to his wealth and connections in this treachery or the head of it. He told her that she would be in just as much danger as he if she told what she thought she knew.

A sound of a branch breaking made Sansa squeak in fear as she whipped around. The labyrinth

had been eerily silent before and now the cold breeze started to sound like a million little whispers.

"Is someone there?" her voice shook.

The whispers grew a little louder and Sansa felt her blood turn cold. Without another thought, she ran back the way she came following her tracks in the snow. She heard her name on the wind when she turned around and stepped back and felt the snow and branches give way. Sansa screamed as she fell down and desperately tried to grab anything. When her hands latched onto strong roots, she could barely see the snow covered edge of the pit. Sansa dug her foot into the side trying to pull herself up but her feet slid in the wet earth. Her dress weighed her down and her cloak was caught on something making it tight around her neck. She looped her arm around one of the roots and held on, her gloves torn and one of her palms bleeding. The more she tried to pull herself up, the more she slipped and almost strangled herself. Sansa dug her foot in again and braced her other foot on the wall trying in vain to keep from falling. She glanced down and it was dark. How deep did this pit go and why was it here?

The whispers stopped there was nothing but the howl of the wind muting her cries for help. The air was biting cold and with her throat constricted by her cloak, she could scream any louder. Sansa didn't know how long she yelled and when silence answered her cries, she felt numb. Above, she could see the sky was getting darker and the snow was falling heavier. If no one found her here, she would be dead. From falling or freezing to death, she didn't know which would be more terrifying.

She cried out again and her throat was hoarse and tight. It was so bitterly cold down here. The more she moved, snow fell off the edge onto her. She held still and waited. Someone would come wouldn't they? She had been gone a long time hadn't she? Petyr, Mrs. Ames... someone would wonder where she was. The sky was dark grey and Sansa's hand were numb with cold and pain. How long could she hold on? It couldn't be much longer and whimpered as what was below. She could die from the fall or worse break her leg or back and die slowly.

"Don't be frightened," a familiar voice said. "I am with you."

"Oh God, help me. Help me please," Sansa begged.

"Let go," it said.

"No, I'm scared. Please help me, I'll do anything," she pleaded again but the voice did not answer.

Sansa heard the soft crunching of footsteps in the snow and sighed in relief. They heard her. They came to rescue her at last.

"Here! I'm here!" she called out breathlessly.

"Girl, did I not warn you it was dangerous?" a dark voice sneered as the face of the last person she expected to see loomed over the opening of the pit. "You should have listen to me."

"Please, Duncan. Help me," she cried and reached up her hand feeling the roots dig deeper into her other palm.

"Do you know what this is? It's an oubliette. The labyrinth is full of them and God know what else," he grinned maliciously. "The Mad King built this damned thing if you remember me telling you."

He knelt down on one knee and watched her curiously. Duncan did not extend a hand to help her. He did nothing. The old butler just knelt there and smiled.

"Before His Grace rebuilt it, Harrenhal had two grand towers. One overlooked this labyrinth completely. The king would force prisoners or whomever he wished into like a demented game of survival. Some pits were so deep, they never found the bodies. Others were filled with spikes, maybe a wild animal starved with hunger. People were told to find the end and they would be free. If I remember correctly only two ever made it out and the King burned them alive as he laughed."

"Please Duncan," Sansa whimpered, her hands cramping with pain.

"What do you think is at the bottom of your little oubliette? I can't see in this dim light," the man chuckled. "By the looks of it, you'll find out soon enough."

"You can't leave me here. *Please!* Lord Baelish will..." she whimpered.

"His lordship has no idea where you are. That's exactly what I'm going to tell him," Duncan grinned. "My lord, I searched the gardens, the stable and nearby grounds. Is it possible the young lady has run away?"

"He's looking for me?" she asked feeling her hands slip a little.

"I wouldn't say *looking*. Just curious, I suppose. He was rather engrossed in bidding the lovely Lady Royce and her father goodbye," Duncan spoke as if having a pleasant conversation with tea. "It's a shame such a grand lady isn't our Marchioness. I hear she's to become Duchess of Winterfell. Someone to be revered and remembered. Do you think anyone will ever find you? I wonder. Once his lordship burns down this deathtrap, your body will buried with it."

"Duncan, no matter how you hate me, please," she begged again but those pleas fell on deaf ears.

The man looked around and stood up brushing the snow off his trousers.

"It's terribly cold isn't it? I'm an old man. I don't wish to catch my death out here," the butler grinned, wrapping his cloak around him. He made a sign of the cross and stared at Sansa for a moment. "You're in His hands now. Maybe this pit is the one that leads to Hell. I suspect that's where you're headed."

Sansa screamed as she heard Duncan walk away. Her voice broke from the cold and after several

minutes, fell silent as she sobbed. She didn't know how much time had passed but it had been far too long and no one else was coming to her aid. This was it. She was going to die here, right here.

"Let go," that little voice returned with such sweetness. *"Let go and come with me."*

Sansa couldn't feel her hands and the frost bit her lips and face. She was so tired. Her arms burned from the strain or the cold, she didn't know. She heard voices, so many voices calling her name. From the little spirit, faerie or what it was to someone that sounded more masculine.

She tried to yell out, to tell them but her voice only squeaked. Her hands weakened and felt herself slip a little but she tried again to hold on.

"He won't come for you," the girlish voice said sadly. *"But I'm here. I've always been here for you. Come with me, Sansa."*

It was the first time it spoke her name and Sansa's bleary eyes looked around in fear. She couldn't hold on much longer her hands and arms told her.

"Let go," it said again.

"I'm afraid," she breathed looking down into the darkness.

"Don't be afraid. It's beautiful there, you'll see and never want to come back," it spoke simply.

"I'll be dead. I'm not ready to die yet," Sansa sobbed. "I'm going to die at the bottom of a pit."

"You won't die. I am with you. You will be happy, I promise. You are sad here. He will not come for you and it will burn," it said.

Sansa thought of how many times Petyr had saved her and for a moment she thought she heard his voice again calling her name. Her hands tightened in pain on the roots and remembered Mrs. Ames words. Sansa didn't know why she said them at the time but she did as the woman told her.

Hold on, my dear girl. Don't let go yet. You are stronger than you know.

She took a deep breath and screamed as loud as her body would allow that it left her dizzy. The cold numbness was taking over and Sansa felt her hands slip again making the cloak tighten under her chin. Her feet scrambled but couldn't find footing in the frozen earth. She would never be found and he would be free. She would be free. No more pain. No more sadness. Is that what *Tir Na n'Og* was? Heaven? Soon she would know.

A voice called out in desperation. It was coming closer. It sounded so much like father. Was he waiting for her after all this time? He was going to lead her to him and her mother, brothers and sister. Sansa's frozen lips curled into a smile and called out to him weakly.

"Father, I'm here. I'm waiting for you," she breathed shallow.

A wolf howled and whined as it scurried anxiously above her, kicking snow onto her face. The white wolf barked loudly and this time she could hear his voice clearly. He was so close and Sansa was finally ready to let go. She never should have left her family. She should have stood there with them, proudly.

"Sansa!" he cried.

Her hand finally slipped when a strong one grabbed it fiercely and another tugged her arm. Her body limp and vision fading as she glanced at a dark figure bracing itself against the light of the snow and holding her. It didn't sound like her father anymore and Sansa wondered as she drifted off if Duncan was right after all. Maybe it was the Devil that held her. Perhaps it was Hell she was destined for.

"Brune! William! Over here! I can't hold her!" the voice yelled in earnest as it pulled and tried to get a better hold of her.

"Let me go," she gasped breathlessly.

"Never. I've got you. Don't let go of my hand," the figure begged and Sansa felt him struggle to hold her when she heard the voice speak desperately before her eyes fluttered close.

"Oh God, help me. *Please...*"

Affirmation

"Hemsley, how long until the repairs are finished?" Petyr asked as he observed the men working on the Royce's carriage.

"Not long now, m'lord. I believe we'll have them on their way before the hour is out. If the weather holds, I daresay they'll make it to Lord Holloway's Town before nightfall. Lord Royce might want to consider taking a boat there and make for Gulltown instead. The mountain roads through the Vale will most likely be treacherous if the snow continues," the man advised looking to the northeast.

Petyr looked at the dark clouds closing in. It would be a heavy snow tonight, he wagered. It seemed as though he would have to take a sleigh in a few days for his own travels. He had planned on doing just as Hemsley was alluding to. Petyr didn't fancy wintering in Gulltown, but if he waited too long he would be stuck here instead. After last night, he didn't know how long he would last cooped up with a woman that detested his very presence.

First, Petyr needed Myranda and her father to leave. He couldn't allow them to spend the night. Walking back inside to the grand hall, he glanced up the stairs. Petyr said a silent prayer, hoping she would stay in her room and not venture down to discover their unexpected guests.

"Baelish," Petyr turned around at the irritated voice grumbling towards him. "Are your men incompetent or just slow minded? A troll could have fixed that wheel by now."

Petyr held his tongue wishing they had been stranded on Kings Road and robbed by highwaymen instead.

"I'll have you on your way shortly," Petyr replied with a smile but kept Marcus's warning to himself. Nestor Royce was an ungrateful bastard. He was lucky Petyr offered his assistance at all. The last thing he needed was to meet up with them in Gulltown.

Just then, Myranda made her way towards him and Petyr sighed inwardly. All he wanted to do was escape back his study.

"Such a shame we cannot stay and dine with you and Sansa tonight," she smiled.

"As lovely as that would be," he answered graciously, "You best be on your way before the storm comes or you'll end up here longer than you would like."

"Would that be so terrible?" she cooed.

"Yes," her father answered abruptly. "Courtesy demands that I accept and thank you for your hospitality in our time of need but even you, Baelish, can understand that I cannot allow my daughter to stay under this roof. Her reputation is at stake as the future duchess who should not be associating with the likes of a Stark, even if she is your wife by law."

"Obviously," Petyr replied, keeping himself in check. "Certainly, His Grace, wouldn't care for his son's young bride to be dining with the last remaining person the North holds affection for."

"See here Baelish," Royce retorted hotly.

"You're in *my* home, Lord Royce, even if by accident. You are insulting my wife. She is my wife, regardless of her heritage of which she has no power over," Petyr calmly stood his ground. "You came to me for aid, I might add, and I have supplied it amply. Out of respect for the lady, I shall not speak what is in my mind. If you'll excuse me."

Petyr turned on his heel and walked up the stairs leaving a flustered Lord Royce and his smug daughter behind. He had enough of this damn charade. It was over with, Petyr was publicly humiliated by his own making and served Sansa up for them to tear apart all in order to get away from them. He would be damned if they would insult her in her own home and in front of him. They didn't need to know he was leaving or that she hated him. Petyr would still defend her honor no matter what she thought of him.

He passed her bedroom door and paused. Should he tell her they were here? He didn't want her to find out on her own. Petyr gently rapped on her door and only Lady could be heard with an annoyed yelp. He waited, but Sansa ignored him. He debated on confronting her regardless but in the end, Petyr figured she did not want to talk to him today. He couldn't blame her.

He walked into his study and poured himself a whiskey staring out the frost encrusted window. Petyr gazed out over the woods and remembered Sansa scaring the wits out of that man. *His little witch*, he smiled. What he would give to go back to when she seemed to be warming to him. He didn't imagine it all. Something was there between them. If he hadn't pushed so hard to seduce her, maybe... If he had been more honest, if he had told her... if, if, if.

A headache was brewing fast and all Petyr wanted to do was drown it in alcohol. He did not want to go downstairs again and face Royce or Myranda. He didn't want to even think about packing his things for Gulltown. The very thought of leaving her was making him ill.

Petyr didn't know how much time had passed when William knocked on his door. The decanter was almost empty as he watched the graceful snow flutter down outside his window.

"Yes?"

"Pardon me, m'lord," the young footman opened the door slightly. "Lord Royce's carriage is

ready. Mrs. Ames packed his lordship a basket for the journey.”

The boy stalled and Petyr raised an eyebrow.

“Anything else?” he quipped. “I have no intention of seeing them off, if that’s what you’re waiting for.”

“Well, m’lord,” William cleared his throat. “Lord Royce, sent me to fetch his daughter and I cannot find her. I thought…”

“You thought she was here with me?” Petyr frowned and watched the boy’s face fill with fear and quickly changed his tone. “As you can see, she is not. I haven’t the faintest clue where…”

Petyr’s eyes fixed on a point over William’s shoulder and paused. Damn it, he thought.

“Tell, Royce we’ll find her. She’s bound to be snooping around here someplace,” he smirked putting the lad at ease but Petyr couldn’t stop glancing at Sansa’s door.

William quickly left and Petyr finished off his drink. If she was in Sansa’s room berating her, there would be hell to pay. Petyr didn’t care if Myranda was the future duchess or not. He was ready to ring her neck if she snuck up here to make Sansa feel worse. Damn it, he wouldn’t have it.

Without knocking, Petyr opened Sansa’s door a crack and announced himself. The room was empty except for the excited wolf that leapt down from the bed and pawed at his pant leg.

“Sansa?” he called out seeing the bathroom door open.

Silence greeted him as he pushed Lady down. Petyr called her name again but he knew she wasn’t here. He closed his eyes at the thought and knew he needed to go downstairs. Petyr commanded Lady to stay as she whined, but the last thing he needed was the wolf attacking Myranda again.

Closing the door, Petyr made his way to the balcony and listened for any of them. It was strangely quiet and Petyr did not like it at all. Heading down the stairs, Royce came out of the parlor and began to ask about his daughter when Petyr waved him off, saying they were looking for her already.

The music room was empty, as was the ballroom, dining hall and the foyer. Duncan had suggested he last saw the brunette in the library as Petyr was already heading there. The fire crackled and yet no Myranda or Sansa. Petyr was about to leave when he spied a figure out on the terrace. Sansa tended to go outside even in the falling snow to be alone and searching for Myranda was suddenly forgotten.

Opening the glass paned doors, the cold hit his face and Petyr thought the girl was mad for staying out here. The figure that approached him wasn’t Sansa but Myranda in just her dress with no pelisse or cloak to keep her warm.

“Why are you out here?” he demanded. “I have enough to deal with without your father blaming an illness on me too.”

“You *are* sour today, aren’t you?” she grinned. “Isn’t your little wife taking care of your needs?”

Petyr wasn’t falling for her pathetic game.

“Myranda, I’m not in the mood to spar with you right now,” he smirked. “In fact, I am looking for my wife at the moment. Have you seen her?”

“Sansa?” Myranda smiled thinly. “Why, no. I just came out here to take in the view for a moment. I was tired of my father complaining. Is the carriage ready?”

“Yes,” Petyr replied. “Your father wishes to leave as soon as possible.”

“Well, it is very chilly out here isn’t it? I can’t imagine anyone wanting to be out here without any warmth,” she purred. “We are out here alone, Petyr. No need for any pretense.”

“Pretense?” he chuckled darkly. “You still think we’re playing this game of the lovers?”

Myranda coozied up to him and smiled seductively.

“Why not?” she cooed. “Just because you’re married and I’m soon to be shouldn’t stop us from a little fun now and then. I rather enjoyed fucking you and unless I’m completely wrong, you did too. Clearly, little Sansa isn’t very skilled in the bedroom.”

“And just where will we meet up? Hmm?” he played along as she slid her arms around his neck. “I highly doubt you’ll be leaving Winterfell any time soon, if at all.”

Her body was warm and ice cold at the same time as she pressed into him. Myranda had been out here longer than she said.

“What do you mean by that?” she japed. “I’ll visit home often and when I’m duchess, I’ll do as I please.”

Petyr chuckled under his breath and smiled.

“Do you even know who you are marrying?” he jested. Petyr knew Roose to be a traitorous and ruthless son of a bitch. He and his men were known for raping women and the rumor was that his son, Ramsay, was really a bastard. The boy had a far more terrible reputation than his father which is why Petyr was mortified at the notion of Joffrey wanting to marry Sansa off to him.

Petyr held his tongue not wanting to scare her too much. He needed Myranda out of his house. She wanted money and power any way she could get it. Frankly, he was no better but there was something deeply wrong with her and Sansa. Petyr didn’t trust Myranda as far as he could toss her. His gut told him Myranda was lying a moment ago about seeing Sansa.

"You'll have a young husband that will surely keep you busy producing heirs, I'm sure," he smiled. "So why you continue to play with me is confounding. Frankly, I don't want to be on Roose's bad side by having an affair with his son's bride. You will not be just some idiot's wife in Kings Landing in need of a good shagging, my dear."

"And yet you're stuck with that prude," she laughed bitterly and pulled away. "I suppose that's what you get for bringing her with you. I told you it was stupid. Should have just fucked her and sold her to a brothel. I hope bedding her was worth being forced to marry her. Tell me, does she just lie there quiet as the dead while you fuck her? Or have you lost interest already?"

The apple didn't fall far from the tree. Her father was a horse's arse and Myranda was a nasty, little bitch. She played Sansa for a fool that day at his townhouse. He knew that day it was a lie. Myranda didn't love him anymore than he did her. It was a business arrangement and nothing more. He would never have fucked her if he hadn't been weak that day. She managed to get the better of him when she lowered her mouth on him. However, it took a vivid image of his redhead writhing beneath him to fuck Myranda on the lounge.

"Be sure to write me all about how Ramsay fucks you and then we'll discuss it," he smirked. "I hear he's as foul tempered and brutal as his father. We're both greedy in different ways, my dear. However, I do feel you're going to pay a higher price for your new title, if and when you get it. Me? I can always get another mistress and make more money. My situation hasn't changed even if we had been married."

That wiped the smile off her face and Petyr didn't even have to admit to being in love with Sansa to do it. There wasn't much information on Roose's son, but Petyr didn't lie. What little there was to know, was Ramsay was worse than his father and that did not bode well for Lady Royce. She could gloat and insult Sansa all she liked but comeuppance was about to rear its ugly head soon enough. Petyr's first instinct that day when both ladies had cornered the wolf near his study told him there was no love lost between them from the Vale. Witnessing how terribly Sansa was treated by Lysa and her courtiers at the Eyrie was enough to tell Petyr Myranda was no friend to her. She was nothing to him and frankly, Petyr didn't care what happened to her now.

Myranda tried to regain her composure with a stern smile.

"Even if that chit gives you an heir, it won't do you any good. From what I hear, she and your future children will be shunned by society. You'd be better off with a bastard from one of your mistresses. At least my children will inherit a grand title, estate and be respected. You best get used to staying her a long time, Petyr. You and your family will never be welcome anywhere else," Myranda sneered viciously.

Petyr didn't care and her intended insult did not affect him in the slightest. He knew what was coming which made him smile faintly. She and her father could gloat all they liked, it still didn't change what the future would truly bring. It mattered not what the ton thought of him or Sansa. Their petty games and bouts of cruelty would be short lived.

"A lot can happen between now and never," he said holding her steady gaze. "I believe your father is searching for you. Best not keep him waiting. Goodbye Lady Royce."

Myranda pushed passed him into the house and Petyr hoped that was the last time he would ever have to see her or her dreadful family again. She was surely marching into a mess with the Boltons and had no idea. All she saw was a title. The woman was clueless about the North and the people in it. She couldn't even fathom how much power Petyr wielded in the Vale. Royce thought he had gained so much with Lysa's death and the man couldn't have been more obtuse. Petyr still had a far greater hold on Robert than anyone would have suspected.

Walking back to the foyer, Petyr could see Royce ascending his carriage. Finally, he sighed in relief. He retreated into the music room hoping Sansa might be there, but it was still empty. He sat at the piano silently and rested his fingers on the ivory keys. He hadn't played since that day that Sansa outed him to Myranda. He was angry with her forcing him to showcase a talent he kept private. It was a form of release when he was alone. Without another thought, his fingers glided effortlessly as a gentle tune emerged and filled the room. A few servants passed by slowly and Petyr knew they were watching him curiously. Coming from him, music was probably the last thing they expected.

He played composed pieces occasionally, but mostly he just liked to let the music come to him. With improvising, he found a strange release. His fingers would find the melody and it was one of the few things that truly calmed him. He teased Sansa on why he would come down here in the middle of the night. He was keeping up appearances of the ghostly musician but it was one of the few times he could be completely alone.

Petyr wasn't sure how long he played hoping Sansa might hear and come to him. He needed to talk to her before he left. He couldn't leave things like this. The clouds were getting darker as the storm approached and it began snowing harder outside. A footman started lighting candles in the room and yet Sansa stayed away. Had she met with Myranda today and was avoiding him?

The music died and Petyr walked back upstairs believing she had returned to her room. This time Lady refused to stay inside any longer and followed him as he checked the bathroom and then his connecting bedroom. William was stoking the fire in his study when Petyr wandered in.

"Have you seen Lady Sansa, William?" Petyr asked and something did not sit right with him.

"No, m'lord. I haven't seen her all day," the boy replied. "Is everything all right?"

"It's nothing," he replied and sought out Sansa's maid, Sarah. She was the last one Petyr spoke to in regards to her mistress. The girl was carrying a bundle of linen down the hallway when asked her about his wife. She too, had not seen Sansa since this morning. As he headed back downstairs, Duncan came from the direction of the kitchens.

"Do you know where my wife is, Duncan?" Petyr asked with growing concern.

"I haven't, my lord. Has she wandered off again?" the butler inquired simply. "She tends to be in the gardens in the afternoon, I believe, with the ... dog."

Lady growled and the old man backed away slightly.

"She never goes out without Lady," Petyr supplied. "Duncan, bring her to me."

The man nodded at the order and turned back to the kitchens. She very well could be with Mrs. Ames but Petyr had a sinking feeling that wouldn't go away. She was angry with him but no one seemed to know her whereabouts and she kept Lady locked in her room.

Petyr returned upstairs as Lady obediently followed. He found Sarah and told her and the other servants to check every room for their mistress. Petyr had an idea and retreated to his bedroom and commanded Lady to stay. Inside his dressing room, he pressed a panel that opened into a dark corridor. Lighting a candle, he stepped inside and followed it to a hidden stairwell that circled down to the first floor. It was freezing until the steam drifted from further down. Petyr passed the locked oak door and found the stairs leading down to the hot spring below the house.

He had forbidden her to return down here but Sansa wasn't one to obey his rules. He was ready with a sarcastic quip, feeling certain she was down here hiding from the Royces but it was dark. No torch, candle, nothing.

"Sansa?" he called out into the darkness. "It's only me."

Nothing answered back and his stomach dropped. Petyr took two steps at a time and exited through the panel in the music room, not caring if anyone saw. Duncan came around the corner and shook his head in dismay.

"She is nowhere in the house, my lord. I just came from the terrace and couldn't see her anywhere. This storm is getting worse, I fear," Duncan apologized and waited for Petyr's instructions.

Petyr strode into the kitchen and found Mrs. Ames speaking to two upstairs maids.

"Mrs. Ames..." he began.

"Lord Baelish, I have every servant looking for her in every conceivable place. Both girls saw Lady Sansa this afternoon upstairs by the balcony," the housekeeper gesturing to the two maids looking anxious at the master of the house. "Tell his lordship what you know," she told the girls.

"M'lord, she overheard us talking about the visitors and said she was going downstairs to greet them," the blonde stuttered fearfully. "That was the last we saw of her."

So, his intuition was right. Myranda had spoken to her and lied about it. Why? Petyr had first left them in the library and found Myranda out on the terrace in only her dress. She wasn't taking in the view. Sansa was outside, he knew it in his bones.

Petyr ran to the library as Mrs. Ames and a few servants followed.

"She usually leaves her pelisse here to dry when she goes out, m'lord," one footman voiced. Petyr looked around and there was nothing. No cloak, pelisse, gloves, nothing.

"God in Heaven," Mrs. Ames breathed. "She wouldn't be foolish to go out in that with Lady, would she?"

"The wolf is in my room," Petyr replied in kind. No, she went outside to speak with Myranda or get away from her. The latter seemed more true. "I want all available men to search the grounds. She could be hurt. In this weather, she won't last long. It will be dark before long."

"Are you sure she is outside, my lord?" Duncan asked from the edge of the room.

"Yes," Petyr answered. "I know she is. We must not waste any more time. Saddle the horses and check the stables for her. See if any horses are missing. We may need to search around the woods and lake."

Petyr ran back upstairs and released Lady from his room. Donning his cloak and gloves, he rushed back down with the wolf in tow and felt sick. He had not felt such dread since she ran away from the inn months ago. When he found her beaten and almost raped, Petyr wanted nothing more than to protect her from everything and everyone. He and Brune killed those men that dared touch her. If he ever got his hands on Myranda, it would be the second time in his life he murdered a woman. She was behind this. She hated Sansa and what the girl had stolen from her. Petyr just underestimated how much.

Brune and William caught up with him as the horses were brought around the back.

"All the horses are accounted for, Petyr," Brune advised.

"With this heavy snowfall, she could be partially buried by now," Petyr told them. "Be careful to check everywhere. I don't how far she could have traveled by foot unless she's injured or unconscious."

Petyr mounted his horse and didn't wait. Brune sent men in all directions as William took others by foot. Petyr came around the back of the house and yelled as loud as he could.

"Sansa!" his voice echoed back to him.

Lady jumped through the deep snow and barked relentlessly behind him.

God damnit, woman. Where are you?

"Come on, girl. Find her," Petyr told Lady.

The wolf dug her nose through the snow and wandered around. She understood that her mistress was missing and was searching for her scent. Petyr guided the horse around making sure he wasn't stepping on Sansa somewhere in the snow. He could see men heading off near the water wheels and woods on horseback. Others were nearing the lake and Petyr could see Brune off in

the distance on the other side of the grounds.

The storm was worsening by the minute as he and Lady made their way across the grounds. Voices were yelling her name in the distance as heavy snowfall muted light from lanterns as they searched. Petyr watched the world in anticipation. That animal was a part of her in some way and yet it was having trouble discovering her whereabouts. William trudged his way over as Petyr searched around the gardens nearing the labyrinth.

"Nothing," he gasped in cold air. "Not a damned thing, my lord."

Brune was making his way towards them with a group of men. It was getting dark and the storm threatened to bury them all. Petyr couldn't accept it. She was out here somewhere. He didn't know how he knew, but he did. The wind picked up and Petyr thought he heard a voice floating with it. He told everyone to be quiet for a moment and listened.

"Sansa!" he yelled and listened again.

Something caught Lady's attention and she darted towards the labyrinth and started barking in panic. She sniffed through the snow and yelped at the entrance to the maze. Petyr was just about to call out to her again when, this time, he heard a definite scream. It was weak and muffled but it was woman's voice.

Lady took off leaping over the wood as Petyr climbed off his horse and ran although the deep snow slowed him down. The wood planks had been moved and Petyr's heart sank. She was in there and the wolf knew it. He followed the Lady's tracks but took care where he stepped. He knew there were traps, oubliettes and all manners of danger inside the maze. The Mad King loved his petty torture games.

He called out to her again but only heard the panicked howl of the wolf and Petyr felt he was getting closer. Turning another corner, he saw Lady pacing and dipping her head in what was a definitely an oubliette. Some were deep pits, other had sharpened spikes and they used to put wild animals in others. Petyr ran and almost slid over the edge when he reached down and grasped her gloved hand. A mere moment later, she would have been lost forever. Sansa's cloak was caught on branches and roots and was practically strangling her. He braced his legs but the snow was making him slip. He reached down with his free hand to keep her from falling any further.

"Brune! William! Over here, I can't hold her!" he bellowed.

Her face was turning blue from cold and lack of air. He shifted his weight but she was heavy in this position where he barely had a hold on her. His muscles were screaming and he tried desperately to get his hand under her shoulder for leverage.

"Let me go," she breathed and her eyes were glassy and didn't seem to see him.

"Never," Petyr grunted from the effort. "I've got you. Don't let go of my hand."

If she let go, he wouldn't be able to hold her much longer. Her hand was bloody and even with the glove, it was slipping out of his. No, he wasn't going to lose her. Not like this.

"Oh God, help me... *please*," he heard his voice beg and felt a painful click in his shoulder.

The two men answered his plea as he heard them come closer. Brune braced his leg against on side of the pit and held onto the roots trying to grab her. William supported Petyr's body and reached in pulling on the arm that held her bloody hand. It took the three of them to haul her unconscious body up and over the edge without falling to their deaths.

William pulled her to a safe distance before helping Petyr slide back and Brune climbed out and the three men sat in exhaustion for a moment. The snow was coming down hard now and Petyr needed to get her inside and warm. Her cloak was caked in snow and mud as he unclasped it from around her neck.

Sansa was cold as ice and Petyr couldn't tell if she was breathing or not. He removed his cloak and wrapped it around her frozen body. His arms were burning but he lifted her up and carefully followed their tracks in the snow. He could hear Brune advise William to be wary of where he stepped as they finally saw the large archway, leading them out of the labyrinth.

Men had heard the yelling and many of them watched in the dim light as Petyr carried his limp wife across the gardens to the tiered terrace. Mrs. Ames and house servants rushed outside as he almost stumbled from the effort. His shoulder was piercing with pain and Petyr wondered vaguely if pulled the joint free. William took over and lifted Sansa into his arms as the warmth of the interior was a shocking contrast to the bitter cold.

"Mrs. Ames, draw a hot bath immediately. She's frozen through," Petyr gasped following Brune and William into the grand hall. "She been out there for some time. Brune ride to Lord Holloway's and bring Doctor Barnett."

Three maids hurried up the stairs on the master's order, but the old woman told them to wait.

"My lord, no, the hot water will shock her and make it worse, especially if the frost has gotten to her," Mrs. Ames corrected quickly and made her way up the stairs. "Warm water only... for now. Trust me."

Brune left immediately as they crested the second floor. Petyr clutched his arm and followed into her bedchamber. William laid her on the marble of the bathroom and the tub was almost full.

"William, fetch me these herbs," Mrs. Ames asked kindly coming in from Sansa's room. Petyr knelt down and unwrapped the cloak from Sansa's still form on the floor. She handed the boy a piece of paper she had hastily scribbled on.

"Sarah, go with William. Lord Baelish and I will take care of her," she told the maid that cried softly in the corner.

Petyr shrugged off his jacket and winced in pain, tossing the garment and gloves aside. Mrs. Ames

looked around the room and picked up his straight-edged razor near the wash basin. Petyr picked Sansa up and held her cold body against his chest. Mrs. Ames cut away the laces of her wet and muddy dress. Together they undressed the girl quickly. Petyr held his breath at the sight. Sansa appeared dead and he willed away the thought. Her naked body was icy to the touch and pale as a ghost.

“Can you lift her?” the old woman asked, eyeing his shoulder.

“Take her legs,” Petyr said as he hooked his arms under hers, lifting Sansa up and into the warm bathing tub.

Petyr supported her head as it threatened to lull down into the water.

“We’ll need to gradually warm her and add more hot water in intervals,” she spoke calmly. “Clean her up best you can. She has deep cuts on her palms. I need to get my salve. Support her neck and watch her breathing.”

All at once, the woman rushed out and Petyr stayed kneeling next to Sansa. He caressed her cool face and leaned in close. She was breathing shallow and he could see a red mark just under her jaw where the cloak was cutting into her neck.

Let me go

Petyr’s eyes took her in before kissing her forehead. She was so cold and he couldn’t bear the thought of losing her.

Never

He took the small washcloth from the little table and dipped it in the water. Petyr lathered the lemon soap she liked so much and gently wiped away the dirt from her face. Sansa had a few cuts on her cheek and he was tender not to cause her pain. He picking some dead leaves and twigs from her hair when Mrs. Ames returned with Sarah.

Petyr supported her head and spoke softly to her, hoping she would wake while the women worked. Mrs. Ames was cleaning the cuts on her hands while Sarah helped bathe her. The maid would let out some of the dirty water and pump in fresh and warmer water. Petyr pulled Sansa against him again and let Sarah wash her hair. His shirt and waistcoat were soaked through but he didn’t care. They repeated the routine again and before long, a rosy color returned to Sansa’s now clean skin. Sarah dried her hair, pulling it back into neat plaits and Mrs. Ames was now bandaging the girl’s hands as they hung lifelessly over the tub.

The tub was drained and Petyr lifted Sansa up with effort and cradled most of her weight with his uninjured arm. He carried her to the next room where Sarah and already turned down the bedclothes and used a warming pan. The fire was stoked high as Petyr laid Sansa down on her bed. Sarah came over with a fresh chemise in her hands and Petyr lifted Sansa up once again.

“No, don’t bother. She’ll soak it through. It will be easier to change the linens. She will have a fever, no doubt, after such exposure,” Mrs. Ames explained.

Petyr laid her back down and pulled the soft linens up, keeping her modesty. She would be furious knowing he had seen her at her most vulnerable and bare. Petyr smiled at the thought of her beating him senseless. He would welcome it, just knowing she was alive and well.

“Let me take a look at that shoulder, my lord,” the old woman voiced concern as she tinkered with several jars and various things on a nearby table.

Petyr sat down on a plush ottoman and supported his arm. He watched Sarah fuss over Sansa when Mrs. Ames unbuttoned his shirt and he gave her a surprised glance.

“I didn’t take you as a shy man,” she smirked. “Come now, let me see what you’ve done to yourself.”

Petyr was too worried about the girl in the bed and didn’t have the heart to admonish the old woman for her little japes. He opened his waistcoat and shirt, letting her inspect his shoulder.

“Could have been worse,” she muttered to herself and lifted his arm at an odd angle making him hiss. Before he could protest, Petyr felt a sharp click and the pain lessened dramatically. “There,” she smiled. “If I make a sling, it should heal well enough.”

Petyr’s attention returned to his wife on the bed and Mrs. Ames followed his gaze.

“Now, don’t you fret. I’ll take good care of this precious girl. She’ll be up and playing that piano before you know it,” the woman patted his good shoulder. “Go clean yourself up, my lord. We’ll watch over her, have no fear. William is going to bring up a hot supper for you shortly.”

Petyr was left speechless at his good fortune as far as servants. Mrs. Ames was a godsend and if anyone could be trusted with Sansa, it was her. He looked down and saw how filthy he was. He was covered in muck from the labyrinth. Reluctantly, he stood and retreated to the bathroom. This was not a time for a leisure bath as he filled the tub with hot water. In no time, he had toweled off and dressed in his nightclothes and warm robe.

Sansa’s room was warm and he could smell the bitter herbs as Mrs. Ames was concocting some sort of foul smelling tincture at the table laden with medicines. Petyr sat down next to Sansa and watched her labored breathing. The girl had practically choked herself to death. If the cold and fall didn’t kill her, the cloak would have.

“Sweetling, can you hear me?” he breathed next to her ear. “You’re safe and you must wake.”

“Talk to her,” the woman advised with her back to him. “She can hear you.”

“How do you know?” he replied a bitterly. Mrs. Ames knew Sansa did not want to be married to him. Why would she want to hear his voice?

"Because she is strong. Plus, she listens to you," Mrs. Ames grinned knowingly. "If anyone is going to get through to her, it's you. Sarah, will you be a dear and fetch Lord Baelish something to eat? He will need his strength."

The girl left and Mrs. Ames shut the door quietly as she observed him in a motherly manner.

"Mrs. Ames," he began, "You are unfailingly kind but you and I both know how she feels about me. I'm the last person she would want at her bedside."

She walked over to the bed and sat on the opposite side.

"I know a great many things, my lord," she smiled sadly. "Whatever else you may be, a good man or not... you love her very much. Something you should have told her by now."

Petyr was shocked at her boldness and the truth of it. She was far more observant than he gave her credit for. It still didn't change the fact that Sansa hated him now.

"You forget yourself," he tried to be stern.

"At my age, that is a frequent thing, my lord," she japed. "When you get to my years, you tend to speak your mind more often. What's the worst to happen, you'll cut short my young life?"

Petyr hid his smile. She was so like Mrs. Cole and Petyr had become quite fond of the old woman. She meant well. He didn't agree with the 'good man' part but there was no lie in the fact that Petyr loved Sansa dearly. She was right. He should have told her long before now. She was lying here now because of him and his damned games.

"Tell her," she eyed him from across the bed. "She needs to hear it. She won't fight for me or anyone else. She'll fight for you if she believes."

Petyr sighed and picked up Sansa's bandaged hand.

"She told me to '*let her go*,'" he breathed in dismay. Petyr didn't know why he was telling Mrs. Ames this. The guilt, fear and a thousand emotions he was harboring was too much as Sansa lay helpless on the bed.

"Yet, you didn't – so don't let her go now. Give her hope, that there is something to come back to," he could hear the smile in her voice. "Someone that loves her. She needs your love desperately." Mrs. Ames picked up Sansa's other hand and caressed her palm, deep in thought. "She has very little time," the woman whispered and Petyr wasn't sure what she meant.

Petyr kissed her hand and after a moment, noticed Mrs. Ames was gone. Had she spoken those words just a moment ago or what it his mind telling him what to do? A little while later, Sarah walked in with a tray and set it down on a table before bidding them goodnight.

He barely ate at thing and pulled the chair next to the bed. He dabbed her forehead and took her hand in his again. Regardless of how warm the room and bed was; her hands were still icy to the touch. He cupped her hand in his, careful of her wound.

Talk to her

What could he say to bring her back? Mrs. Ames was kind but she wasn't witness to what happened last night. Sansa hated him, accused him of hurting her. She didn't object to him leaving. Petyr kissed her cold fingers and wondered what she and Myranda said to one another. Why in God's name would Sansa go into the labyrinth. He told her so many times it was dangerous. He heard her scream but in the end, she didn't want him to save her. Now, here she lay and Petyr wasn't sure of anything anymore.

Sansa had been so depressed since leaving Kings Landing. He knew she was unhappy but not to this extent. Did Myranda feed her more lies? It couldn't possibly matter. She was going north. The ton would not come to Harrenhal. Sansa would not have to be victim to their terrible gossip and stares. She would be a free and wealthy woman here and not bound to him in anyway. Petyr hadn't been cruel to her or attempted to force intimacy.

Petyr couldn't wrap his mind on why she would venture out in this weather, let alone enter the labyrinth. He watched her for a long time until his eyes were too tired to stay open any longer. She would wake in the morning and everything would be different. He would tell Sansa what was in his heart. If she still loathed him, Petyr would leave as he planned.

Closing his eyes, he told himself – *just for a moment. I only need to rest for a few minutes...*

Men were arguing in the distance and Petyr began to wake. His neck and shoulder were stiff and sore. He had the most terrible dream that Sansa was burning and she was wailing his name.

Jolting awake, he was still in the chair beside her bed and Sansa was mumbling incoherently. Beads of sweat trickled down her face as Sarah was taking a cool cloth to her damp skin. The maid looked up and covered a bit.

"Mrs. Ames said not to wake you, m'lord," the girl whispered.

Petyr leaned over his wife. She was in feverish fit. Her head tossed back and forth and Mrs. Ames was right. They would need to change the linens. He looked around and wondered where the hell everyone was.

He strode to the door just as it opened and Brune was pulling the doctor in. Mrs. Ames was protesting about something or other as William held her back in the hallway.

"Here he is, Lord Petyr," Brune shoved the man in the room. "Took some persuading."

"I object to being treated in this fashion!" the round and balding physician exclaimed. "Pulled out

of my bed and into this storm. For what? The Marquess' new whore?..."

Petyr frowned and stood before the man unyielding.

"You best watch your tongue if you wish to keep it," Petyr warned him. "My wife is ill and you will tend to her or have you forgotten I'm lord of these lands? I do believe I have treated you well, doctor."

The man looked to Sansa on the bed and back to him and immediately apologized.

"Lord Baelish, I did not know you had taken a wife. I thought it was a trick to bring me out here calling the girl the lady of the house," the man stuttered. "Your reputation and all...I don't tend to whores and mistresses."

"Even if she was, is my money not good enough for you?" Petyr growled.

The man shrank back and bumped into Brune's large body. "Of course, my lord. Of course," the doctor whispered in fear. "I can see now I was mistaken. Please forgive me. Being woken in the dead of night and riding all the way out here... I am not myself." The doctor walked over to the bed and stared at Sansa. "Yes, you were quite right to bring me."

Doctor Barnett examined her, feeling her throat, forehead and checking each eye. Petyr heard a disgruntled sigh and turned to see Mrs. Ames leaning against the door with her arms crossed and a deep frown on her face.

"Yes, she has the fever on her," the doctor pointed out the obvious. "What is that smell?" The man wrinkled his nose and saw the table with all of Mrs. Ames's remedies. He walked around the bed and picked up a few bottles.

"Oh, Lord Baelish, tell me you haven't had some madwoman tending to your young wife have you?" the man jeered and both looked in the housekeeper's direction. "Only northern peasants would use such things... cast spells and God knows what else."

"Are you calling me a witch?" the old woman retorted hotly as William held her back.

"Watch your tongue madam. You have no place here," Barnett scolded. "Get rid of this sorcery. Lady Baelish needs a true physician not some potions and spells."

Mrs. Ames looked to Petyr for help and he felt terrible for nodding to her to take away her medicines. William helped her gather the items and before she left the room, the woman glanced sadly at Sansa.

"I'll be downstairs, if you need me my lord," she told him sincerely.

"Make sure the men have warmth and plenty to eat after last night," Petyr ordered softly giving her a task. She was trying to help, but Barnett was right, Sansa needed a modern physician.

Brune closed the door after him, leaving Petyr, the doctor and Sarah alone in the room. He opened his bag and took out several items placing them on the table next to her bed. Petyr sat back down and watched helplessly as the man applied all sorts of remedies to his beloved.

Hours passed slowly and soon it was nightfall again. The man bled her, tried to feed her some kind of tonic that she unconsciously spat up. She moaned and sometimes cried out as if in terrible pain. All Petyr could do was watch. His nerves were on edge and either paced the room, fidgeted in his chair, or stared blankly out the window. He could hear Lady howling and pawing at the door, begging to be let in. Once, when Sarah opened it, the wolf scurried in to the fright of the doctor.

The man said it was unhealthy to have such a beast in the house, let alone this room. The wolf growled at the man and refused to leave Sansa's side. She was protecting her mistress, Petyr knew but he escorted her out and asked Sarah to have Mrs. Ames keep her downstairs for now. All the way down the hallway, he could hear Lady cry and bark as Sarah struggled to pull her away. He closed the door on the sound and sighed in regret. Was he doing the right thing, his mind turned over and over.

Morning came and Dr. Barnett was at a loss for words. He bled her again but the fever only appeared to get worse. He almost couldn't bear to watch Sansa like this. There was nothing he could do but wait and hope. Every tray of food brought to him, went untouched. He refused to sleep, frightened to wake and find her gone.

After taking a rest, the doctor returned with a frown and checked her again. Petyr couldn't even look at the man. He knew what he was going to say before the words were spoken.

"I'm afraid there's nothing more I can do, my lord," he apologized earnestly. "I think – well, that you must prepare yourself. I fear she won't live out the day."

"Sarah, bring Duncan and Mrs. Ames to me," he commanded softly.

A while later, Mrs. Ames came in and gasped at the sight. That alone almost broke him. She knew it as well. Petyr noticed she was alone.

"Where's Duncan?" he asked.

"I know not, m'lord," she answered, not taking her eyes off the girl in the bed. "We haven't seen him since Lady Sansa was found."

Petyr frowned. He would deal with him later. How could he just disappear at a time like this?

"Fetch me my purse in the study and bring back your remedies. I wish for you to tend to Sansa," he instructed and the doctor objected loudly. At the inn when he was ill, Sansa said she used treatments she learned from the old housekeeper. As much as he hated it, it worked. Mrs. Ames couldn't do any worse now that the doctor was at a loss.

"I must protest! You would let that woman..." he grumbled. "You would insult a proper physician..."

Petyr held up his hand to halt the man's tirade. He was exhausted and could barely think straight as it was.

"As you said, you've done all you can," Petyr sighed. "If bathing her in tea would help, I would do it."

Mrs. Ames returned with his purse and Petyr counted out a hefty sum in gold, handing it to the doctor and nodded to Brune standing at the door.

"I'm grateful for all you have done. My man will see you home," Petyr said tiredly and waved him off.

"Let the girl meet God without some witch casting her spells on her," the doctor preached as Brune pulled him away. "You're only damning her..."

"Then we'll burn in hell together," he muttered under his breath and heard the door click shut. Immediately, Mrs. Ames rushed to Sansa's side with fear in her eyes. "What can be done? Is it too late?" he breathed.

The woman pulled back the sodden sheet and cursed softly. She felt all around her body, coming at last to Sansa's hands and feet.

"She's burning up," she said. "Her hands and feet are cold but we need to cool her head and body down. Get cold water and wring out several cloths. On her forehead, behind her neck and then try to cool down her body. I'll be right back."

Petyr didn't hesitate and did what the woman instructed. She was hot to the touch as he gently wiped the cool cloths along the planes of her body. Shortly, Mrs. Ames returned with Sarah in tow with a basin of streaming water and all the items the doctor protested against.

The girl propped Sansa up with more pillows and pulled back her sweaty hair before going to the bathroom and Petyr could hear her pumping fresh water into the tub.

"If this doesn't work, we'll need to put her in cold water," she said putting different herbs together with a decanter of clear alcohol and then handed him heavy linen. "Here, soak that in the hot water and wrap it around her feet. We need to bring the fever out of the head."

The woman used the liniment rub as Petyr did as he was told. He pulled her to sit up as Mrs. Ames wiped down her back. The room was filled with the scent of bitter herbs and alcohol. The women placed fresh bed linens over her but kept cooling down her skin.

Petyr had no recollection of time as they worked into the late hours of the night. Once again William brought a tray of food and even though Petyr was hungry, his stomach turned at the thought. Lady made a home at the foot of the bed and was strangely silent. She too, seemed to be waiting.

"You need to eat something," he heard the woman say. "You're no good to her if you make yourself sick. You need to get some sleep as well."

Petyr shook his head numbly as he sat back down next to Sansa. "I'm not hungry and I'm not leaving."

Thankfully, she said no more about it and let him be. Mrs. Ames sensed he wanted to be alone and quietly left the room, closing the door. He wouldn't have been able to force himself to eat or sleep if he tried. He wasn't moving from this spot until she awakened or...

No, he wouldn't think of it. Just as she took care of him, he was going to be there for her. Petyr took her hand again and kissed it. He could smell the salve on her cuts and the alcohol on her skin. Her fingers were no longer cold and all he could do was wait. The doctor said she wouldn't live out the day, but it would be dawn soon. If she at least proved him wrong, maybe there was a chance.

Petyr cursed himself silently. He should have let Mrs. Ames take charge from the very beginning. He held her hand to his cheek and sighed. She couldn't leave him. His heart just couldn't take it. Twice in his life, he loved and lost. Even if she didn't want to stay with him, Petyr wanted her to live. He leaned above her face and watched as her eyes danced furiously beneath the closed lids. She wasn't moaning so much now, but she was still feverish.

"Sweetling," he whispered. "Can you hear me?"

He held her hand and looked for any sign she might give him. Her breathing was labored, but she didn't make a sound.

"You need to wake up," he began as he remembered Mrs. Ames words of advice the other day. "I have so much to tell you and I need to know you hear me."

So many opportunities he had to tell her what he truly felt but didn't. He tricked her, lied, used her all for what he wanted. Petyr never asked her what Sansa wanted or needed. Now, she lay her helpless and she would never know.

He kissed her lips softly, wondering if she would ever allow him to do so ever again.

"Come back to me," he pleaded softly. "I will do anything you ask of me. *Anything.*"

His chest was heavy as he left another kiss on her warm forehead before sitting back down, never once letting go of her hand. Could she really hear him? Was it in his power?

"I need you, Sansa. So much," he breathed and took another cool cloth to her face and neck before putting his lips to her ear. "You have no idea how much I love you. If you'll just give me another chance, I'll spend the rest of my life proving it to you. But you have to wake up and tell

me.”

Petyr waited and yet her eyes did not open. She did not speak and his heart sank. Wringing out another cloth, he continued wiping her damp skin just to have a task so he wouldn't go mad. He wasn't giving up but needed to stay awake. He was so tired. Petyr hummed a tune he knew as a child and continued his ministrations. Lady unexpectedly jumped up on the foot of the bed and lay at her feet. He thought for a moment that it meant something, that the wolf sensed her coming around, but after several minutes, Lady closed her eyes. Perhaps she knew it was hopeless and waited for the inevitable, too.

He felt tears sting his eyes and continued to hum sweetly caressing her bare arm. Everything he did since taking her from Riverrun, he thought was for the best. Never once did Petyr truly believe he would harm her. But he did. He hurt her more than he knew. He did this to her. After all his games and intrigues, what he loved was dying in front of her. Even his long laid plans, all before he met Sansa, did not seem as important anymore. He was still going to be alone when it was all said and done. With her, Petyr thought there was something good on the horizon. When he caught her sketching him that afternoon in the music room, he could see it all before him. He could see the wonderful mother she would become. It was all there, in her eyes. Eyes as blue as a sunlit sea.

Petyr laid his head down, lacing his fingers with hers. His own eyes were so heavy but he didn't want to fall asleep. Her hand didn't move in his and the overwhelming hopelessness weighed him down. It was all his fault. As much as he fought it, his eyes closed against his will.

“Don't go,” he heard his voice mutter as sleep took him. “I'm here right here.”

Long after he drifted off into the void, delicate fingers weakly closed in his.

It was a melody she knew, one her mother used to sing when she was frightened or ill. The sweet tune echoed in the darkness but it was a deeper voice she heard in the distance. Sansa's head was pounding and her mouth felt dry as if she hadn't drunk in ages. Wearily, her eyes peered open and the soft light from the windows of her room were too bright, making her wince.

The song long ended and Sansa saw Mrs. Ames sitting in a chair next to the fire. The old woman didn't say a word but smiled at her serenely. The last thing Sansa remembered was falling down a hole. The little girl said she should go with her but another voice, a stronger one, said to she needed to stay.

Come back to me

Sansa moved to sit up a little, only to find one of her hands trapped under something heavy and warm.

“Don't wake him just yet,” the woman whispered as she came over to the bed. “He hasn't slept in days.”

Mrs. Ames tilted a cool glass of water so that Sansa could take a sip. The liquid ran down her sore throat, and her hand immediately went to the bruising under her jaw. She remembered the cloak around her neck as she struggled. Sansa tried to speak but it hurt and Mrs. Ames hushed her quietly keeping her eyes on the man asleep next to her.

Sansa looked down and he held her hand tightly in sleep, as it rested under his cheek. How long had Petyr been here?

“It's been three days, child,” the old woman said quietly as if reading her mind. “I must admit, I wasn't quite sure you would come around but the lines of the hand don't lie. You weren't meant to go now.”

Sansa glanced at Petyr sleeping soundly, hunched over the bed while still sitting in the chair.

“He never left your side, my dear. Not for a moment,” Mrs. Ames smiled sadly. “Neither slept nor ate as he worried over you. If you ask me, that is only something a man does for one he loves.”

Sansa watched him breathe deeply. His face was slightly turned towards her and she could see he hadn't shaved in days. His hair was a mess of black and grey and there was a bit of a frown creased between his brows. Even in sleep she could see the exhaustion. Petyr looked older than his years.

“He loves you very much, child,” the woman spoke and Sansa turned to look at her. “He's been waiting for you to wake up. To be honest, I was worried what he might do if you died. A man like him... I've never seen such hopelessness in his eyes.”

Sansa tried to speak but her voice refused. Mrs. Ames let her drink a bit more and smoothed the hair away from her face.

“I think I'll go feed Lady,” she smiled. “She'll be happy to see you. She and Lord Petyr found you, you know. I don't believe in luck. It was meant to be.”

The housekeeper left the room without making a sound. Petyr must be exhausted for he didn't flinch a muscle. He kept her hand in his and Sansa wondered if she should wake him. Turning on her side towards him, her free hand paused over his head debating the action to take. Gently, she sifted her fingers through his hair. It was as silken as she remembered. He grunted a little and suddenly a weary eye opened. She tightened her fingers with his and it took a moment for him to

register it all. She smiled softly and that's all it took. Petyr rose up and brought their joined hands to his lips, squeezing his eyes shut. When they opened, he gazed at her in such a way that took Sansa's breath away. His eyes were swollen with dark circles but there was something else there that had her heart flutter madly.

Could Mrs. Ames be right? Did he love her? The way he looked at her now said he did. Petyr reached over tentatively to touch her face but a breath away he hesitated. She could read it in his eyes. Did she want him to touch her? After all that was said and done between them? He began to pull his hand back, when she took it and leaned her cheek into his warm palm. Petyr released a deep breath he had been holding and dropped his head to her stomach.

There was no need for words. They both knew. Everything that needed to be said was right here. Every movement, gesture, touch... it was all right here and now. Sansa was a bit grateful she couldn't speak but she didn't know if she could find the words that would express everything she was feeling.

Sansa scooted back a little and gestured and tried to speak, to ask him to stay. She tucked the linen around her a bit from shyness. She felt she was naked underneath. Petyr may be her husband, but she wasn't ready for him to see her just yet. He didn't make a move to touch her beneath the linen as he moved onto the bed and lay on his side facing her. For the longest time, they stared at each other. Sansa was aching to hold him and decided to make the first move. She needed him to know it was all right. She lied when she told him he raped her and she hated his touch. No, she wanted it desperately.

Closing the distance, Sansa wrapped her arms around him and snuggled into his chest. Nothing had ever felt so right. After a moment or two, she felt his arms enclose around her waist and she couldn't stop the salty tears streaming down. Her breath hitched and Petyr held her tighter, resting his chin on top of her head.

He hushed her gently and began to hum a sweet tune. It was the melody from her dream. It was Petyr's voice she heard all along. She didn't know how long time had passed in his arms when the room became silent.

"It was always you," his rough voice said out of the blue. "I never loved her, I swear to you."

Sansa knew who he meant. She would ask him later about Myranda but not right now. Somehow, Sansa knew in her heart that Myranda had lied. She should have trusted her first instinct about the woman. It was a discussion she didn't want to have at the moment. Sansa had many questions about so many things, but right now she just wanted him to stay.

She leaned up as Petyr turned on his back. Sansa studied his face for a moment, searching out the truth. There it was again in his eyes. Petyr was an expert at hiding behind those deceptive greyish greens. Right now, he let her see him. He seemed to be hoping just as much as she but fearing that terrible rejection.

Sansa heard Mrs. Ames advice from that day in the kitchen. Maybe she needed to give him so encouragement. Petyr had always been the one to initiate anything but perhaps this time, she should make the first move. Softly, her index finger traced around his lips. His face was rough with scruffy whiskers and he really needed a shave.

So many emotions crossed his face as she hovered above him. Tentatively, Sansa bent down and closed her mouth over his. It wasn't passionate or lustful. Just a simple kiss. Petyr caressed her cheek for a moment before she pulled away and rested her head on his chest. She was still dizzy and ill and all these emotions were making her head spin.

"Petyr," she forced her groggy voice with a little cough.

"Sshh, we can talk later. Everything will be alright now, I promise. Don't strain your voice," he whispered while caressing her back.

"Will you take me with you?" she asked uncertainly. He said he was going to Gulltown, had everything changed?

He was silent for a time and her nerves started to make her uneasy.

"You want to go to Gulltown?"

No, her mind said instantly. She had been there once and hated it. That was beside the point. She wanted to be wherever he was.

"I want you to stay," she coughed again and her throat burned. "But only if you want to," added at the last minute.

"I want to be wherever you are, sweetling," he whispered and held her tight. "I'll take you anywhere you wish to go. If you want to stay here, we'll stay here. Whatever you want, I'll do. Anything."

Sansa thought about it and closed her eyes. She was still very tired and ill. She wanted him to stay in this bed with her. For now, that would do.

"Petyr?" she breathed into his chest.

"Yes?"

"I want the truth... I have many questions," she sighed. "But not right now. Later."

She felt him take a deep breath and went back to caressing her back again.

"Alright," he agreed softly. "The truth."

Another Chance

The next few days passed in a pleasant blur. Sansa wasn't well enough to leave bed and Petyr, after a well-needed bath and shave, saw to her every comfort. He finally wore the sling that Mrs. Ames threatened to hang him with if he refused again. Sansa hid her smile at the elderly woman standing her ground against the master of the house. Petyr was stubborn as a mule at times. She caught him on numerous occasions cradling his injured arm when he didn't think anyone was watching. Sansa knew he hurt himself saving her, that it took the three of them to pull her to safety. Any one of them could have fallen to their deaths in order to help her and Sansa's guilt engulfed her.

She should have just spoken to Petyr rather than let Myranda get the better of her. Petyr did say the other day, when she awoke, that he did not and had never loved Myranda. Perhaps much of what she saw was one-sided. Petyr did not kiss her; it was Myranda that kissed him in the foyer. Sansa didn't know what happened in his bedroom, she only assumed by what the girl had told her. However, that night in the music room – Sansa did not imagine that. Even if Petyr was truthful about not loving her, it certainly didn't stop him from taking his pleasure that night. He was at least attracted to her, wasn't he?

She also didn't imagine the way he called out for her in the library. For the last few nights, Petyr slept with Sansa in her bed at her request. He held her lovingly, sometimes sleeping behind her and others she snuggled into his chest. Mrs. Ames forbade her to speak in order to heal her throat and Petyr made sure she drank cups and cups of a pungent tea the old woman made daily. Sansa used the remedy to stay silent. She didn't know why, but she wasn't ready to talk to him just yet.

That comfortable silence had returned and Sansa was grateful for it. He read to her most afternoons and by the way he looked at her sometimes, she felt he was avoiding what would soon need to be said between them. William would bring up both of their suppers and Petyr would talk about his plans for the Riverlands and when spring came, they would travel to the Eyrie and visit Robert. The young duke's affection for his uncle was honest and true and Sansa felt Lord Royce would have a difficult time turning the boy against Petyr.

Duncan's disappearance had Sansa writing down what had happened in the labyrinth. Petyr's face was furious when he read that the butler knew where she was and had left her to die. It wasn't just Duncan's sympathy for Myranda and the Marchioness he wanted, but a pure hatred for Sansa. She tried to explain how poorly he spoke to her and Mrs. Ames while Petyr was away. He was calm and more controlled than Sansa expected. It wasn't until he spoke that the ice in his voice could have frozen God's Eye lake. He would find wherever Duncan had run off to make him pay for his treachery. Sansa was taken back by that cold fury and wondered who else had crossed Petyr and did not live to tell the tale.

The ammunition and weapons Petyr was hiding in the labyrinth left Sansa with unease. The men that he met with here and while in Kings Landing were kept private. Some would leave with wagon of crates and Sansa couldn't help but think Petyr was arming these men. For what purpose, evaded her. The Lannisters gave him everything. Power, title, lands... a wife of good family name – that is until Sansa came along. Petyr was already wealthy in his own right and whatever he was planning was big. Why would he go against the ton and king that gave him so much? Sansa wasn't sure if she wanted to divulge what she discovered in the maze.

Trust – and treason.

If by chance, Petyr was lying to her still, that was a card she could keep tucked away for a rainy day. He didn't seem concerned nor did he ask if she saw anything she shouldn't have. Petyr didn't trust her with the knowledge of what he was doing – at least not yet. To be fair, she did tell him she wasn't ready to ask him her many questions. Petyr did agree to tell her the truth. He seemed to be waiting for her rather than confess his deepest secrets. If whatever he was concocting went south, she would be implicated just by marriage – and even worse as the daughter of a condemned traitor to the crown.

It was his gentle side he displayed to her these past few days. It would be so easy to forget the kind of man his reputation bore him. Somewhere along the time, she fell in love with Petyr. He was not the man her father would approve of and nothing she ever expected. Petyr was not her storybook prince in shining armor saving her from the fiery dragon.

Today she was restless and wanted out of this room. It was driving her mad. She begged Petyr to take her downstairs to the music room or the library. He acquiesced, wanting to please her and despite his arm still hurting, he carried her downstairs and settled her on the chaise lounge in the music room. It was still snowing but gratefully the room was warm not only from the fire but the heat rising from below. Sansa smiled at that little deception. She was so angry with him about that. Strangely it seemed so long ago.

Wrapped in a warm blanket, Sansa lay her head back and listened to him play on the piano. He didn't care who heard him now. It was fascinating to watch him on that instrument. He never played written compositions. Petyr would tinker with a little tune and then turn it into something beautiful. He truly was talented and played a music only he could hear. It was nothing like the music that was popular. Petyr's playing was raw emotion. Whatever he was feeling echoed from the ebony and ivory keys. Some songs were so lovely, that she even asked if he would consider writing them down. Something that was purely him, something she could hold onto. Surely, during the winter, as they would be bound here until spring, it would give him something to do. Perhaps a pleasant task they could do together.

Petyr insisted the music came to him and that it had no rhyme or reason. It was whatever flowed from his fingers in the moment. Whatever it was, it was pleasing to the ear and Sansa could listen to him for hours on end if he was willing. After dinner, he didn't take his usual chair in front of the fire in the library. Instead, he reclined back on the large sofa and let Sansa lay against him. This

was the part she started falling in love with, this simple and sweet way he was with her. She remembered the poem he read to her and everything felt as it should be. Sansa liked his sarcastic side as well, for she could be just as stubborn and willful as him. Sometimes arguing with him for the sake of arguing felt good. They both liked press each other just to test the waters.

Over a year ago, when she first met Petyr at the Eyrie, Sansa never would have imagined she would be here, his wife – and for the longest time, now having a sense of contentment. *Almost*. Sansa almost did not want to break the pleasantries with talk of things that needed to be discussed. It was as if everything had reverted to what they were before Myranda, Joffrey and Kings Landing. Now, she knew too much. It couldn't be ignored no matter how lovely it was with Petyr right now. For the first time, since their hasty marriage, did she finally liken to the idea of being his wife.

He was almost twice her age, but now the idea didn't bother her so. Sansa knew he had many women and that thought, even though it was common among men, made her insides squirm. Did he love any of them? Would he compare her in the marriage bed to those before her?

That night, Petyr returned from his room changed for bed. Sansa did not ask him to stay this time, but he seemed to read her mind all the same. Extinguishing the candles, Lady was already fast asleep in front of the fire. The flames danced low on the walls when he climbed in under the covers as Sansa made room for him. Pulling her to him, she curled into Petyr and nestled her head on his chest. She liked lying with him this way. He smelt of sandlewood and would trace little patterns on her back. Normally, it would put her to sleep but tonight her mind was restless.

"Petyr, are you asleep?" she asked softly.

She felt him chuckle slightly.

"Not quite."

Sansa toyed with a button on his night shirt and could feel his breathing change. How should she ask him? Did she really want to know?

"What do you want to know?" he asked the question that played in her mind.

Hesitating, Sansa tried to find the right words.

"You said – that you never loved her," she began. "But – erm, did you like, I mean, did you enjoy... you were attracted to her, aren't you?"

His hand paused for a moment before resuming the delicate movement.

"Myranda wasn't ugly," Petyr said truthfully. "Most men could do worse, I suppose."

Sansa didn't know if she was dodging the question or Petyr.

"She had quite the reputation in the Vale. Did you know that before agreeing to marry her?"

"I knew what she was," he answered. "It was no secret. I doubt Royce would have made the contract if she had been pure. Not to mention my money. I wasn't marrying her for love and devotion."

"Then why?" she asked dreading the answer.

"Business, sweetling, nothing more," he replied easily. A little too easily. "No woman of title and reputation would marry me no matter how wealthy I was. It would have given me a name and kept my connections in the Vale."

"And I ruined that, is what you're saying?" she started to pull away but Petyr's arm wrapped around her preventing it.

"I welcomed it," he breathed into her ear, holding Sansa close. "After you, I couldn't bear the thought of marrying her. I'm glad Joffrey broke the engagement. I was thrilled, but when I saw how unhappy you were..."

"That because I thought you loved her," she frowned remembering everything clearly. "I saw you together in the music room the night they arrived here. If you didn't want her, why did you – I saw you and she was moaning in pleasure."

It was quiet for a time and Sansa felt sick. Maybe he was lying after all just to make her feel better.

"The music room," his voice whispered with a questioning. "The only time I was with Myranda in the music room was the afternoon you made me play for everyone."

"But I saw you both..."

"It was her footman," the answer came abruptly as if it wasn't a surprise to Petyr.

Sansa remembered the handsome young man with dark hair and heard Myranda's voice. She didn't want her father to know...

"You knew?" she leaned up to look him in the face.

"I knew," he gazed back at her in the dim light.

"Why would you agree – I mean, if you knew she was with other men..." Sansa stumbled. "She said you were alright with knowing her past... that she loved you."

Petyr tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and smiled thinly.

"I wasn't marrying her for her virtue," he stated. "I certainly had no intention of bedding her with what I knew of her."

"Even for an heir?" she wondered.

"I never would have known if it was mine or not. It's one thing if a man doesn't know his wife has taken lovers, it's quite different knowing it beforehand. I never loved her and no matter what she said to you, she never loved me. She was jealous of you Sansa. I didn't know she was coming here. I don't think I hid my feelings for you well from her and she made it clear she did not want you in Kings Landing."

"You hid it from me well enough," she frowned.

"I don't recall you revealing anything to me, either, my love," he smirked.

"I recall you calling out for her that night after the opera. You were drunk in the study and we..." Sansa averted his eyes. "You called out for *her*."

"I was drunk, yes, but not mindless," he turned her face back to him. "I knew it was you. It was you, I wanted. You, I wished could be my wife. The one I wanted to make love to."

Sansa strained to remember that night clearly. Did she hear him incorrectly? They were deep in passion and she thought he said he *couldn't wait* to make her his wife. Sansa was positive that's what she heard. She had a bit to drink that night too, she admitted. He couldn't have made her his wife until Joffrey made it so. She must have heard wrong.

"Then you pulled away with a look I'll never forget," he sighed. "Shame and regret... as if you hated me. Then when you said I forced you those times..."

"You didn't," Sansa tilted his chin up. "I said that because I was angry. You never forced me. I liked kissing you. I liked the way you touched me – so much, I didn't know what or how to feel about it. I knew your reputation. I didn't want become any man's mistress. I hated that you might love her. I hate that you've known other women. That I was just another one of them."

Petyr laid his head back and gazed at the ceiling.

"I won't insult you by lying. It doesn't make it any better if I say that I didn't care about any of them. Men can disassociate sex from love. It was more a façade than anything else. It gave me information, that is usually very hard to come by," he groaned rubbing his face. "In my line of work, information is everything."

Sansa rolled over and lay on her back with a scowl. At the very least he didn't lie, she grumbled to herself. She did start this inquiry, didn't she?

"So am I to assume, you'll continue these methods in the future?" she huffed in annoyance. "No one will question it, being married to the likes of me."

Petyr leaned over her and studied her face a long time. At first she couldn't meet his gaze, but when he didn't move away, she finally faced him.

"*Married to the likes of you?*" he repeated whimsically. "You were *forced* to marry me. I was overjoyed to marry you. There is no woman I want but you. I'm not asking you to love me, Sansa, but I won't lie," he said breathlessly. "I don't want there to be any man but me. No other man should ever hear the lovely sounds you make, taste the sweetness of your mouth. I would kill any man that dares touch you."

Her chest heaved as he moved in closer that she could smell the mint on his breath. It had to be more than lust. It just had to be. Despite his history, and everything her mother and father ever taught her, Sansa still wanted him. Could Petyr make her happy after all of this?

"I can wait for as long as you need," he smiled sadly. "I know I'm not young and handsome. I'm not the kind of man that deserves a woman like you. I'm not terribly good at duels, so I'll have to find a less than noble way to fight for your honor." Petyr was trying to lighten the mood, but suddenly his face was serious and his eyes filled with something that made her heart heavy. "I *want* to make you happy. I'll give you the world if that's what it takes. If you'll let me love you, I promise you will never question my love or loyalty."

His lips were so close to hers, they ached with anticipation. Could she learn to trust him again? Sansa wanted so much to believe him and wondering if it could be so simple. After all neither of them planned on this. It just happened. She didn't want him to marry Myranda and now they were man and wife. He wanted Sansa the entire time and Myranda was a jealous liar. What he was promising sounded too good to be true. Could she look beyond his past and see the man before her now?

"Will you marry me?" he asked so softly, Sansa almost didn't hear him.

She smiled skeptically, "I'm already your wife."

"Are you? I never asked you what you wanted," he breathed. "You were never given a choice. I'm giving it to you now."

"Promise me," she whispered after a time and Petyr nodded slowly. "No more lies. I want to be your equal."

Sansa watched his eyes and saw that he was indeed hiding something. He wasn't quick enough for her not to see as she waited for his answer.

"I will tell you the truth," he agreed again.

"I know you have something going on in that head of yours," she called his bluff but decided to give him more time to decide on what to do. Petyr was so close and the heat of him was intoxicating. She couldn't stop gazing at his lips. "I'm not stupid. I won't be that silly, idiot of a wife that knows nothing. Whatever it is, I want you to tell me... *soon*."

Petyr grinned at that and brushed his lips barely against hers.

"I would be a fool to mistake you for silly or stupid, sweetling."

He closed the distance and kissed her deeply. Her chest was still heavy from illness and when she gasped for air, Petyr's tongue dipped inside touching hers. This time he was gentle. When he teased her down in the hot spring, he was anything but tender. Right now, he was asking permission and suddenly Sansa answered him by kissing him back.

Petyr chuckled deeply into her mouth, "Is that a yes?"

Sansa purred a little and arched against him, making Petyr groan. She had waited so long, that she didn't want to ruin the moment with any more words.

"Mmmm, I think I need to be persuaded," she teased lightly.

Petyr smiled, and tenderly moved on top of her, making a home between her legs.

"Persuasion?" he kissed along her jawline. "My specialty."

He found that pulse point near the underside of her ear and Sansa felt herself melt. Petyr was careful not to put all of his weight on her, bracing his upper body on his forearms. That however, didn't stop the feeling of his growing desire pressing between her legs. Sansa remembered how close she let him come to taking her maidenhead that night. She didn't want to be his whore, but she wanted him all the same.

They were man and wife tonight, and she wanted to feel him this time. As he suckled her neck and one hand found her breast, Sansa slowly snaked her hand down between them. When she touched him, Petyr tore his mouth away with gasp. His eyes were filled with astonishment and lust. Sansa gripped him through the soft muslin of his nightshirt and watched in fascination at the changes on his face. He was solid in her hand. Watching the strained pleasure on his face as she slowly moved her hand, was mesmerizing. She had complete control over him right now and it gave her an unexpected sense of power. His hips jerked and he stilled her hand.

"Was that not right?" she asked nervously.

"It was lovely but this is better," he smirked and took her hand, placing under the shirt until she found him again.

His cock was hard and the skin silky to the touch. He guided her hand slowly until she found a rhythm. The skin moved with her hand, sliding up and down his length. Petyr returned to kissing her as his hands travelled down and gathered her nightdress until it was up to her waist.

Her core was pulsing as she caressed him. Sansa liked this, like touching him, arousing him. Something moist coated her hand as she moved over the full length of him. He had grown bigger and harder and she knew what it meant. He was ready for her. He wanted her.

Petyr's hands ghosted down her waist and hips, pushing her thighs apart even further. When his fingers slid between her wet folds, Sansa involuntarily gripped his cock hard making him hiss. Abandoning her neck, he devoured her mouth while those sinful fingers worked hard to make her as aroused as he was.

Kissing him back furiously, Petyr pulled away just long enough to tug his nightshirt over his head and toss it aside. For a man almost twenty years her senior, his body told a different story. His skin was soft and unblemished except an ugly scar near his shoulder. There wasn't an ounce of extra padding on his frame anywhere. Petyr was lean with just a little hair on his chest.

She didn't have time to think for he was already yanking up her nightdress until she was finally bare before him. Unconsciously, Sansa covered her breasts from nerves. She had never been naked before a man until now. Gently, he pulled her hands away that were still bandaged, allowing himself to take her in.

"You're beautiful," he said reverently.

Lowering himself to cover her, the feeling was intoxicating. His skin on hers. No barriers. Sansa felt his muscles move, the slight tickle of his chest hair and how their sexes pressed against each other. He was nestled between her legs and Sansa was throbbing. When his mouth descended upon a breast, she moaned loudly as her hips instinctively arched to meet his. Petyr's hand returned to her apex finding the swollen most part of her. His mouth matched the movement of his hand and it felt like they were one in the same. His tongue circled and sucked a nipple and when his finger found its way inside, she couldn't help thrusting against his hand. Another finger joined and he was pumping slowly as if gauging everything her body told him.

She was sopping wet and could hear the noises his fingers made as they picked up the tempo. Slightly embarrassed, Sansa closed her eyes and let him take over. That ache was building while her hips rose to meet his ministrations. Feeling the cool, dampness on her breast, Sansa opened her eyes to see he had pulled away just far enough to watch her. Petyr's eyes had darkened to where she couldn't see the green anymore. He was completely engrossed in his task as his hand worked feverishly. Sansa could feel her body tense and knew she was close. He was going to take her over the edge and very quickly. Her eyes squeezed shut as she held onto his free hand.

"Open your eyes," Petyr commanded softly while she whimpered and crested that peak.

He was in awe of her. Petyr's eyes were full of raw desire and, dare she say it – love? She felt his hand, already slick with her juices, coat himself. This was it, there was no turning back, no shameful fears. Petyr guided himself to where he needed to be and waited for moment, giving her a chance to stop him.

Her heart was beating wildly from excitement and a touch of fear. It was going hurt, they told her. Petyr sensed her apprehension and began kissing her again. She could feel him at her entrance as he gently prodded and coaxed her to relax. The way he rocked against her was making that blissful ache return even though she just came down once already.

"Breathe," he instructed. "Just let me in."

Petyr lifted her hips angling them up and began to press himself inside slowly. Sansa didn't know what to expect. She thought the man would just plunge ahead but Petyr was controlled and tender.

It felt like he was stretching her open but it wasn't the terrible pain she feared. He would ease in and out before going deeper. A few wincing of pain and it was done. She was a maiden no more. It was a strange sensation of fullness. Here, they were joined and she didn't know where he ended and she began.

"Does it still hurt?" Petyr asked, kissing her around her ear.

"Not so much," she breathed and let her hands caress his lower back.

It must have been the sign he needed, for he started to withdraw and then slowly return. This push and pull was steady just as her hand had been on him moments ago. Her walls gripped him in the most pleasant way that kept him inside her. Petyr was already moaning and Sansa decided she loved the sound coming from him. She made him moan and it was more than arousing.

Petyr was back to kissing her and with the sensation of him moving inside her, before long she whimpering in his mouth again. He thrust deep making her gasp loudly and they both looked at each other with a building hunger. It hurt a little but felt good at the same time. Petyr tested the waters and changed the tempo. It was a bit faster and deeper and Sansa was at a loss for words.

She had no idea it would feel like this. Petyr pulled her legs to wrap around his waist and the new angle had her head light and fuzzy. Sansa didn't know when she started mewling like some wanton. He moved faster and with her hips tilted up, and every time he thrust, a spark fired. He was panting in concentration and Sansa was fascinated seeing him slowly lose control. He was lost in her. It felt so good, but it wasn't enough. She needed more to crest that delicious peak again. It was just there on the horizon and yet she felt like she was never going to get there.

Leaning up, Sansa boldly attacked his neck with her mouth and he paused in shock. He gazed at her with wide eyes for half a breath and then ravaged her mouth without another thought. It was no longer slow and gentle lovemaking. He was thrusting hard and fast now and Sansa couldn't catch her breath. He was growling her name and it was erotic.

That burning and throbbing from before spiked and the chase was on. She was begging him now. That's how badly she needed to feel that release again. Her body, running on instinct, was telling her what to do. She met his hips when Petyr took her hand and placed it where they were joined. She knew what he was silently telling her.

Mimicking his ministrations, she furiously rubbed that bit he called her rosebud and every time it pressed against him, it sent a jolt through her core. Petyr's brows were furrowed and she could tell he was rapidly losing control. His thrusts became more erratic and faster, and it drove her mad with excitement. That dam was about to burst as she called out his name and begged him not to stop. Stop, he didn't. Her cries only spurred him on and before long, he was groaning for her too.

Suddenly, she felt it, it was coming. Between her own fingers and Petyr inside her, Sansa almost willed it not to happen yet. She loved hearing her name on his lips, the way he moaned for her. He was coming undone and it was because of her. Wrapping herself around him tightly, one wave after another crashed down and she shook beneath him as he lost himself inside her.

Sansa's head was spinning and it wasn't just from the pleasure he gave. They were both hot and sweaty, but the exertion might have been too much. Sansa didn't realize how much energy went into such things. Stupidly, she thought the woman probably laid there as the man did all the work. Did that make her a wanton because she acted on her own desires? She could feel him inside her still and a musky scent filled the air of the room, making it thick and heavy.

Petyr kissed her gently and when she didn't respond, a worried look crossed his face.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked tucking sweaty strands of hair behind her ear.

Sansa shook her head but it made the spinning even worse. Petyr caressed her forehead and frowned.

"It was too soon," he cursed himself. "You're not well enough. I'm sorry. I should have known better."

He rolled off her onto his side and pulled the bedclothes over her. She could feel his seed leaving her and a pool of sticky wetness between her thighs. He sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her, and Sansa admired his lean form. Without a word, he walked across the room completely bare to the basin of fresh water. Pouring a glass, he returned and handed it to her. Sansa couldn't help but blush. After what they just did, seeing him walking around naked was still awkward for her. Petyr was not ashamed and completely comfortable with his body as he sat down.

"If Mrs. Ames finds you ill tomorrow, there will be hell to pay," he chuckled and Sansa smiled as she finished off the cold water. "I'd rather not have my morning tea poisoned."

"I'm fine, really," she blushed. "I didn't think it would be like... *that*."

Petyr slid into bed beside her and adjusted the pillows laughing softly.

"I'm not quite sure if that is a compliment or not."

Sansa snuggled down and lay on her side facing him.

"No, no. I liked it. Very much," she admitted, her cheeks burning red. "Is it always so... messy – and noisy?"

Petyr rolled onto his back and barked in laughter. Sansa wondered if she should be offended but when Petyr pulled her into his arms, she knew he wasn't mocking her. Sansa blushed again at her naïve words.

"Only when it's good, sweetling," he chuckled. "Oh my little witch... the things I will happily teach you."

Sansa glanced up at him in surprise.

“There’s more?”

Petyr kissed her forehead and held her tightly against him.

“So much more,” he breathed. “This is what our bodies were made for, my love.”

This had felt so good tonight; Sansa couldn’t imagine it being better or vastly different. How many ways were there to make love? Her mother said it could be pleasurable if her husband was considerate enough, but Sansa thought the act itself was mainly to produce children. That thought stilled her. It was entirely possible she could be with child after tonight.

“Petyr?”

“Hmph?” he answered tiredly caressing her back once again.

“Do you want children?” she wondered.

“Do you?” he asked after few moments.

Sansa thought on it and smiled. She could imagine having his children, yes. She would love a little girl.

“Yes,” she finally answered him.

“Good,” she felt him grin and held her tighter. “By the numbers, I wager, we’ll have a small army of children because I plan on bedding you as often as I can.”

After several minutes, she could tell he was falling asleep for his breathing evened out and for some reason, her old insecurities came bubbling up along with a prediction Mrs. Ames made months ago. She said Sansa would have only two children. Did that mean she couldn’t have any more? What kind of life would they have? Would they...

“Will they be ashamed of me?”

“What?” he tilted her head to look up at him.

Did she really that out loud?

“Myranda said, that you wouldn’t be received anywhere because of me,” she muttered. “That any children I gave you would be shunned. You would be better off with bastards.”

Petyr frowned deeply, “If I see that woman again, she will rue the day she met me.” Catching her worried eyes, he smiled sincerely and kissed her tenderly. “Our children will have nothing to worry about. They will lead charmed lives. They will love and be proud of their mother. Have no fears. Never again will you ever have to worry about what any of those pompous cows have to say about you or I. Things will change for the better, Sansa. I promise you. I will never let anyone hurt you ever again.”

The Emerald Ring

Chapter Notes

Okay.... I know you've been MORE than patient. It's been one helluva busy month for me and I just didn't have the time or energy to write other than that little ficlet I made for the end of season 6.

I'm back on track to get this story going and hopefully finished.

So, here's a little smut for my dumpster babies and a bit of fluff. For those of you wanting some good time for our now happy couple, I have that in spades on the way.

But you know me... enjoy it while you can before I make you cry and hate me.

A fortnight had passed and Sansa was becoming stronger every day. Her hands had healed and she didn't have to wear bandages any longer. Sarah helped her walk around her room, gaining more strength each time. Before long, with a steady arm to hold on to, Sansa was using the stairs and able to move about the house again. As lovely as her room was, she was growing anxious to find a normal routine. Petyr had traveled to town a few times, and it seemed that everything, whatever it was, had returned to business as usual. Even now, she wasn't ready to discuss what she found in the labyrinth. It just didn't feel like the right time. He was still fussing over her since that day as if she were a porcelain doll that might break and Sansa knew his mind was occupied with other things. Duncan had last been seen in town not long after Sansa's accident and she knew Petyr was on the hunt for the man. With the men he undoubtedly had at his disposal, Sansa wondered how long it would take to find him, or what Petyr would do to him. He was furious about Myranda as well, but Sansa had to admit the woman was in for a shock upon her arrival at Winterfell. She probably had no clue what kind of people the Boltons were. It hadn't really surprised Sansa when Roose betrayed her family, for father never liked nor trusted the man and Petyr told her that his son was even worse. Perhaps Myranda would fit right in. She was a cruel and vicious thing after all.

Sansa tried to put that day behind her and never told Petyr or Mrs. Ames about her little faerie that whispered in her ear about leaving this world behind. After Petyr saved her, when the spirit told her he wouldn't come, Sansa did as the old housekeeper advised long ago. She ignored it. It never happened. For the first time since meeting the spirit, it had lied to her. Petyr *did* come. She wasn't leaving him no matter if there was a beautiful, immortal world awaiting for her. Petyr loved her now and that's all that mattered to Sansa. She belonged somewhere, finally, and someone loved her. They could be happy here in the country away from those hateful eyes. Sansa never wanted to go to the capital again as long as she lived. Even the Vale wouldn't be as bad with Aunt Lysa gone. It was a terrible thing to think Robert was probably better off without his controlling mother.

All the questions she had could wait just a little longer, for she was enjoying all of Petyr's tender affections. He slept every night in her bed, and sometimes he would kiss and caress her but they didn't make love again. He wanted her to be healthy and not over-exert herself. There would be plenty of time for such pleasures, he told her. Sansa felt a bit wanton as she craved to feel that desire again so soon. How did a wife tell her husband she wanted him every night? He was worried she would fall ill again or he might hurt her and it was frustrating. Petyr's heart was in the right place and let him take the lead. He knew what was best, didn't he?

Petyr dutifully took Lady outside as Sansa watched them from her window every day. Petyr never said so, but he adored that wolf. Often, when he thought no one was looking, he would play with her briefly. It was as if he were a boy again as she watched Petyr with Lady and it warmed her heart. He wanted children and Sansa could see the father he would become. Mrs. Ames was right, there was a good man in him, just waiting to come out again. Sansa frowned a bit and couldn't help but wonder what made him this way. It was if there was a battle going on inside him. The man he was and the man he wanted so desperately to be.

Tired of staying indoors, Sansa donned her cloak and gloves and decided to join them. If she asked him, Petyr would have denied her, knowing he would worry about her health. She would not give him the opportunity to say no today. The sky was blue and sunny and Sansa had to be outside, if only for a few minutes. She found them behind the house just below their bedroom windows and Sansa waited for a moment and watched.

Lady had grown so big that when she playfully pounced on him, she knocked Petyr down in the snow and flat on his back. Sansa laughed and caught his attention as Lady ran to her excitedly. He dusted the snow off him and gave her a mocking glare.

"You know you shouldn't be out here, sweetling," he teased.

She expected him to admonish her for disobeying his wishes for her well-being but in the end, he only smiled.

"Hard to believe she could fit inside your cloak the day we found her," Petyr japed, walking to her and Lady. Sansa's tummy fluttered. Petyr said 'we' all the time now.

“Hard to believe you let me keep her,” Sansa smiled brilliantly at her adoring husband and giggled. “You’re covered in snow.”

Sometimes she didn’t know which man she married. The one that was full of plots and secrets or the one that loved art, music and was playing with a wolf in the middle of winter. Sansa started dusting him off when he took her hands and pulled her close. She would never tire of the way Petyr looked at her with such adoration. His lips were cold but his mouth was warm and inviting. Her arms wound around his neck and returned his kiss. Breathless, he pulled away and gazed lovingly at her.

“I was thinking,” he grinned, caressing her cheek.

“Plotting more treason are you?” she teased but Petyr’s eyes narrowed for a second before smiling again.

“Not today.”

Sansa decided this wasn’t the time to tease him about that. He was in a good mood and didn’t want to spoil it. “What’s going on in that mind of yours?”

“Well, I’m not a religious man as you’ve probably guessed but I wanted your opinion, my wife,” he took her arm and walked near the terrace. “The house needs some vivacity considering how dreary a winter can be... and the passing of recent events. Do you wish to celebrate Christmas? I’m sure a suitable tree could be found, perhaps a lovely dinner... gifts.”

Sansa stopped and turned to look at him. Was he being serious? It was hard to tell with Petyr sometimes. Out of all the things he could have said, this completely left her speechless. He raised an eyebrow at her scrutiny with a smirk.

“Christmas?” she blinked a few times.

“Yes,” Petyr smiled. “this Friday, my dear.”

Was it Christmas already? How time flew by. Her birthday was in February. It seemed so far away when she first arrived here. In that time, so much had happened and now he was discussing Christmas as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“If not, that’s fine as well,” he shrugged his shoulders, “I rather thought...”

“It would be lovely,” she beamed and took his gloved hands. Sansa knew it wouldn’t be like the ones her family celebrated – holiday balls, dinners with other lords and ladies of the ton. No, it would be just them and a house full of loyal servants – and it gave Sansa a splendid idea, if Petyr allowed her to do it.

“Perhaps by spring, we can curry favor with the locals again. Next year, we’ll have the Riverlands so bountiful, no one will care what the king says about us,” he grinned and took her arm again. “Tell me, my love, what do we need to spruce up the house a bit and make it more festive?”

The next few days, Sansa did exactly that. Men found a tree that she wasn’t so sure would fit inside the doors. Once propped up, it reached to the second story in the grand foyer. Petyr took her to town and let her buy whatever she wanted. She had filled the sleigh but he never questioned her, not once. They received a few odd stares from the local gentry but Sansa refused to let it bother her. Nothing was going to ruin this day. She walked proudly on Petyr’s arm and killed them with kindness instead.

Sansa, Mrs. Ames and the women decorated the house and the tree and the mood changed drastically. There was happiness in Harrenhal again, just as Mrs. Ames had once hoped for. The atmosphere was relaxed and it felt more like a family than master and servant. Petyr didn’t mind her suggestion or at least he said nothing to Sansa and let her do as she pleased. She bought gifts for every single person at Harrenhal. Just as Petyr told her when he bought her whatever she wanted; she wasn’t buying them or their loyalty – it was appreciation. Miranda would have never been generous to her servants and small folk. Lysa was a horrible duchess and no one liked working for her. Sansa didn’t want that. She wanted to take care of the people that took care of her.

She helped in the kitchen preparing for a fine feast for tomorrow. It was the eve before Christmas and Sansa was almost as giddy as a child. Tomorrow, the dining hall would be used for the first time and it wasn’t for distinguished guests or royalty. Tomorrow, every servant would dine with them at Sansa’s request. Petyr agreed but she wasn’t sure if it was because he thought it was good idea or he just wanted her happy. He tried to hide it, but there was a glint in his eyes, a soft appraisal that needed no words. Petyr came from nothing and to now see his wife, a grand lady, treat her smallfolk with such kindness and respect seemed to touch him. He was a powerful and wealthy man now, but he did not forget where he came from. What Sansa noticed since coming to Harrenhal, Petyr was apt to do more business with the commonfolk. She never saw any titled men and she wondered, again, what he was up to. Was it just standard business or did he have other dealings in which involved arming the locals. The ones he seemed to be interested in gaining their loyalty and favor. He was still the new lord of this county after all.

Sansa put it out of her mind for now. Tomorrow was Christmas and she was going to enjoy it to the fullest. It was depressing last year in Riverrun and before that, Sansa might as well not even come down from her room. Lysa spoiled Robert with gifts and sweets and Sansa just wished she could have stayed in bed for no one would have noticed. There was no joy in it and yet in the past few days, this house suddenly came alive. The servants were happy, Petyr was happy, and Sansa felt a sense of satisfaction in it all. The only thing that would make it even better were children. Sansa stared at the tree and smiled.

Soon.

She could see her little ones opening gifts. Sansa imagined Petyr would most likely spoil them to hell and back. He spoiled her with anything she wanted as it was now, she could only imagine what he’d be like with children of his own. He would be a wonderful father. She just knew it in her heart, he would. Somehow his past didn’t seem to matter much anymore. Would he want a

son or a daughter? Sansa wanted a little girl so bad, she was ready to start making tiny dresses and she wasn't even with child yet. She wanted someone to call her very own. Petyr loved her, she had no doubts but it was different. Sansa wanted a family. Something that belonged to her. She was tired of being alone. She missed having a family. If she was able, she would bear as many children as possible.

Petyr had been strangely silent today and after dinner they retreated to their room instead of the library. He read to her quietly stretched out on the chaise lounge in the firelight and Sansa loved the sound of his voice. He painted a moving painting in her head. She couldn't imagine him being like this with any woman but her. In fact, she wanted him to forget he was ever with any woman before her.

Sansa turned slightly from resting against his chest and fingered the sash on his dressing robe. He didn't miss one syllable when she moved it open and let her hand explore his abdomen. Slowly, she found him where her leg was draped over his. Petyr's breath hitched and lowered his book. Blue met green as she touched him, feeling his chest rise and fall under her own. Sansa took the book from his hand and set it on the floor. The only thing she wanted to hear him say was her name over and over.

Pushing herself up, she leaned over him and examined his face. The firelight danced in his eyes as he watched her with anticipation. She kissed him softly, taking her time. She was a bit nervous and still not well the night he first made love to her. She wanted him but didn't know what to do or what to expect. She wanted him every night since then and tonight she wasn't going to let him sleep. She wasn't till anymore. She didn't want him to handle her with knit gloves. She wanted to break, if it meant feeling that bliss again.

Peppering kisses along his jaw, he hummed a bit in satisfaction. She liked it when he kissed her neck and he seemed to enjoy it as well. Sansa felt his pulse and it raced. Her mouth suckled that point until she felt his hands lift her hips to straddle him on the lounge. Her own dressing gown was in the way and quickly shrugged it off, tossing it on the rug. Slowly, she unbuttoned his nightshirt while he watched her in fascination on top of him. Sansa smiled and lowered her mouth to his skin. She could feel him stir between her legs and it made her smile.

She opened his shirt more, exposing his chest to her wandering mouth. His hips bucked slightly when her tongue dared touch his nipple. So that felt good to him as well. Sansa tucked that bit of information away as she discovered him and he let her. That first night, she really didn't get to see him. She felt him though and it was wonderful. Sansa pulled away to look at Petyr almost panting. His eyes darkened and his hand kneaded her hips. He wanted this as much as she did but he didn't take over. He let her take the lead.

Glancing down, she saw that nasty scar on his left shoulder and traced the glossy flesh. Mrs. Cole said he dueled for her mother when he was a boy. This was a pistol wound. A grown man shot a boy and it made her frown.

"Does it is still give you pain?" she asked.

Petyr's eyes never left her face and didn't stop his hands from feeling her backside, ever so firmly pressing her against his hardness.

"Not in the way you would think," he replied and Sansa wasn't sure what he meant.

She leaned down and kissed the scar, feeling him gasp slightly at the tenderness. She kissed back up his collarbone and neck until finding his mouth once more. She loved kissing him. One hand drifted up, cradling the back of her neck while the other pressed their hips together in a rocking motion. Petyr sat up, taking her with him, moving to put his feet on the floor – all without breaking their kisses. She was still straddling him when he lowered his head to her swell of her bosom.

"I want to see you," she moaned, loving his mouth on her breasts. He looked up at her with a wicked smile.

Lifting her up to stand, Petyr shrugged off his dressing robe and pulled the nightshirt over his head letting it fall between them on the floor. The fire lit up his pale skin as he stood there and let her examine him. His shoulders were broad and tapered to a small waist. Her eyes followed her hands as they explored. His stomach flinched a bit and Sansa wondered if her fingertips tickled him.

Lowering her eyes, she gazed at that part of him she witnessed from a distance in the lagoon. She took him in her hand and stroked that silky skin. Petyr's breathing became heavier but he didn't move and just let her take her time. It was probably good she didn't see it that night, it would have scared her. He was hard and heavy as that member jutted out from arousal. It didn't look that big when she spied on him at the lagoon.

Petyr stilled her hand with labored breathing, "You're not playing fair, my little witch."

Without another word, he lifted her nightdress over her head and tossed it aside. It was different being naked beneath him on the bed. Standing here, she felt very exposed and nervous. Petyr's eyes raked over every inch of her, making her bum as if he touched her. She tried to cover herself as she blushed a deep red but Petyr kept pulling her arms down to her sides.

"Why do you hide? You're the loveliest thing I've ever seen," he murmured in her ear. "Here, I want you to see what I see."

Petyr took her over to the dressing mirror and stood behind her, holding her arms gently.

"Look. You're so beautiful, Sansa. There's nothing to be embarrassed about, my love," he breathed in reverence. "There is nothing sinful nor shameful in our bodies and sharing them with the one we love. Those religious zealots think it's only to procreate and nothing more. Anything else is lust and sinful. If it's so bad, then why does it feel so good?" he smiled in the mirror.

His hands cupped her breasts as he nibbled on her neck, not once did his eyes leave hers in the

mirror. Sansa had looked at her reflection a million times, even naked and knew she was pretty but Petyr made her feel like the only beautiful woman in the world.

That sinful heat began to pool seeing and feeling his touch at the same time. It felt scandalous to be naked and watching themselves like this. Sansa couldn't take her eyes away when one of his hands drifted down until finding a home between her legs. Her chest heaved as she watched that hand massage her where she ached terribly.

"See how your body wants to be ravished?" he purred, sucking on her earlobe. "This what I love to see – the way you respond to me, how your face changes with each sensation..." he pressed his fingers firmly against her core, making her tremble. Sansa watched her face as her mouth panted and finally leaned back into his shoulder. "... hearing you call out my name."

Sansa couldn't watch anymore; it was too much. Never, even with Myranda's dirty talk, did she think a man and woman liked to watch themselves like this. Turning slowly, she found his mouth and winding her arms around him. Yes, this is what she wanted, when Petyr held her tight against him. He lifted her up, wrapping her long legs around his slender waist and carried her back to their bed.

Instead of laying her down, he sat letting her straddle him. She could feel him hard against where she was moist and waiting. Petyr rocked her hips and kissed her thoroughly before finding that sweet spot on her neck. Her fingers sifted through his dark hair as that delicious mouth feasted and made her whimper.

Petyr shifted back, still holding her to him until they were in the middle of the bed. Pulling her with him, he laid down on his back. Sansa tried to roll over but he wouldn't let her, keeping her on top of him. His hands ran down her spine until massaging the soft flesh of her backside. It made her rub up and down the length of him in this position and it was positively sinful. Petyr did say there were many ways to make love but she never thought of the woman being on top of a man. She really was too naïve. He was going to teach her, he said.

The moan that escaped his lips was music to her ears. Feeling a bit of bravery, she sat up and watched him beneath her. His eyes were heavy with desire and Sansa decided she liked seeing him like this. He was waiting to see what she would do. She could feel him and knew what they both wanted but Petyr didn't move to take her. His hands smoothed up her thighs until reaching her hips and gently started to rock her against him. He wanted her to take him like this. She experimented a bit rubbing along the length of him and that alone felt good. Adding more pressure, Sansa made him moan loudly. He liked it and his pelvis rose to meet hers as she worked furiously against him. His grip on her hips trying to raise her up made her realize he wanted more. Not sure of how it should work, she leaned down and kissed him a little more roughly than she intended. The movement made her hips rise up and then could feel him prodding at her entrance.

Those hands were guiding her hips down, and Sansa understood now. She lowered herself little by little, sinking down on him. It didn't hurt like the first time but he was stretching her again. Maybe if they did this more often, that discomfort would go away. Petyr was gentle with her that night and eased himself inside her but this felt different. She was in control of how fast or slow and it was a strange empowerment. Slowly, she rose up and down a few times and it wasn't simple as she thought. Bracing her hands on his chest and with him guiding her hips, she finally found a rhythm.

Oh this was truly wicked, indeed. It was easier to lie there and let him pleasure her but this was everything a well brought up lady would never be told about. Never would Sansa have ever realized that a woman could take her own pleasure from a man. She was slowly fucking him and watching his every move, making her breathless. Everything about it was pure sin - Petyr inside her, rutting against him, feeling his chest heave and the way he gazed at her. She may have felt embarrassed about watching herself in the mirror a moment ago but watching him under her was erotic. Occasionally his eyes would close and his hands became more insistent, traveling from her hips, to touch her breasts as they bounced softly. Sansa liked this, she was in control of him and she loved watching his expressions change. She was giving him pleasure and it spiked her own. She felt his knees bend and when he bucked up hard, they both gasped.

Petyr's eyes were pitch black and seemed to stare right into her soul. He pulled her head down for a searing kiss when those hips bucked again hard making her yelp into his mouth. It wasn't pain, far from it, when his hands grabbed her hipbones and starting thrusting into her deeply. She could barely catch her breath. Sansa braced her arms just above him and the action gave his mouth full access to her breasts. He was humming and grunting tasting that sensitive skin, but his hips never missed a beat.

"Oh, Petyr..." she moaned deeply, feeling their slick bodies move together as one.

It felt wonderful but it wasn't enough. She needed more but didn't know how to tell him. She leaned back just far enough to see his face and it tense as he was focused on where they were joined. He must have seen the frustration on her own face for he suddenly rolled them over and sat back on his haunches between her legs.

Those dark pools of emerald green burned every inch of her skin. Sansa had never felt so desired as the way Petyr looked at her right now. His breathing was shallow and his skin had a slight sheen in the firelight. His hand reached out and caressed her face, drifting down and lighting a fire down the center of her body until resting just above her sex.

Sansa couldn't breathe as his thumb danced tantalizing circles around where she was aching for him. Her hips jerked and suddenly she couldn't stop the soft pleas to end this torture. She got to watch him writhe underneath her and now he wanted to watch her unravel by his touch. Her legs were spread wide before him but his devilish eyes never left hers. She could feel him so very near where she wanted him to be and rocked her hips to touch him, telling him what she wanted.

Petyr smiled and grabbed her bum, yanking it up to meet him. She was still wet and he slid in to the hilt. Holding onto her thighs while still sitting up, he thrust madly into her and Sansa's eyes practically rolled back. Teach her, he did. There was nothing romantic about this, it was pure lust and it was driving her mad. The look in his eyes was her undoing. It was all about pleasing her. She wanted him to call out her name tonight and Sansa couldn't even form one coherent word as

he fucked her senseless. Yes, this is what fucking was. It wasn't making love but it was just as glorious.

She heard something like her voice begging him desperately. When his hand rubbed where they were joined, she unconsciously thrust back at him and felt herself body tense. Dear God, it was even better than their first time together. Her body quaked and she was mumbling his name, her head light and fuzzy. Petyr growled deeply and kissed her fiercely coming to his own release. He was pulsing inside her and finally heard her name fall from his lips.

Vaguely, Sansa wondered how soon until she would be with child. If they kept this up night after night, it wouldn't be long. This time Petyr hadn't moved and was still inside her, resting his head on her chest. His back was slick and hot as she trailed her fingertips down his spine. She could get used to this, she giggled inwardly. Her mother and father would be mortified at how wanton their daughter had become. Perhaps they lied to her as well. Sansa had many siblings. Obviously they liked this enough to have so many. Sansa wondered if this is how it was in most marriage beds or was she and Petyr just lucky?

"Am I crushing you?" his exhausted voice asked.

"I like it," she mused continuing her soft caress.

"Did you?" Sansa felt him smile.

Sansa blushed and was glad he couldn't see it. "I think that was obvious. I probably woke the entire household."

He chuckled deeply and leaned up on his elbows to gaze at her. "I'm fairly certain everyone knows we're fucking like rabbits in here by now. I haven't slept in my bed for weeks."

Sansa slapped him playfully, "You're impossible. It's bad enough the servants gossiping... what will our children think if they hear us every night?"

"They should be grateful that their mother loves fucking their father or they would never have been born?" he smirked and nibbled under her ear. "Plus, I feel their rooms should be in the other wing. They don't need to hear the nastier details of their parents daily debauchery. If you're not screaming, I'm not fucking you right. Come to think of it, we might as well christen a few rooms before little ones arrive. We'll most likely be regulated to our bedroom after that."

"Tell me again why I chose to marry you?" she sighed at his kisses. "One day I may have to explain it to them."

"You didn't, remember?" he murmured and pulled back with a serious look on his face. Why the change all of a sudden?

True, it was forced at the time. It was clear by now that they both unconsciously wanted it. Petyr did ask her the night they made love. Why was it bothering him now?

"If there had been no Myranda, no Joffrey, no one to force your will... nothing but you and me," he began and a hint of anxiety was in his voice. "If I had asked you then, would you have said yes?"

Sansa stared at him for a moment. She could actually see that boy in him, here and now. She was already his wife but somehow there was still the fear of rejection. That if fate had not worked its path, they would not be here – together... in love. The act he put on for everyone else was just that, an act – a façade. This was the real man underneath so many masks, asking if she could have ever wanted him. Just him as a man.

"When you were sleeping in the music room and caught me sketching you that day," she caressed his face. "The day I burned my dress... I think that's when I fell in love with you."

Sansa kissed him softly and searched his eyes. Yes, he loved her. She could tell. When he allowed it, his eyes told her everything.

"I tried so hard not to love you," she breathed. "Even now I'm not sure why. I just know that I do. Fate brought us together for some reason and I'm glad it did. I mean, I wish my family were still alive but if – and I wonder about this all the time – if everything had not happened the way it did. Would we be here right now?"

Petyr sifted his fingers through her hair and smiled sadly. "You never would have given me a second glance, my love. Not to mention your father would have never allowed me to court you. Not in a million years. Would our paths have ever crossed? I don't know. What I do know, is that I love you and will do anything to make you happy."

Petyr pulled out of her gently and she rolled onto her side facing him, snuggling into his chest.

"I cannot bring your family back, Sansa," he sighed deeply, holding her to him. "If I could pluck away all your pain and sorrow, I would. If you want me to take revenge on those that hurt you, I will."

"And if I just want you and a family of my own?" she tucked her head under his chin.

"You had me the moment I first danced with you on the terrace at the Eyrie," he smiled. "Ah, I should have stolen you away that night. So many things I would have done differently."

Sansa didn't quite know what he meant by that.

"I would not have gone with you," she spoke truthfully and thought about it seriously for a moment. She had pondered it once before. She wouldn't have chosen him then. She wasn't the same woman she was before. "No, it had to happen this way. I believe that now. For better or for worse."

Petyr stroked her side and Sansa wondered what he was thinking right now. He was awfully quiet.

"I mean; I wasn't the same person I am now. I've changed because of you," she added softly and then huffed in annoyance. She couldn't find the right words. "I was a stupid girl before I knew you."

"You were never stupid, sweetling," he crooned and continued his ministrations. "You are wiser beyond your years, even in your innocence. You would have been wise to stay far away from me."

Sansa pulled away and studied him with furrowed brows. What did he mean? Did he regret this? Regret being with her?

Petyr smiled sadly, picked up her left hand and kissed it. He removed the makeshift wedding ring from her finger and suddenly moved off the bed walking to his bedroom, picking up his robe on the way.

Sansa panicked, grabbing her dressing gown from the floor and hastily putting it on. She marched into his room ready to demand an explanation when he walked out of his dressing room holding a silver box.

"I was planning on giving you this tomorrow," he hesitated with a half-smile, "but I thought now would be better."

Sansa returned to her room since Petyr's was too dark and fingered the delicate box. It was a jewel box. She glanced at him and his look was unreadable as he waited patiently.

Opening the silver box, a large princess-cut emerald surrounded by diamonds shimmered in the candlelight. It was a beautiful ring, a proper wedding ring and Sansa was speechless. A simple gold band would not do – not for Petyr. Of course he would give her something stunning. This was a ring befitting royalty, not some northern girl. Petyr wasn't trying to show off his wealth by purchasing such a thing, it told Sansa how much he really did care. Everything he gave her was the best he could provide. He wanted the best for her. Once as a young man, he probably wouldn't have been able to afford such things for a lady of his choosing. Now, he wanted to dote on her with everything he had.

Sansa took it out of the box and it was heavier than she expected. His house colors were that of green and black. Onyx would have been a dreadful choice for a wedding ring, but the emerald suited perfectly. It was a magnificent stone, rich in color and expertly cut. The small diamonds made it sparkle and Sansa felt giddy inside. She thought Myranda's diamond was beautiful, but this was three times the size and obviously Petyr put more thought into it. The band had intricate scroll work in the gold setting as she turned the ring over in her fingers.

"If it's not to your liking..."

Petyr didn't get to finish those words as she flung herself into him. She felt the tears sting her eyes and willed herself not to cry. This ring meant so much. It wasn't a poor substitute for a hasty marriage. She wondered when he commissioned it. All this time, Sansa thought his small pinky ring would forever symbolize their forced marriage. That she wasn't worth a proper ring befitting a true wife.

"This is what you should have had on our wedding day, my love," he smiled, taking the ring and slipping on her finger. It was heavy but Sansa didn't care. She would never take it off.

Sansa was about to set the box aside when the glint of gold caught her eye. There was another ring in there. A man's ring. Most married men in the ton did not wear wedding bands, only their wives. Sansa inspected it and it had the same scroll work as her ring. It was of old northern design and Sansa looked at him in surprise. Wearing such a thing in public just wasn't done. Neither of them, had they not been practically exiled from society, could not have worn something considered vulgar and blatantly treasonous by their opinion. Petyr wanted her, and him, to have wedding rings that meant something to her. It touched her heart to the core.

She took the ring and placed it on his finger and this time the tears would not be contained. She loved him. She really did and didn't care about the whys or hows. This tiny gesture alone was enough for her to forgive him so many things. She knew he truly cared about her. Petyr loved her and Sansa wished the world could just leave them be for the rest of their lives. Let them live out their lives in peace with a few children along the way. It wasn't so much to ask for, was it? Sansa didn't care if they were blacklisted, shunned or ignored. As long as she had him and a family... she could be blissfully happy.

"Merry Christmas, my little witch," he smiled, holding her in his arms. "I am yours. Forever under your spell, heart and soul – and you are mine."

Signs of Affection

Chapter Notes

I promised I'd get another chapter out soon. :D

And I promised some fluff and smut....mixed with other things. We're not even scratching the surface of what's to come. Mwahahahaaaaaa

The new year came and went and Petyr felt a sense of renewal. It was almost as if he were living another man's life. A dream that he had as a boy. A vision of him and Cat and what their lives would be. Here he was, the wealthy lord of a great house with his beautiful redhead by his side. Only it wasn't Cat. Sansa, her lovely daughter, had fulfilled the image in his mind. Cat had been his dream but Sansa was the reality and some days, Petyr didn't know how to process it all. It still seemed very foreign to him. Many nights, after making love to her, he would still be in awe that this heavenly creature was his.

Cat had been his ideal for so long, but Sansa smashed that the first time he kissed her. He could see no woman but her. Sansa had to be his no matter the cost. Now, she was his wife and it was better than he could have ever expected. She loved him too. He had hoped that in time she could grow to love him. After finding her half-dead, Petyr was so worried he'd lost her. He would have ripped his heart out with his bare hands if he thought for a moment it would save her life. He fussed over her and coddled her to the point that he wanted to put her in a glass case and keep her safe forever.

For some reason he couldn't fathom, Sansa had forgiven him for things she really didn't know he had done. Petyr knew she wanted answers from him but she didn't pressure him. She knew he was plotting something. Hell, he practically opened that door once she discovered his ghostly ruse. Myranda and Kings Landing was a welcome distraction but it wouldn't be long before Petyr would have to tell her many truths.

How would she react to his grand plan? Sansa hated Joffrey, the Lannisters, and what they had done to her and her family. She did not grieve the passing of Lysa, her only aunt and had not spoken of Edmure since his fateful letter. She had accepted Petyr as her family and that, oddly enough, seemed enough for her. Even the idea of bearing his children, was a happy one. She could see a future with him. A family. The very idea was opium to his brain. Everything he ever wanted was now just a breath away.

The girl had an inkling of Petyr's involvement in her father's rebellion, one that did not serve her family in the slightest. He didn't need to touch on that at all. Whatever she believed, Sansa didn't hold it against him. She seemed to be willing to let go of the past and yet, here he was, clinging on. It wasn't Cat. That boyish love was long dead many years ago, but that scar that forever marred his body, still held him in a vice grip. He was rich and could stay here in the country and live out their lives peacefully, but it wasn't the truth. It was still a fantasy that both of them were toying with believing in – for as long as it might last.

Petyr knew that kind of ignorance and blatant avoidance of reality was a canon ready to blow up in their faces. Joffrey was unpredictable, the moment Petyr ceased being useful, he was scared to think of what would happen, not to himself, but to Sansa and their children. Before, Petyr had no one else in the world to worry about but himself. He could risk it all. Now, he had a wife, the love of his life that would soon be with child. He couldn't ignore the game that would continue on with or without him. He couldn't stop playing and leave his fate in the hands of someone else. However, things were set in motion that could not be undone. It would be a better life for them, Petyr convinced himself. Their children would grow up without having to worry about their heritage, titles, or the value of an old name. They could marry whomever they wanted, do whatever they wanted. It would be a different kind of rebellion on an outdated system that was already dying slowly. He was only going to expedite that necessary demise.

He could take Sansa and leave the country but it didn't seem right. They would win. Joffrey, Edmure, Lysa, Cersei, the society that loathed his and Sansa's very being. Petyr couldn't allow his children to grow up as he had. Petyr couldn't allow the people that destroyed their lives to live theirs out without the retribution they deserved. They didn't deserve to be happy and treat everyone else like rubbish. They didn't deserve to live easy off the backs of others.

Revenge was imprinted on his soul. No matter how much he loved Sansa, it had to be done. Ever since leaving Kings Landing, Petyr had signed a few deals that would seal the fates of so many. There were too many involved now, on his payroll, on his assurances that demanded to be satisfied. Too many years, too much gold, promises and putting men in the right places, to back out now. Those men would likely turn on him and kill him for running away after so much had been invested in this venture to turn the world upside down.

Petyr lowered his news periodical and silently watched her as she painted near the window in the library. It would be so easy to forget the world and live day to day in contentment out here. Live the life of a normal man. It would be lovely to pretend that world didn't exist and he could spoil her to heaven and back, just to see her smile. The dream of having his own children with her...

"You're staring," he heard her voice as if in a faraway place.

"You're beautiful," he smiled at her from across the room.

Sansa blushed and he would never tire of it. Even after tasting every inch of her body, ravaging her in ways that she never knew existed, she still managed to radiate that innocence. This pure and

delicate nymph was his and Petyr still couldn't believe it.

Petyr rose and crossed the room to her. She was painting the terrace overlooking the lake in its wintery state. It was rather good, he praised. Sansa was a romantic. It was ingrained in every she did. Her grace, music, carefully chosen words, the way she looked at him... even this painting told of how she saw the world. Even now, after all that had happened to her, she could still see the good and what could be. Somehow Petyr knew she would be happy here if the world let them be. She was ready to make a new life with him but Petyr felt she had decided to ignore reality since declaring their love for each other. She wanted happiness so intensely, that she almost seemed to pretend that they could play the loving family. Maybe it was he that was resisting and Sansa was right. Petyr just didn't know.

Sansa was still so young and inexperienced in the ways of the world. Petyr had a lifetime and knew better. He would happily bury himself in this delectable, rosy dreamland but always in the back of his mind, he was anticipating the hidden dagger in his back. Someone or something was just waiting for him to let his guard down. Not only would he suffer the consequences, but so would she. Once, he felt that way with Cat. He could have been blissfully happy in his dream of them. Her flirting, kisses and what Petyr thought was love. It was dream that came crashing down. He couldn't be a grown man with a foolish boy's fantasy. Not a second time. This, what he had with Sansa, was so real. He could taste it, touch it. It was right here in front of him now... and it scared him to death.

"How would you like to go to town tomorrow?" Petyr put on a smile for her. He knew what day it was. "I thought it would be good to get out of the house."

Sansa beamed and it made his heart light, even if for a short while. All he wanted to do lately was shower her with gifts, kisses, and make love to her every night. There wasn't much else to do way out here and in the middle of the winter no less. Such a pleasant past time.

Petyr tried to let his worries go. He had mapped out what needed to be done to pull Joffrey off the throne but many of those little seeds needed time to mature. He had manipulated the finances and in a few years, he would have everything he needed in order to bring down the monarchy. The crown would be bankrupt, the merchants, pirates, connections over-seas would be ripe for taking everything over. Petyr had been quietly putting his men into the right places for just the right time. This kind of game took patience and time. It couldn't be rushed. That's how Stark's rebellion was thwarted so easily. Ned, a proud and honorable man, didn't know how to win this kind of war. You don't make your intentions known. Your enemies shouldn't even know you're their enemy let alone that you're coming for them.

Perhaps another four years, Petyr surmised. He would stay out of the scrutinizing eye of society. The Riverlands would be profitable and prosperous. The king and the ton would believe they had won over him and put him in his rightful place – making them rich. Once he had control over the Vale and with the Riverlands in his keep, the small folk would be behind him. Sansa was more right than she knew. They must take care of their small folk. House and feed them. Set them up to see the new lord and lady as one of them. Petyr wasn't taxing them for a good reason. He needed to win them over and when the time came, he would be seen as a rightful leader. They would be glad to be rid of the old ways of the aristocracy. The loyalty and backing of the people would be needed once the deed was done.

Joffrey and the kings before him, kept people in line out of fear and poverty. Petyr was going to change all of that. Men that could feed their families, live decently, were more apt to be content and not rebel. The more Joffrey and his mother put their boot to the neck of the people, the more common folk would be happy to be rid of them. It was already happening across the country. The Riverlands and the Vale would be different. They would be utilized to help the people in their desperate time of need. They would be seen as a savior of sorts. It was all just a matter of time and how to time it just right.

The sleigh ride into town was quite beautiful. The day was bright and sunny for late February. A little too bright as sunlight bounced off the snow making Petyr squint a bit. Thankfully, spring would be just around the corner. Sansa was covered in her furs and snuggled into his side. Small folk acknowledged them as they passed and Petyr could see that the many supplies he curried from Lysa were put to good use. Due to the last few poor seasons, the people here were desperate. Petyr gave them everything they needed to get through the winter. They would be more willing to work harder come spring if they weren't starving and frozen to death.

Arriving at Lord Holloway's Town, the place was bustling while the weather was favorable. One of Petyr's merchant ships docked at the mouth of the river bringing in more supplies and a package he had been waiting a month for. The ship was delayed but managed to arrive just in time. Petyr would have been dismayed if he couldn't surprise her today. He was betting that Sansa didn't know he knew her birthday. She hadn't mentioned it and Petyr believed it was something that had not been celebrated since her family died.

She was three and twenty today, if his research was correct. God, she was still so young. Petyr was almost twice her age. It was common for a man to take a young wife, but it still wasn't lost on Petyr on just how much difference there was between them. He had rather forgotten how old he was. There were days when he could feel it, needing those hot baths more often. Others, he could see it – the grey in his hair, the wrinkles that were deepening ever so slightly. By the time she reached his years now, he would be...

Petyr didn't want to think of it. As long as he wasn't round and bald, it wouldn't matter too much by then. Hopefully, their children would be grown and having babies of their own. Petyr could sit back and enjoy the twilight of his life, smiling at what he had achieved. Just as long as Sansa didn't take a young lover...

She linked her arm in his as she strolled the town. It was a good thing he was a wealthy man,

because his wife would make any other man penniless. He let her buy whatever she pleased because it pleased him to do it. He loved seeing her face light up as they tinkered in many shops. Lord Holloway's Town was located on where the three rivers converged opening into the sea. It was perfectly situated as a point in between the Riverlands, the Vale and heading north or south on Kings Road. In the year since taking Harrenhal, the town had grown thrice in size and was a major trading point. New merchants and shopkeepers were coming in to set up business and the trade was good after Petyr opened it up with ships traveling from Gulltown on a regular basis. Lord Holloway's was practically under Petyr's complete control.

Sansa stopped and Petyr wondered what caught her eye this time. When he turned back towards her, he held his breath for a moment. A toy maker had set up shop. He hadn't remembered this place the last time he was here on business.

Her eyes danced at all the little trinkets in the frost paned window and entered the shop, pulling him along. Petyr could only stare at her. It was as if she were a little girl again. He could see it and how he would have loved to spoil her even then. It was in that moment he saw it all before him. A daughter she could give him. She would have her flowing red hair and blue eyes and Petyr would adore and protect her with his life. He would give her anything and everything she ever wanted.

Sansa picked up a pretty doll with a painted porcelain face and smiled as if it brought a lovely memory to her mind. Her slender fingers touched almost everything and once brushed against her stomach and Petyr stopped breathing. It was subtle and quick but he saw it. Maybe he was reading too much into such a tiny movement. Sansa would have said something, wouldn't she?

Petyr couldn't stop the fast pace of his heart as he watched her every move, hoping she might give something else away. She found a few gilded music boxes and opened one, letting the soft tune tinkle sweetly in the small shop. If didn't have the effect on him as it did her and suddenly Petyr needed fresh air.

He wasn't sure how long until she noticed he was gone. The air was crisp outside as Petyr took deep and calming breaths.

"Are you alright?" her soft voice was laced with concern.

"A little stuffy in there, my love. I just needed some air," he mixed the truth with a little lie.

There was worry with a hint of sadness in her eyes. Unconsciously, her hand briefly went to her stomach again and Petyr's heart skipped a beat. No, this needed to be a happy day. Petyr had to let the past go. His future was standing right next to him.

He smiled, "I'm famished. How about you?" He took her arm and kissed her cheek lightly. "I should have eaten more at breakfast."

Sansa studied his face for a moment and seemed satisfied with his lie. She smiled back at him but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

They dined, drank their tea and Petyr tried his best to bring that true smile back to her face.

"There was a reason we came here today," he grinned, sipping his tea.

"Oh?"

"I have something very special for you, sweetling," he said, watching her fidget with her wedding ring nervously.

Petyr retrieved a letter from his inside his coat and set it before her, the wax seal broken.

"A gift on your birthday," he smiled warmly.

"A gift – for my..." she mumbled confused.

"You didn't think I knew?" Petyr raised an eyebrow playfully.

She was flustered and Petyr loved it.

"I – well, I just assumed. I didn't think it was important," she mumbled, her eyes never leaving the parchment that sat before her.

"My beloved wife, not important?" he tutted with a smile. After a moment, he teased her again. "Aren't you going to open it at least?"

Petyr watched her face as she opened the letter and scanned it with a furrowed brow.

"I don't understand. A woman has accepted a commission from you?" she glanced up at him and Petyr couldn't help it. She was precious.

"I'm ashamed of you, my dear. Don't you know the name? A well-educated lady, well versed in art, surely would know what gift I have given her," he teased.

"Madame Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun?" she questioned and Petyr could see she was trying to work it out.

"She painted Marie-Antoinette. Only a woman that paints the portrait of the late Queen of France is good enough to immortalize my wife. If Boucher wasn't already dead, I might be tempted to have a more scandalous painting of you, but a portrait fit for a queen will do. I spared no expense in bringing her here next month," he shrugged sipping from his teacup.

She clutched the paper as if it were covered in gold leaf.

"A portrait? Of me?" she wondered aloud.

"You're three and twenty, and long past having your likeness made. I daresay, Madame de Pompadour will be green with jealousy," he grinned. "For nothing would be more beautiful than you."

There it was. That spark of happiness in her eyes again. She was giddy as a little girl at the thought of sitting for an artist, a woman no less, that painted the likes of royalty.

"Of course, a new gown was necessary as well. It arrived today along with something else that might just match it," he said trying to keep his tone calm and nonchalant all the while seeing her face light up.

"Just me? Aren't you going to be in it too?" she asked sincerely.

"Me?" he japed. "Oh, sweetling, you're too kind. I fear I'm not handsome enough that my face needs to be put on canvas."

"But you're my husband. The Marquess. Surely, we should have one together?" she told him. "I *want* it to be the both of us."

The idea of sitting for hours in a single pose was far from anything Petyr desired to do. The look, the hope, in her eyes was his undoing. He was hopeless for he couldn't deny her anything.

"Alright, my love," he acquiesced. "If that is truly what you want."

The redhead flashed him the most brilliant smile and Petyr chuckled into his tea. Dear God, this woman would be the death of him.

They picked up the packages that contained her new gown and jewels that Petyr specifically had designed for it, for the most beautiful portrait ever commissioned. They strolled back to the sleigh and passed a tavern that was full of drunken patrons.

"Well, doesn't this paint the pretty picture?" a slurred voice grumbled. A man was leaning against the sleigh and Petyr paused, putting his hand to Sansa's arm, warning her.

Edmure Tully was beyond drunk and looked ready to fall to the ground, if the sleigh wasn't holding him up.

Petyr sighed and held onto Sansa's arm, "Edmure. What are you doing here?"

"I'm not allowed to drink at any of the taverns near Riverrun because of you... so I came out here," he slurred and Petyr noticed the man was holding a sword like a walking cane. "I need to spend my allowance somehow."

"I see," Petyr growled. "Let's get you a room and on the morrow return you to Mrs. Cole."

Edmure chuckled darkly and took a swig from a bottle.

"Planning to put me six feet under are you, Petyr? I found the stash of gold you've been sending her when she died last month."

Sansa gasped, putting a gloved hand to her mouth. She looked at Petyr with tearful eyes but he couldn't let any emotion lead him.

"Edmure, you're drunk. Let us help you..." Petyr offered.

"I don't want your help, Petyr. You've helped plenty," Edmure scowled at Sansa. "Made a whore out of my niece... taken my lands, my family home..."

"Sansa is my wife, you should choose your words more carefully," Petyr warned with ice in his voice.

The man laughed loudly catching the attention of people around them.

"*Wife?* So you've finally done it, have you?" Edmure drunkenly roared. "You couldn't fuck and marry my sister, so you stole her daughter instead. She looks just like Cat, doesn't she Petyr? You sick, arrogant son of a bitch."

Sansa pulled her arm from his and stood shocked at the revelation.

"My sisters are dead and you married my niece," he slurred. "Did you finally get everything you wanted? Cat would be turning in her grave if she knew what you've done."

"Edmure," Petyr warned.

"What, are you going to kill me? Go ahead. I have nothing now," Edmure chuckled and walked towards them, tripping a bit over the cobblestones. "I should kill you now. Take everything back."

Edmure grabbed Sansa by the wrist and yanked her over to him. Petyr was quick and pulled his rapier from the floor of the sleigh, unsheathing it. He was not good with a musket but he had learned the sword well enough to defend himself. By the time, a confident man missed the intended target and had to reload, Petyr could stab you through the heart and be done with it.

"You're coming home with me," he told Sansa and her eyes grew wide with fear as she looked between the two men. "I refuse to let you stay with the likes of him."

"You didn't seem so anxious to come and save her months ago," Petyr retorted coldly. "She read your letter."

"That's when she was your whore," Edmure replied nastily. "Now the Marchioness of Harrenhal. If I kill you now," he raised his own sword, pointing it at Petyr, "We'll have everything back just as it was."

"And the next lord that comes after me," Petyr smiled. "Will take it from you again. Do you really think the king will side with you? A drunk and a fool that let his family's land go to rot?"

Petyr was cautious and watched Edmure's every move. He was drunk, uncoordinated and holding a weapon inches from Sansa.

"I heard the king kicked you out of the capital. Made my niece marry you," the drunk grinned. "You're out of favor with the court, I'd say. Ned would kill you if he knew his daughter was the wife of a man that helped destroy him. Brandon should have killed you that day. Too bad Cat stopped him. If you had died... they might be alive."

Petyr closed his eyes for a moment. No, not now. This wasn't happening. He glanced at Sansa and saw the most terrible pain in her eyes.

"Ned Stark's rebellion was doomed before it began," Petyr sighed. "He told Cersei that he knew the children were bastards when Robert died. He warned her not knowing what kind of woman she was. Ned had no idea who he was dealing with. He didn't have the support of any houses. I had hoped the rebellion could be squashed quickly and save Cat and the children. Never would I have believed that Joffrey was that ruthless and out for blood."

"Wanted Ned out of the way, you mean," Edmure sputtered. "Take my sister for yourself, is that right? Now, you've soiled her daughter."

"You fool. I would have done anything to keep her and the children from harm. I was too late to stop it," Petyr growled. "You have no right to criticize me. You were her *brother* and did nothing. You saved your own skin. You *and* Lysa. Lysa treated Sansa like dirt under her boot. You, might as well just made her a servant. How dare you. She is my wife and I love her."

Edmure cackled and for the first time, Sansa was trying to pull away from her uncle.

"Love? That's rich. You thought Cat loved you. She only liked messing with you. You were never going to be good enough for her. Tell me Petyr, do you still hear the songs she used to sing? Keep them in that box? I'm willing to bet you still have it. You took Sansa and made her into her mother. Forced her to be your wife. She doesn't love you any more than Cat did. You've done nothing but turn her into a whore. A whore with low born children and she will be shunned the rest of her days. God help me, she would be better off dead than forced to live in such shame."

Sansa froze at those words while Edmure's hand was still clamped around her wrist. She looked desperately between her uncle and Petyr.

"Edmure, you're drunk. You wouldn't hurt her," Petyr spoke softly and lowered his sword. He didn't want to provoke the man. "Hear what you're saying. Look at her, you wouldn't dare harm her. Your only niece."

"You can't have everything Petyr," Edmure wailed drunkenly. "Cat never belonged to you. Sansa doesn't belong to you." He pointed the sword at Sansa and his hand shook as the blade was so near her stomach.

Petyr held his breath and tried to figure out what to do. Edmure was incensed, drunk and armed.

"Uncle, please," she whimpered and trembled. "Please."

"Let her go, Edmure," Petyr begged softly. "It's me you want to hurt. Not her."

"You're right," he growled and pushed Sansa into the wall.

Edmure lunged at him and Petyr quickly parried. If Edmure was sober, this would be a more dangerous contest. Petyr never could best him as children but many years had passed and Petyr was far more skilled than a young boy.

"Stop it!" Sansa screamed. "Stop this, the both of you!"

She tried to push Petyr back and Edmure sliced his upper arm in the process, making him hiss in pain.

"Sansa, keep away!" he shoved her to the side.

"I'm going to kill you," Edmure spat, lunging in again and Petyr deflected him easily.

"I am not the little boy you used to beat down," Petyr retorted. "I've learned much since then."

"Damn you both, stop this!" she yelled again.

A man tried to grab Petyr from behind as another was pushing at Edmure. The Tully man saw the advantage and went to lunge in when he saw Petyr's sword wielding arm yanked back. In slow motion, all Petyr could see was Sansa rushing to his aid as Edmure's sword plunged forward. In a flash, the weapon crashed to the ground as the man tackled the drunk, pushing him into the gutter. Sansa fell into the sleigh and fell down hard.

Petyr dropped his sword and pulled her up, inspecting her for any injury.

"Are you hurt?" he pleaded and Sansa was sobbing.

He couldn't see a mark on her but his rage only flamed higher.

"You drunken fool! You could have killed her!" Petyr roared, charging the man before two men held him back. "You stupid, son of a bitch!"

Before he could stop her, Petyr saw Sansa climb in the sleigh and whip the reins as the horses pulled out into the street.

"Sansa!" he yelled and pulled away from the men that held him. "God damnit!" he swore more to himself.

She would be half way to Harrenhal before he found himself a horse. Petyr knew that's where she was going.

A few men from the tavern that were on Petyr's payroll came out to survey the commotion. Petyr paced in front of Edmure who was practically passed out.

“Get him out of here. Take him to Riverrun,” Petyr ordered, handing one man some gold. “I need a horse.”

Sansa reached the front steps of Harrenhal and the tears had already dried on her face, frozen streams on her pale skin. It wasn't just her beloved Mrs. Cole's death, that broke her heart in two.

He lies to you

The footmen were calling out if she was alright as she hurried inside. Sansa passed two maids and hauled her skirts to run up the stairs.

He is lost on another

She ran past her door and opened Petyr's. She knew what she was looking for. Throwing open the door to his dressing room, it was there on the vanity. Sansa was panting looking at the gilded, carved box. Twitching fingers opened it and that tune played as if a cruel joke. Sansa could hear that tune her mother used to sing to her and Arya as a child. She almost forgotten it, the sweet lullaby, for Sansa hadn't heard it in years. It wasn't a song from the north or the Riverlands, it was something her mother made up. In her dream, after she fell in the labyrinth, Sansa thought she heard her father singing it. It wasn't Father, it was Petyr. Petyr's voice sang this tune.

It is very precious to me

The little spirit kept putting it in her room. It wasn't a ghost, nor Petyr or a servant full of mischief. She wanted Sansa to have this or to know about it.

It will come to pass and you will see the truth

Lifting the music box, she inspected it and finally turned it over. Sansa's eyes grew wide.

Her name is carved in music and must be broken

Sansa's breath was shallow as her fingers glided over the engraved name on the bottom of the music box.

Catelyn

“There is an explanation, my dear,” his voice echoed behind her.

Sansa's eyes flared and her hands shook from anger.

“Explanation,” she muttered numbly. “I'm waiting for an answer,” she repeated his words from long ago when he thought she stole this from his room. “Perhaps I should supply it?”

Her uncle's words rang in her mind – *Tell me Petyr, do you still hear the songs she used to sing? Keep them in that box? I'm willing to bet you still have it. You took Sansa and made her into her mother.*

“Why do you have my mother's music box?” she finally voiced. “Did you steal it? Keep a memento of your unrequited love?”

“It's not your mother's,” he sighed.

“Her name is carved on the bottom,” she seethed. “I'm not a complete idiot.” She chuckled darkly at her own words. “Perhaps I am. I fell for your lies, didn't I?”

“It never belonged to her,” he grimaced and leaned exhausted against the door frame. “I made it. Took her song she used to sing to me and had the tune made. Cost me quite a bit, all I had. I spent months making that box. In the end she refused to accept it.”

“You're still in love with her,” Sansa forced out. “Why keep such a thing? You were livid that I had it. Then you were going to give it to me...”

“I was upset that you took it from my room at the time,” he said calmly. “You said you were afraid of it, so I put it away. I thought you already knew by the way you acted. I would have given it to you, if it meant so much.”

“If I had known, I would have walked all the way back to Riverrun. Now I know why I was afraid of it,” she closed her eyes. “It wasn't a ghost that haunted me, but you. I would have found out then that I wasn't a poor substitute for Myranda... but for my own mother. You loved her so much you dueled for her. That's what that scar is on your shoulder, isn't it? You were willing to die for her?”

“Yes,” she heard him admit. “Sansa, I was a boy...”

“Yet a man kept this with him after all these years,” she sighed. “Would you have tried to woo her again if Joffrey had not killed her? You said you came too late. Would you have been her savior? Whisked her away here. Married her?”

She glanced at him, and Petyr couldn't even look at her.

“Yes.”

Sansa's lip quivered and she turned her back on him.

"A shame, really. She wouldn't have married you for love. Maybe security and your money," she uttered, knowing her words would cut like a knife. "Or not at all because she loved father. Were you ever going to tell me? Or let me live a lie?"

"It's not a lie, sweetling," he began. "You said yourself that fate had worked its path to bring us here. You were right. I didn't know you then. Our paths were not meant to cross at that time."

Sansa couldn't face him. She rubbed her stomach and the knowledge was killing her. She was tied to him.

"Your mother and I..." he breathed. "It was never meant to be. It was boy's fantasy. A reminder of what I could never be to her in a world like this. Remember the painting of Goliath? Also a reminder – that those fables I believed in were never true. The boy doesn't beat the giant. The poor boy with nothing doesn't win the fair lady. The painting, the music box served as a way to contain the pain I never wanted to feel ever again."

"A man that feels no pain, no love... can marry a woman he doesn't love just to use her. That man can tear the world apart. A man that keeps secrets hidden in this house. A man that has enough weapons for a small army tucked safely away in an old labyrinth. After you've burned the world down, what would I be then? Your little prize. A second rate doppelganger of the woman you really loved?"

Petyr's eyes widened in surprise about what she knew. He was never going to tell her that either, she was willing to bet. That betrayal, that fury was rising like molten fire in her belly as she clutched the box hard enough to break her fingers.

"You wanted me to be her, didn't you? That's why you took me from Riverrun. Mrs. Cole said I looked like her when she was my age. Do you pretend it's her when you kiss me? Do you see her, fantasize about her when you're in bed with me?" she bellowed and threw the music box at Petyr, barely missing him. It shattered to pieces against the wall, the tinkle of a couple chimes sounded before silence engulfed them.

"Let me guess," she laughed, pacing the dressing room, feeling a hysteria come over her. God, she wanted to hit him. Scream at the top of her lungs, cry, and barge out of this room all at once. "You wage a little war and use me as a scapegoat? The traitor's daughter would be perfect for such a role. If it all goes to hell, it would come back on me, right? The Stark you were forced to marry. Or did that ruin your carefully crafted plans? Now, they're watching you because of me? You only wanted me as a mistress, didn't you? You don't love me... you don't love this –"

Sansa stopped herself. Did she want to tell him? It was early enough, that she could get rid of it easily if she wanted. She was only a few weeks past her cycle. She was going to tell him today, that she knew for sure, now Sansa didn't know what to do. He was uncomfortable in that toy shop. Maybe he lied and didn't want children after all. It was just to placate her.

Do you want children?

Do you?

Did he? Was it all in her head? She was still a romantic and hoping that this was real between them. He stood there silent as the grave. He didn't defend himself at all. Didn't try to convince her she was overreacting. He clutched his arm and Sansa wondered, vaguely, how badly he was hurt.

"When I took you from Riverrun, I thought I was protecting something of her," he whispered. "Never, had I ever believed that I could love again. I didn't know what to do with you. You ruined practically every plan I set in place – turned everything topsy turvy..."

"Oh, I see... *I ruined everything?* It was *you* that brought me here... you..." she screamed, and started throwing items from his vanity at him. "You made me believe I was mad, you seduced me, you threw me to wolves in Kings Landing... led me to believe..."

Petyr marched across the room and pinned her to the wall, as she tried to hit and slap him.

"*Hear me,*" he said harshly. "I never planned for you. Do you understand? I changed everything for you. You do look like her, that's the truth. The reason I took you from Riverrun isn't the reason you're here with me now. The first time I kissed you, I knew. It's always been you and no one else. Not Myranda, not a ghost from the past. You dazzled me in every way. Cat couldn't hold a candle to you. You are a greater woman than she could ever have been. I was scared of opening my heart again, don't you see? How could an angel like you love a man like me..."

"I don't believe you," she sobbed. "You'll say anything to keep me quiet now won't you?"

The sadness in his eyes was breaking her down, slowly. "You will be the death of me, my little witch. Make no mistake. Turn me over to Joffrey, if you must. He is the one I plan on bringing down. A war *is* coming, my love, but not in the way you might think. I should have told you. I thought I was protecting you. Perhaps the less you knew the better off you would be."

"You're a fool," she spat trying to wiggle out of his vice grip. "My father, one of the finest military commanders, couldn't even win and he had an army. You're going to die, Petyr, and they will hang me along with you."

Petyr refused to let her go and pressed against her firmly. She struggled and elbowed his injured arm. Petyr cursed but didn't let go.

"Not all wars are won with armies having at each other in an open field, my dear," his tone serious and still. "A smart man finds his enemies weaknesses and exploits it. He plays a slow and controlled strategy, one that has taken me years, long before your father made the fatal mistake of using honor as his armor. My way isn't noble or honorable but it will do the job far better and with less blood spilt."

He kissed her forehead but kept her arms still, for Sansa would surely have hit him again. She could see his arm was bleeding even through his top coat.

"However I have wronged you, I will make amends. If I could take it back..."

"You can't undo what is done. Not to me. You can't take it back," she growled and took off the emerald ring. "Take it. I don't want it. We are already forever bonded you and I. This child will hate us both for the world in which it will be born into."

Petyr's eyes lit up like the sun for a moment but the sorrow that emanated off him, casted dark clouds. No, she would not break. He did this to her. Immediately, he released her arms. Slowly and unexpectedly, Petyr sunk to his knees. His hands slid down her waist, resting at her hips. Before she could push him away, Petyr wrapped his arms around her, pressing his cheek to her belly. For the longest time it was silent. He held her and Sansa was reeling with emotions. She wanted to shove him off her, rail at him for getting her with child... this, everything was lie and now she would have to bring a child into this world.

The tears streamed down her face, but Sansa willed herself not to make a sound. His face turned and planted a kiss on her corseted tummy, his arms never leaving her.

"I love you," he murmured against her and Sansa wasn't sure if it was for her or their unborn baby beginning to grow inside her.

"You're a liar," she cried, her eyes blinking away the tears. Looking down, his dark hair was all she could see. Her hand hovered over his head. She wanted so much to run her fingers through his silky hair. Petyr held her as if he never wanted to let her go. Her hand trembled but at the last minute she made a fist and pulled it away from him. He lied to her from the very beginning.

"I love you," he kissed up to her chest and Sansa shoved him, but he wouldn't let go.

"I hate you," she groaned when his mouth whispered just above her collarbone.

"No you don't," he breathed and tasted the skin under her ear.

"Don't touch me. I hate everything about you," she growled and tried to push at his chest.

Petyr grabbed her wrists gently but firmly enough to keep them at bay. His mouth moved around her jaw and Sansa hated that he knew exactly where she liked to be kissed. No, she couldn't believe him. It was trick. Everything was a game to him. She didn't love him. She didn't.

"You are everything to me," he hummed along her neck. "Without you, I am nothing. I will die for you, for our child. The past is gone, my love. The only thing that matters is here and now – you and I. God in heaven... I never loved her the way I love you."

Petyr took her mouth, and she fought him for a few moments. He never relented even when she bit his bottom lip. His tongue tasted the drop of blood as she pulled away and the look in his eyes was filled with lust. No, she thought. He wouldn't.

He took her wrists in one hand and pulled them above her head against the wall. His free hand traced her lips and flinched when she tried to bite him. She wasn't going to play this game with him. Her eyes flared a bit, daring him to try and kiss her again. She would draw his blood but good.

"Say you love me," he commanded softly, his eyes burning with desire.

"No," she breathed harshly.

Petyr pressed himself hard against her, and attacked a spot on her neck. He pushed her legs apart just far enough to step between them when she tried to kick his shin.

"Tell me you love me, Sansa," he groaned into her skin where surely a bruise would form tomorrow.

"Aren't you calling me by the wrong name?" she sneered and jerked her head to the side.

She felt him smile against her skin and it wasn't the desired effect she had planned.

Petyr groaned, "I love my little witch. My sweetling."

His hand cupped her sex through the many layers of her dress and massaged deep circles. He pulled his mouth away and stared passionately into her eyes.

"You love me. Say it," Petyr whispered inches from her mouth.

"Go to hell," she gasped hotly when his hand found that bundle of nerves.

"Only if you come into the depths with me," he grinned wickedly and claimed her mouth again. "It's only with me are you truly willing to fall into that pit of licentiousness. You do trust me, for every time, I bring you back into the light again. Fall with me from grace... tell me you love me."

Her hips moved with his hand and she could feel how wet her small clothes were. Damn Petyr. Damn him to hell and back for making her feel this way. How did this happen? She was furious with him still but wanted him desperately. Unconsciously, Sansa moaned deeply into his mouth and that's all he needed. His tongue touched hers and she was suddenly lost in him. She aggressively kissed him back and felt him growl with desire.

Petyr let her hands go and she had the opportunity to throttle him but when he tore open the front of her dress and took a nipple into his mouth, all she could do was hold his head there. He sucked and lavished attention and Sansa ran her fingers through his hair.

"Take this off," he moaned and whipped her around, unlacing the back of her dress with lightning speed. Shrugging out of his jacket and unbuttoning his waist coat, Petyr pressed her up against the wall letting her feel him along her backside. His cravat hanging from his neck, Sansa was tempted to strangle him with it when he turned her around to face him again. He devoured her mouth, backing her up towards his vanity.

With a swipe of his arm, everything was off the table as she placed her on top of it. He didn't unbutton his breeches, even though she could see his cock straining against the material. Instead, Petyr gathered her chemise above her hips and pulled away her small clothes. A wicked gleam in his eye, he spread her legs and knelt between them. His tongue trailed fire along the inside of the thigh and then he hovered just above her curls.

Sansa waited with baited breath, the look in his eyes was enough to boil her blood. When his mouth covered her, she bucked against him. It wasn't gentle as he feasted on her, just like he said he wanted to down in the lagoon that night. His tongue licked, flicked and danced making her cry out. She fisted his hair pulling his face harder into her and Petyr obliged the voiceless command. He wrapped his arms around her hips, pulling her roughly to his fiendish mouth. Petyr devoured her like a man starving. His groans vibrated and it was all Sansa could do not to thrust against his face. She almost fell off the table when his fingers joined his delicious tongue. Her moans overcame his and the sound of the table hitting the wall in time with the thrusting of his hand.

"Oh my God," she whimpered feeling the beginning of that first shudder. Her inner thighs were slick and his face and hand were glistening from her juices. She thought for certain his mouth would be tired, but Petyr pushed on feeling that she was just on the cusp. She bucked wildly and he lapped her until she finally cried out.

Not wasting any time, Petyr unbuttoned his breeches and stroked himself a couple times before hooking her knees in his arms. He teased and prodded her but wouldn't let her get close enough.

"Tell me you love me," he panted, letting the crown of his cock rub against her opening.

"Fuck you," Sansa shot out in anger and frustration and even the vulgarity shocked Petyr. She would have never known such a word, let alone use it. Petyr taught her so many things in their short time together. He brought out a side to her that no lady should be.

He licked his lips and smiled lasciviously, "As you wish, my wife."

Petyr yanked her to him and plunged in deeply making them both moan. The table rocked as he fucked her hard and Sansa couldn't find anything to hold onto until finally grabbing him by the shoulders. His upper arm was bleeding through his shirt and Sansa thought they should stop and dress it. All such thoughts left her mind when he lifted her up and Sansa wrapped her legs around him. For a slender man, Petyr was stronger than he looked. He pushed her up against the wall holding her under her thighs for support.

She had to hold onto to him or fall. His hips thrust up and ground against that little nub that was on fire. Petyr grunted in the effort and pumped harder and faster. He sucked on her neck and Sansa braced one hand on the wall to steady herself and the other around his neck. She could smell herself on him. Petyr's mouth found hers again and she tasted that musk. Savoring herself on his tongue, the feel of him inside her and the thrill that he liked the tang of her. He liked giving her pleasure with his mouth and for some strange reason, she liked tasting it on him.

She wondered briefly if they could be damaging the delicate baby inside her but when he angled her hips to meet his and hit a spot inside, she lost all control.

"Harder," her voice cracked and Petyr's eyes furrowed with concentration and gave her what she begged for.

"Say it," he growled deeply.

Sansa knew what he wanted to hear but pride was losing the battle to ecstasy. She needed to come but Petyr was holding back, leaving her just on the edge.

"God damnit, you stubborn woman," Petyr panted harshly. "You know you're the only one I want. There is no room in my heart for anyone else. I need to hear it."

He slowly considerably and Sansa thought he was going to stop all together. He couldn't stop, not now. She was burning alive.

"You want me to lie to you?" she bit back, bucking against him.

"You want me to stop fucking you?" he growled, turning and abruptly, tossing her down on her back on a large, plush ottoman in the middle of the room. He spread her legs wide and plunged deep and hard forcing a cry from her lungs.

"Do you?" he huffed, finding that spot again and hitting it every time.

"No," she wheezed feeling that desperate rush and grasped his narrow hips.

"Then lie to me," he moaned loudly, fucking her faster and her body started to pulse.

"Oh dear God.." she wailed, not caring anymore. "I love you. Oh, please... don't stop."

"Say it again," he groaned, his hips pounding into hers.

"I love you," she cried out, feeling it deep in her core. "I do love you, Petyr. I do."

She wasn't lying. She did love him against all odds and better judgment. Whether he believed her in this moment, she couldn't tell. Her body tensed, her toes curled and Sansa held onto him as it hit her hard. Her hips had a mind of their own and bucked erratically. Petyr was louder than she had ever heard him before. He was going to come and he was calling out her name over and over as he spilled into her.

Shuddering for a moment, Petyr came to his senses and pushed his weight off her as if suddenly remembering she was with child. He was out of breath and slid off the ottoman between her legs, resting his head on her thigh. His hand came up and traced little circles on her tummy as she came down from her high, gasping for air. She glanced around, and the dressing room was in shambles. The shattered music box, his entire vanity on the floor... they would have to clean this up themselves. Sansa didn't want any servants to see this. Petyr hummed softly, bringing her attention back to him.

“When?” he asked reverently, feeling her stomach as if searching for the little thing that would be his son or daughter.

“September, I think,” she breathed slowly. “That is if we haven’t...” Sansa couldn’t say it. She wanted this baby more than anything in the world.

Petyr searched the rug and Sansa wondered what he was looking for when the ring was slipped back onto her finger.

“You know me, sweetling,” he smiled softly. “I don’t like losing. I’m not giving up on you just yet. I have until autumn to make you love me again. If not, I’ll care amply for you and the child if you wish to leave me. I’ll find somewhere safe where nothing can harm you.”

Sansa swallowed hard and sat up to look at him, pushing down her chemise.

“You would give up your only child?” she asked in wonder.

Petyr smiled sadly and caressed her cheek. “To protect you both, then yes. If you truly do hate me by the time you give birth... that is if you still want to have my, I mean our, child. I cannot bear to see you unhappy. You know my secrets. It’s not an easy thing to tell your wife and beloved that you once loved her mother... and expect her to believe you. You may not want to be involved with my machinations, which to be fair, had begun before we met. However, I would be selfish to force you into it with me. At least now there are no more secret between us and you can decide if love, or my love for you is enough to stay.”

“How are you going to dethrone Joffrey and the Lannisters?” she asked skeptically.

Petyr rested his chin on her hip. “Ah, quite brilliantly. It will be over before they even know what hit them. My people are well-placed and in a few years, everything will be at the ready. Just a little patience on our side.”

“Do you have a crown picked out?” she smirked.

“Do I wish to be king? Dear God, no. I don’t fancy someone plotting to kill me every day,” he chuckled. “No one is going to allow me anywhere near the throne.”

“Then who?” Sansa frowned. Anyone from the ton would be just as horrible. If Margery wasn’t with child, succession could befall a number of people, depending on who Petyr kept alive. That thought alone made her shudder followed by an equally troubling notion. Had Petyr killed before? The very concept didn’t seem to bother him.

“Someone whom we control completely,” Petyr smiled. “Granted, he wasn’t too happy that you were forced to marry me, but if you truly wish to divorce me after Joffrey is dead, I suppose I could arrange for you to be queen after all.”

“Robert,” she breathed.

“Yes, our dear Duke of the Vale,” Petyr caressed her hip. “Or should I say, the next King of Westeros who will bring a much needed democracy to the country.”

Ink & Oils

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was mesmerizing to behold. It didn't matter how many times Petyr passed by, he would stop and stare at her. Those auburn curls glowed as if reflecting the setting sun's flame. A beautiful contrast to the silver and emerald of her dress. Many portraits were painted to flatter a person's physical inadequacies, but Sansa's fire and ice was captured brilliantly. The artist did not have to make her beautiful, she already was in the flesh. Her flawless milk and honey skin, the elegant curve to her neck that held the emerald and diamond necklace he had made, just as the gown, for this portrait alone. She was a jewel with a deep fire, a queen, regal and untouchable. The ring had a glimmer to it on her delicate hand and attention was made to every tiniest detail from her full lips to the flat tummy the artist chose instead of Sansa's every growing belly. For all its perfection, it was her eyes that Petyr could not stop gazing into.

There was no need to see the ocean for she carried it in her eyes. If he stood in just the right place, she was looking directly at him. Petyr closed his eyes with a smile. He knew the exact moment, as if the artist had frozen it in time, forever for him to remember. Sansa sat quietly, patiently as the artist sketched and painted. The scent of oils and paint wafted throughout the main floor of the house. The canvas was large enough to cover the wall in which Petyr intended to be its home. It was a massive undertaking and when the weeks flew by, he knew it would take much longer than he thought to complete. Spring turned to summer and she began to show as their child grew inside her. The artist chose to depict her slender waist instead of a forthcoming mother. Originally, her eyes were slightly cold as they stared straight ahead at nothing. Petyr did not wish to hover during those long sessions, but it didn't stop him from peaking at the work in progress before heading to bed.

Sansa had been angry when Petyr decided that it should be her, and her alone for the portrait. She wanted them together, but after her birthday, Petyr changed his mind. If he couldn't win back her love, he would have this, her, immortalized. The last thing Petyr wanted was a portrait of them if she ended up hating him. It would be cold and forever remind him of the chasm that had been created that day. As the weeks passed and the painting progressed, Petyr was afraid that Sansa's blank, cool stare would showcase her unhappiness with him.

He had showered her with gifts since that fateful day in late February. He courted and doted on her without abandon. Perhaps it was a silly thing to court one's wife, but Petyr knew they couldn't go back and the only way forward was to not only win her love again, but more importantly her trust. She knew what lay in the labyrinth and yet had stayed silent for months. Sansa was not a fool. She may not know the whole truth, since Petyr only gave her what he felt she needed to know – for the time being. Petyr could only placate her for so long.

Sansa didn't need to know the more gruesome details of putting Robert on the throne. He hadn't lied. Petyr had no intention of bringing her into this. Here she would stay – unless she decided to leave him. Sansa and his child would be protected with everything Petyr possessed. Before finding that frightened girl in Riverrun, Petyr had laid those plans years ago to bring the Lannisters down. The realm, or its finances, were completely in his control. The markets, guards, trade and key people placed throughout the kingdom – all his and no one in power knew it. Petyr was willing to risk it all to burn it down...

However, now he had a wife. Not just any woman. Not someone expendable. He loved her deeply. As Sansa's belly grew, so did his excitement – and fear. Petyr did not know how to be a father. Lord Tully was the only father he really remembered and that man cast him out like a pebble in his shoe. Petyr wanted to give his child everything he never had. He had more than enough money to keep Sansa and his future son or daughter in the lap of luxury for the rest of their lives but Petyr wasn't sure how he would feel when that day finally came and his child was placed in his arms.

Sleeping in his bed, alone, after so many months of sharing Sansa's was tough. Petyr couldn't sleep. She snuggled into his side or he held her to him from behind. The beating of her heart was a sedative. She was safe in his arms. He was tuned into her. If she moved or left the bed, he knew. Petyr had slept alone his entire life but Sansa was a drug he desperately needed now. His own room was alien to him. He would hear her some nights, muffled cries, and how many times he came to the door to find it locked. Petyr would knock and ask if she was alright. Most of the time she would reply that she was all right. Nightmares seemed to plague her and the sickness would come and go. Mrs. Ames reassured him it was normal. Sansa adamantly refused to let a doctor see to her and Petyr couldn't really contest it. He trusted Mrs. Ames completely with Sansa after that day of the labyrinth. He owed that old woman so much for keeping his beloved from death.

Business, however, could not be ignored. The rain had been plentiful and thankfully it gave way to warm spring. All of Petyr's money had been well spent. The Riverlands were going to be more than fruitful this season. It was as if, the stars had aligned. Sansa was warming to him again, the child was healthy and growing fast, and the crops would bring a bountiful harvest. The locals were doing well and every time he traveled to the towns, Petyr was greeted with goodwill from the smallfolk. Sansa's – and his own – generosity had paved the way with the people, just as Petyr had hoped. It would all be necessary and when the time came, Petyr was relying on that good favor to hold the people to him in those uncertain times. He was already insanely wealthy, but that wealth was being put to good use. Not only here but around the country and to those outside the borders. Those key people were placed just right, with time and just a bit more patience... it would all work. Petyr had to keep one foot in reality and not lose himself completely in his wife and new family.

Petryr opened his eyes and gazed into her smiling blue orbs that stared back at him from the painting. They were no longer cold and distant. He remembered walking in that day when the artist was focusing on small details, making little changes here and there. She had asked Sansa to pose once more, even though the dress no longer could be laced in the back. It wasn't the dress or her body. The artist didn't seem to like the coldness emanating from her eyes, just as Petryr had feared. Sansa's face and breasts were just a bit fuller. She was glowing, for just the day before, Petryr gave her sheets of music that he had written. Music she had suggested he write months ago. It was only a simple melody but it succeeded where all the gold, jewels and gowns could not. Her face lit up and finally, after months of this estrangement, Sansa smiled and it reached her eyes.

He had played in the music room as Sansa posed for the artist. The song had a touch of melancholy due to the loneliness he felt. Petryr often wondered what she was thinking in the next room. She never asked why he played the same song all the time. Did it touch her the way it did him? Unlike other songs he tinkered with and were soon forgotten, this one stuck in his mind. Petryr found himself many nights in his study, writing it down on parchment. He was no great composer and struggled a bit with putting what was in his head and echoed from silent fingers drumming on his desk, into solid form. The ink was dry and Petryr was finally satisfied. He didn't give it a title, leaving the space blank.

She played it without a single question to his lazy penmanship. The first bar rang delicately in the room and Petryr smiled. He had not failed after all. She played it as if she knew it from heart. He stood outside the music room and listened, not wanting to loom over her or make her nervous that she might not be reading his work correctly. Her fingers on the keys and resonated what he felt when writing it. Sansa played with feeling. She had to feel it too. That emotion couldn't only be from him. He was asking for forgiveness and she was giving him her answer.

That night, he didn't hear the turn of the lock of the door as she entered his room. The mattress dipped and Petryr was hazily aware of the form she slid under the bed clothes. A cool hand caressed his chest just inside his night shirt. It was a lovely dream, Petryr told himself. Ones he had so often alone at night. Many to the point of taking himself in his hand until a desperate and silent finish all the while imagining her with him. That little hand slowly gathered the material until finding him soft with slumber. Gripping him firmly, that hand moved gently until he stirred and began to harden. The dream was lovely indeed. It felt so real even when a tortured moan escaped his lips. The hand disappeared and Petryr sighed knowing how many times he woke with his cock erect and aching.

When the linen pulled back and dove soft thighs straddled his hips, Petryr's eyes opened with a start. If this was dream, he never wanted to wake. Sansa sat atop him in her silken night dress. Her round belly prominent under the sheer material. He reached out and touched her, making sure she wasn't some phantom in the night. They hadn't made love since that day in his dressing room. One could hardly call it making love at all. It was raw. Passion and anger. He had been so rough with her, Petryr worried he might have damaged the delicate thing they made.

She moved against his aching hardness, forcing a deep groan from his lungs. His hands unconsciously gripped her bare thighs to keep himself from finishing in that moment. Her weighted lifted and then returned, sinking down on him. Petryr was speechless. She felt so good and yet he still wasn't sure this was really happening. She was silent in her movements. When he tried to pull her nightdress up, she pushed his hands away and finally spoke.

"No. I don't want you to see me."

"Why?" he wondered aloud.

Sansa didn't stop her movements, bracing one hand on his chest. It was slow and controlled and Petryr could feel her belly touch him each time she pushed herself down on where they were joined.

"I'm ugly," she sighed and swatted his hand away for the second time.

A deep chuckle reverberated from his chest as his hands returned to her milky thighs.

"Sweetling," he smiled in the darkness, trying to lean up only to be pushed down again. "Ugly is something you could never be even when we're both old and wrinkled."

"I'm fat," she sniffled but didn't stop moving. "You don't desire me anymore."

"Desire you?" he asked incredulously as his head hit the pillow. "You're riding me and I'm dying with lust for you. Or can't you feel me inside you? You're the one that locked me out of our room every night."

"Because you've found a mistress in town, haven't you?" she accused and Petryr was shocked. Where was this coming from? Surely, he had attended to business matters around the county but he could not even conceive of taking a mistress. He didn't want any woman but her. Petryr was waiting patiently for her to come back to him. She was the one keeping him at arm's length. He thought he was being punished for those unfortunate revelations that day. Not as though he didn't deserve it but he was willing to wait all the same.

"Have you gone mad, woman?" he blinked and yelped when she smacked his chest hard.

"Don't you ever call me mad. Do you hear me?" she cried and thrust down on his cock hard making him grunt. She was going to kill him; he swore under his breath. She could kill him right now and he wouldn't care. She was riding him with each hard thrust and Petryr's eyes rolled back. God, he loved her. Here she was, heavy with child and fucking him senseless.

Petryr bent his knees and reared up when he felt her tiring from the exertion. He gripped her fuller bottom and rather liked the extra padding there. He kneaded that tender flesh forcing her hips to the new pace he set and controlled now.

"Is this what happens to women's minds when they're pregnant? Clouding your reason?" he growled as he pumped into her. "Making you crazy with imaginary things?"

Sansa opened her mouth to retort but Petyr pushed himself up and kissed her hard into silence.

"I didn't call you '*mad*', little witch," he smirked, seeing her eyes flare a bit. "But if you think I've taken a mistress or could even desire another woman... then you've definitely lost your senses."

Petyr took his free hand and touched her where they were joined. There it was, that sound he loved hearing. She moaned and held onto him. Petyr buried his face between her full breasts and could feel the beginning of the end. He wasn't going to last much longer, for it had been too long since he had her like this. Sansa leaned back on her hands and let him take her hips, thrusting faster and faster. Her voice echoed in the dark room and he felt her tighten around him. Just as quickly as it started, it was over as he spilled into his pregnant wife.

Drawing his head from her chest, Petyr kissed Sansa softly when she started to pull away. His spent cock fell from her as Sansa moved off him and off the bed.

"Where are you going?" Petyr asked curiously and grabbed her hand sharply.

"To bed. I'm tired."

Petyr was truly beginning to wonder as to her mental state. He pulled her back, careful not to make her stumble.

"I'll be damned if you're going to fuck me then leave to your own bed," he chuckled.

Thankfully, she didn't struggle or argue with him. Laying down on her side, Sansa fussed and moved around until finding a comfortable position on her side away from him. Petyr waited a moment or two and then tentatively closed the distance, molding himself into her backside. Only when his hand came to rest on her belly, did she protest weakly.

"Enough," he groaned into her ear, his nose buried into the curve of her neck, kissing the skin there. "You're beautiful and I love you and I love the baby we've made. Stop this nonsense."

His hand caressed the ever growing abdomen of his beloved. It was the truth. She was beautiful and he loved her to heaven and back. She filled his heart completely and Petyr vaguely wondered how he could love anything more than her. It didn't seem possible. Just then he felt a movement under his palm and it almost made his heart stop. It was faint, a flutter, but he felt it. Petyr grinned like a fool against her skin. Her hand covered his gently and moved it a bit lower.

"Can you feel him?"

"*Him*?" he smiled and kissed the back of her neck again. "It could be a girl."

"No, it's a boy," she murmured. "Only a boy would give me such trouble."

Petyr chuckled deeply and continued massaging her belly. "What can I do?"

Sansa sighed and leaned back into him. A little victory but Petyr would take it.

"Keep doing that. He likes it."

Petyr wanted to chide her that if she had allowed him back into her bed, perhaps the child wouldn't have given her so much grief at night. He would have been happy to caress her all night if that's the remedy she needed. Petyr didn't want to anger her again or make her leave, so he stayed silent. She was here and it felt as if she had never left him to sleep alone. They were made for each other. They needed each other whether they wanted to admit it or not. Petyr was done second guessing himself when it came to her. Sansa was never going to leave him, not if he could help it. Petyr would never keep her against her will, but he would find a way to make her stay. He couldn't bear to part with her now – or ever.

He woke alone as the sun streamed in from the windows. Glancing at the mantel clock, Petyr cursed. He never slept so late. That was the effect she had on him. It had been the first night that he had slept well in months. William told him Sansa was already downstairs with the artist, making use of the good lighting.

When he walked in, her gaze turned from indifference to a sheer glow. Her blue eyes found him just off to the side – *and smiled*. That was the moment. The artist saw it and captured it with brilliance. Petyr stood in front of the masterpiece and every time, even into old age, he would remember when the love returned in the way she looked at him in this moment. She was staring at him when those eyes lit up. It was a moment, frozen in time only between the two of them. Petyr wondered if, long after he was dead and gone, would people ponder what this beautiful girl was looking at when the artist caught it? Like the Mona Lisa, it was a mysterious smile and glance that seemed to find someone in the distance. It was him, and no one else would ever know. A little secret between two lovers.

August flew by and a charge was in the air. Not only was it a terribly humid and hot month, making Sansa miserable as she neared the end, but the harvest was beginning and demanded much of his attention. Stress, wasn't even the word for how Petyr felt. Every time he left the house, he prayed she wouldn't go into labor until his return. Sansa moved into his room as they changed her adjacent sitting room into a nursery. The noise was too much for her she said. Most days she rarely left his room let alone the second floor. It was as if she had grown twice in size over night. Petyr did not want her falling down the stairs in such a condition. The nursery finished and Sansa wanted to sleep in her room again. This was the room she wanted to give life to their first child, she told Petyr.

He and the servants brought her anything she desired to occupy her time but everyone knew the child could come at any time. Petyr bought and bought and the shopkeepers were thrilled at the income from their new lord. He must have appeared every bit the new father. When attending business in town, he would always stop and buy something new to bring home to Sansa.

She said with all certainty that she would give him a son, but Petyr wasn't sure. Perhaps it was his natural instinct to expect the unexpected in everything. In case his lovely wife was wrong, he would have little things tailored for a daughter too. Gentlemen of the county tipped their hat and asked how his wife fared. Had she given him a son or a daughter yet? Petyr would always reply with a smile... *soon. Any day now.*

Petyr didn't know where this strange giddiness came from. He was not a fanciful man and even when he bought for Sansa, it didn't have quite this effect on him. That hopeless romantic, the boy he thought died so many years ago – in fact, had not died at all. He lay dormant. Waiting for the right time. The right woman. Petyr never expected it to happen so late in his years. He was getting older and perhaps did not have that many years left in him to produce a child regardless how young and healthy his wife was. He remembered the snickers and empty platitudes of men when they found out he wed himself a young and beautiful girl. Bed her well, they chided. Get her with child soon. That a man of his age would have the benefits of such a lovely creature in his bed every night. Those men were green with envy, and Petyr felt it was just another dagger in their pompous hearts. He had it all. Wealth, power, land, title and one of the most beautiful women as wife. The Stark name didn't seem to matter when beauty and grace trumped the frumpy wives of those titled men. None of them would have married her, but would have happily taken her as a mistress. No man would deserve her. She was his and Petyr was damned sure to keep it that way.

It was an unseasonably cool evening when she woke him with fear in her eyes. The moon was high in the dark sky as its silver rays penetrated the sheer curtains.

"Do you wish me to fetch Mrs. Ames this time?" he asked guardedly. She had many false alarms the past week which made him alert to every move and change of breath.

"I don't know. He is restless," she sighed and winced in pain.

Sansa referred to their child as *he* all the time now. She was convinced it was a boy she carried. Petyr wondered if she would be disappointed if she gave birth to a daughter instead. All thoughts whisked from his mind when she groaned sitting up and Petyr felt a wetness on the linens. Horror filled him as he quickly lit a candle and almost did not want to look, afraid to see blood, that something had gone wrong.

"Call for her, it's starting," she breathed and pushed the linens back. It wasn't blood. It was the first sign that the child was coming and Petyr willed himself to stay calm.

Calm. He dressed quickly as he could. *Calm.* He repeated it as he rushed down the stairs. *Calm.* As he knocked furiously on Mrs. Ames door to come quickly. The woman had been prepared for days and days. The necessary maids were woken and everyone moved with a purpose. Even though Sansa refused, Petyr had Brune at the ready to ride for the doctor if necessary. He wouldn't take any chances with his child. He had not forgotten when he almost lost her that freezing winter's night. The doctor had given up on her and didn't expect her to live. Mrs. Ames never relented in bringing Sansa back to him.

Petyr wasn't sure what his role should be right now. This was out of his control and he hated every second of it. He had never been nervous in his life and yet, he was ready to drink a barrel of whiskey to numb those irrational feelings. He watched as the women worked furiously in the room. Sansa lay on her side and whimpered in pain. Every so often her breathing would change and she would cry out. Should he go to her or would he only be in the way? This was completely new to Petyr.

She called out for him then, and Petyr didn't hesitate. He sat next to her and whispered sweet nothings. A maid rang out a cool cloth, handing it to him. She was wet with perspiration. Gently, he wiped her forehead, face and let the cool water run down her neck and chest.

A pain would come and Sansa gripped his hand ferociously. She was crying now, and his heart bled for her. He couldn't imagine the pain she felt. Childbirth was as dangerous to a woman as anything else. She lay her head in his lap, and Petyr continued his ministrations – rubbing her back, taking the cloth to her skin. All the while whispering in her ear.

"It will be over soon," he smiled, trying to give her encouragement. "You'll see. And will have a beautiful baby."

Petyr didn't know how many times he told Sansa he loved her. She was beside herself with emotion and pain. Mrs. Ames reached between Sansa's legs often to check on progress. To Petyr's analytical mind, it wasn't happening quick enough. He hated seeing Sansa in so much pain. When she howled and clawed his arm to the point of drawing blood, Petyr's heart halted when a red stain began to soak her nightdress.

"My lord, you need to move," the old woman practically pushed him off the bed. Mrs. Ames gave succinct directions and suddenly Petyr felt he was in their way. He moved back and almost couldn't watch. The candles were smoking, the room was hot and humid with all the linens soaking in the bathroom, the scent of oils, medicines and the only sound was of his sweetling crying out – tearing his heart apart.

Petyr strode into his room and poured a stiff drink from the crystal decanter. He could still hear her cries in the next room and the sound made him sick. She sounded as if she were being torn apart. Perhaps he was a weak man after all. Petyr couldn't watch it. It was too difficult to listen to it. His mind was his worst enemy playing all sorts of terrible images. William came in to check on him, probably at the old woman's request. The whiskey in his hand, trembled in the glass. Petyr was scared, truly, for the first time in his life.

A scream bled through the walls and he rushed back in, only to have two maids hold him back.

"Let me in, god damnit!"

"William! Get him out of here," Mrs. Ames yelled, and she didn't once break her concentration from the girl on the bed, pushing with all her might.

"Shall I send for the doctor?" the young butler asked holding Petyr back with all his strength.

“Not unless his lordship wishes worse for her and the child,” the woman smiled knowingly at the master of the house. “Don’t worry, my lord. They’re in good hands, I swear to you on my life.”

William hauled him back into his chambers when two footmen were called in and shut the adjoining door where her cries grew louder and louder. William whispered something and one of the men left only to return minutes later with Brune following behind.

He must have looked like a wreck sitting next to a table by the window by the way Brune looked at him with a smirk on his lips. The old friend poured a drink for the both of them and sat down gesturing to the servants to leave them alone.

“What are you smiling at? Can’t you hear her?” Petyr grumbled and gulped down the fiery liquid.

“My hearing is just fine,” he sipped the whiskey watching Petyr intently. “Makes a man glad he isn’t a woman.”

He poured Petyr another drink.

“I have to say, this is a first,” Brune chuckled and Petyr scowled back at his old friend. “Never seen you quite like this before. It’s interesting to see how a man reacts to his first child being born. My father didn’t give a shit. He was out whoring when I was born – so my mother told me. Count yourself a better man, Petyr. I was there when my niece was born. My brother died in battle. Not a pretty sight, that was. The girl came too early. The doctor thought surely she would die…”

“And this is supposed to calm me down?” Petyr grumbled.

“Well, best be prepared for the worst, I say,” the man shrugged. Petyr couldn’t fault him. That’s the kind of man Brune was.

“Have any children yourself?” Petyr asked. He never thought to ask before.

“Oh, I’m sure a few bastards are around somewhere. I’ve had too many whores in my youth,” Brune smiled and tossed back the whiskey.

Another scream echoed and Petyr tried to stand when Brune’s heavy hand clamped down on his, pinning it to the table.

“It’ll do you no good to go in there, Petyr,” the man warned and Petyr knew he would hold him back against his will for his own good and reluctantly sat back down. “You’ll know soon enough, my friend. We’ve been through worse and the worst is still to come.”

Petyr knew exactly what Brune meant and it had nothing to do with the woman giving birth in the next room.

“Does she know?” his voice cut through Petyr’s frantic thoughts.

“She knows enough,” Petyr traced his finger around the rim of the glass.

“Do you trust her – *enough*?” the man weighed his words carefully.

“Yes.”

“And if it all goes to hell? What then? I thought you were mad to marry that Royce chit. At least you cared nothing for her,” Brune tapped his fingers lazily on the polished wood.

“What are you implying?” Petyr frowned. This was not the time nor place for this conversation.

“I see what I see,” Brune drummed his fingers and the sound was irritating to Petyr. “You care for this one. Now you’ll have a child. You’ve never cared for a soul in your life since I’ve known you. I’m just saying they could be a liability.”

“I am aware of that,” Petyr growled. “I have made plans for it. You needn’t concern yourself.”

“Considering I’ll be the one watching over them like a nurse maid, it is cause for concern,” he replied easily not caring if his friend and co-conspirator was fuming angry. “You can’t exactly pretend the rest of the world isn’t turning while you play happy father and husband.”

“Most of the crates and weapons have already been moved. Not as quickly as I would have liked,” Petyr thought to the stash hidden in the labyrinth. “Everything is set and in motion. Nothing has changed. The King is clueless. Robert is under my control. I only need a few more years before lighting the match to the fuse. By then the crown will be bankrupt and everyone else that matters will be dead.”

Brune raised a single eyebrow and half-smiled.

“*Nothing* has changed,” Petyr emphasized.

Brune stood and opened the door, “Bring him some strong coffee, my boy. He’s going to need it.”

Petyr didn’t know how much time had passed when William returned with a tray of fresh coffee and biscuits. It would be dawn in a few hours and the night dragged on like an eternity. The cries had long stopped and all Petyr could do was pace his room that felt smaller and smaller as the minutes lagged on.

The door to her room opened and a maid with blood on her apron entered slowly. Petyr held his breath, taking Brune’s advice to heart. *Expect the worst.*

The blonde girl smiled and Petyr’s heart soared to the heavens.

“M’lady is fine and the child too,” the girl fidgeted looking at the lord master. “Mrs. Ames just wants to clean up a bit and said you can come in – in a few minutes, m’lord.”

Petyr knew he could march in there right now, but the stronger part of him told him to wait. Perhaps Mrs. Ames and Sansa did not want him to see the remains of childbirth. Frankly, he did

not need more terrible images to haunt his mind. Sansa and their baby were alright. That's all that mattered. The maid closed the door before he could focus and ask about the sex of the child. He could wait. He would rather hear from his wife.

A half hour passed and Petyr grew restless, finally opening the door and entering her room, refusing to wait any longer. The maids were propping Sansa up with pillows and the most wonderful sound rang like music in his ears.

The wail of a baby, *his baby*, sounded from the bathroom where Mrs. Ames came walking in wrapping the now clean infant in soft linen. He looked to Sansa, who was exhausted, her eyes half lidded to the old housekeeper holding his first born.

"Your son, my lord," Mrs. Ames smiled.

A *son*. Petyr's heart constricted when Mrs. Ames gently placed the bundle, carefully swaddled, in his arms. He was so small and Petyr cradled him safely. Immediately, the boy stopped crying as if he knew his father held him.

"He's healthy then?" Petyr muttered, trying to think of anything to say for he was speechless in this moment.

"Yes," Mrs. Ames grinned. "Gave his mother quite the exertion. I suspect he'll be a strong one."

Petyr frowned and gazed at Sansa. She looked half dead. Her face pale. The linens on the bed were fresh and a fear seized him.

"Is she alright?" the concern lacing his voice as he walked to her side.

"She'll be fine, my lord. No birth is the same. It was tough on her, but she'll come around. Let her rest. She worked hard to bring your son into the world," the woman eyed him with curiosity.

Petyr sat down and brushed the hair from her forehead. She was warm and her hair damp. They were alone at last with only the sounds of his newborn son making little noises. Petyr kissed her forehead and wondered if she fell asleep as her eyes were closed.

"He's beautiful, Sansa," he murmured.

Petyr opened the linen a bit as the infant wanted to move. His eyes were closed and Petyr wanted to know what color they would be. Fine, silken black hairs ran along the top of his head. Little wrinkled arms stretched out and when that tiny little hand clasped his finger, Petyr gulped and blinked back a tear that was threatening to fall.

This was his son. *His son*. Suddenly Brune's words echoed in the back of his mind from earlier. No, they weren't a liability. Were they? Petyr left a tender kiss on top of his head. It was so soft and he smelled of his mother.

"I told you it would be a boy," her voice whispered.

Petyr grinned and caught her eye. She was exhausted but she smiled warmly all the same.

"I never doubted you," he breathed. She was so very pale. "Are you sure you're alright, my love? I can send for the doctor."

She placed a hand on his and shook her head.

"No, I'll be alright. Mrs. Ames is making a tonic for me. I bled quite a bit she said. She has everything under control. I trust her," she winced trying to sit up a bit. "Here, let me hold him."

Petyr placed him in her arms and watched her carefully, not fully believing her.

"Are you in much pain, sweetling?"

"Yes. No point in lying is there?" she sighed and rocked their son gently. "I assume you'd rather not know the details."

"If you wish to tell me, I will listen. I wanted to be in here with you. They forced me out – probably for the better. I would have been a bother. I can't bear to see you in pain, sweetling," he answered, kissing her cheek.

"I can't believe my mother did this five times," she chuckled dryly.

Petyr didn't flinch at the mention of Catelyn, but more so the fear that Sansa may not wish to have more children. He had a healthy son. If she truly wished to stop, he would agree. Never would Petyr force her to bear children she didn't want.

"If," he hesitated and closed his eyes, "If you don't wish to have more, I'll understand."

Sansa's doe-like eyes looked up at him in confusion and then his heart lifted when she smiled.

"I didn't mean that," she blushed. "Mrs. Cole use to say that women suffered from a terrible malady. *Forgetfulness*. Otherwise we would never let our husbands ever bed us again. However, I'm cursed for my husband is an addicting lover as well."

Petyr laughed and must have scared his son for he started crying loudly.

"Sssshhh. There, there," she grinned. "Your father will have to learn to be more quiet."

Father. Petyr couldn't get used to hearing it. Fathers weren't men like him. Good fathers and husbands didn't plot to bring down kings and torch the world.

"It's a good thing you're his mother," he sighed, letting that trepidation show. "I don't know the first thing about being a father. I didn't exactly have any to learn from – in a good way."

Her hand cupped his cheek turning him to face her.

“You love us,” she smiled with tears in her eyes, that the sight broke him to his core. “That’s all I need to know. That’s who you really are. Everything else is just a mask, a façade. The sooner you strip that away the better off we will be. Do what you have to do, Petyr. In the meantime, just be there for him. That’s all a child really wants, isn’t it? To be loved.”

Sansa didn’t know how true her words were to him. That’s all he wanted. Hoster Tully was the only father he really knew since fostering at Riverrun. Catelyn, Lysa and Edmure were his siblings. They grew up together. Had all things been created equal, he might not have been so hurt by Catelyn’s rejection. It was that he was nothing to them after all those years. Not a son, not a brother... not even a friend. He was just Petyr. A poor boy from The Fingers. Not worthy of anything good. Not worthy of love.

Yes, he loved Sansa. He loved his son, more than he could ever have expected. What he feared was a lie. His heart was big enough to house both Sansa and his child. The boy yawned and Petyr couldn’t tear his eyes away. He would kill for him. Petyr would die for the both of them. This newfound selflessness is exactly what Brune feared. It wasn’t going to take years to develop. In an instant, Petyr knew he would do anything and everything for them. *That* made them a liability. Brune knew it and now Petyr did too.

“You’re tired. Lie down,” she breathed, kissing him softly.

Petyr did as she commanded without question. With help, she snuggled down with the boy between them. Sansa smiled as he grabbed her slender finger.

“What do you want to call him? We never really talked about it,” she yawned and winced in pain again.

Petyr tucked strands of hair behind her ear. He thought about it and knew exactly what his name should be.

“Alexander Faolan,” he grinned at her look of surprise that he chose a northern name.

“Faolan – *a wolf*,” she muttered with a hint of a smile.

Petyr kissed her deeply, careful not to crush his son between them.

“A *great wolf*, my little witch.”

Chapter End Notes

Probably a few more fluffy chapters before you kill me. I think I'm going to like writing Daddy Petyr. :D

A Perfect Family

Chapter Notes

Ooooookay. So, I've come to the conclusion that I cannot write fluff for shit. I've played with how I wanted this to go and it just wasn't working at all. Written it, re-written it. Hated this or that. Plus, it would have given us more chapters dragging things out on things that don't really move the story where it has to go. I've cut the time span to move things along. There are some really juicy chapters coming soon that will dictate the direction of the story. Don't worry, there's some fluff and smut in this long chapter. I'm not completely cruel considering I'm making you wait long times between chapters.

So, I've kind of switched gears a bit instead. Yeah, there's a little fluff but not really fluff? We'll see what you guys think. And I decided to start fucking with you in this chapter instead of the next one. As I wrote it, it just seemed to fit better. I think I have one more semi-fluff/foreshadowing before it gets ugly in here.

Sansa closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Mornings in May couldn't have been more beautiful at Harrenhal. The water lapped gently along the lake's shore. Every flower was in bloom and the trees were full of blossoms that danced on a honeysuckle breeze. Alex's high pitched laughter made Sansa smile as she embroidered on the terrace. Petyr was teaching him to ride on his black stallion not too far away. He had been so full of fear and apprehension about how to be a good father when their son was born. Sansa told him not to worry and she was right in the end. Petyr was a natural father and he doted endlessly on his first born.

Glancing in the direction of the child's laughter, it was hard to believe he was such a fussy baby. Petyr held the boy with one arm in front of him as he trotted the black horse around the garden. Alex smiled and held onto the reigns without any fear of the enormous beast upon which he sat. He was growing so fast that it boggled his mother's mind. It seemed only yesterday Petyr held him in his arms for the first time in the wee hours of early morning.

Mrs. Ames called it a tender tummy and the doctor referred to this infant ailment as 'colic'. Alex cried endlessly for hours and Sansa unable to calm him. Sometimes he would refuse to feed from her breast and there were many days and nights where she grew depressed and exhausted from the ordeal. The doctor tried several things and was going to resort to sedatives for the baby. The idea of giving such strong medicines to a little thing was unthinkable to Sansa and Mrs. Ames.

The old woman was a godsend once again. She crafted ointments to rub on his skin, made of calming herbs and it helped greatly. However, it was Petyr that was the shocking factor. Sansa didn't know what it was. A connection between father and son, a manner that her husband possessed, but something calmed the boy immediately. It was if his embrace was the remedy. Alex would scream and cry, and those times when Petyr would take him, the boy quieted within minutes. Many times, Sansa would lay in bed and watch Petyr work his magic on the child. He would sit and rock the boy, humming a simple tune. The man that was in love with his son was a far cry from the man she met over five years ago. He had changed greatly as a husband and father and there were times when Sansa wondered if this part of him was just dying to come out. He had worn a mask so long, but Sansa wasn't sure which was the façade. This loving man before her or the one that was the ultimate gambler in a game of politics and gold.

Had it been that long? There were moments when it felt like only yesterday when he changed her life in Riverrun. Sansa was the lady of a great house even if they were shunned by high society. She thrived here in the Riverlands. The locals respected her and she was treated like the proper lady her mother brought her up to be. Petyr brought much prosperity to the county and the gold was rolling in for the crown. Petyr told her as long as the king's vaults were full, it was likely he wouldn't care about them. They weren't a threat, he insisted. Petyr was playing his part and rubbing two gold coins together to breed a third. Money tended to make men turn a blind eye. Petyr didn't do anything that would raise suspicion. The lands were profitable than they had ever been, his ventures made many important men very rich. Who cared that this lord had his northern wife and son in the quiet of the country? They did not mingle within their circles and were easily dismissed as nothing.

It was easy to lose herself here. Sansa and Petyr made a few friends with local businessmen, smaller lords, gentry and their wives that wished to profit from the talented marquess. Petyr advised to keep such people, even as pleasant as some appeared to be, at arm's length and never to confide in anyone. It wasn't a difficult task, for the only person Sansa truly trusted was the old norther woman that helped her in every way. Mrs. Ames was always there for Sansa to vent her frustrations, cry and talk about the things she still felt were not for Petyr's overly logical ears. Logical and stubborn.

The day Alex was brought to the local parish to be baptized, Sansa was already filled with doubt. What kind of God let innocent children die before a firing squad, that she would baptize her son in His name? Petyr was no religious man and the act was more of just that – an act. A performance for the locals, that he, the master of these lands, was a good and faithful subject to the Almighty. That he would bring his first born son to town to be bathed in the light of God.

It was just another way to make them appear the respectable and trustworthy lord and lady of the county. They were, weren't they? No one needed to suspect that the Marquess was plotting to bring down the royal family. No one needed to know that his northern wife was haunted by spirits and was scared to death of that unknown and what her husband's game would bring.

She forced a smile as the clergyman poured holy water on her son's forehead until he cried loudly, his shrill voice echoing from the stone walls. Petyr plucked him from the man's hold and just like that – Alex quieted once more. Christened Lord Alexander Faolan Baelish, the clergy and witnesses did not blink an eye at the northern name. Only then did Sansa truly smile as she gazed at Petyr and their infant son. Her son would inherit all from her and Petyr. She would teach him about his family from the North. He would know how they were honorable, loyal and fought to the end. He would know how and why they died. The boy would learn from his father all the things he would need understand in order to survive in this world. That sometimes you needed to play the part even if it was a lie.

As they walked outside, Sansa's and Petyr's attention was drawn to a gathering nearby in the town square. Small folk were standing near the fountain surrounded by cobblestone as a man preached his sermon to the crowd. More and more ministers cropped up here and there over the past few years. Some taking a more modern approach to the Anglican Church, that was doctrine across the country, and others moving back to the older, more conservative ways. They took advantage of the turmoil building around the country as the arrogant, frivolous and vicious king was slowly destroying his realm. They came and went, some moving abroad to the colonies that were now a new nation of their own. The civil wars on the mainland had settled after so much bloodshed and even the old Catholic traditions were being observed again.

Strange that so many off-shoots of the same belief system were now widespread in so many countries and growing. The late King Robert even passed The Act of Tolerance, which would give peace across the land, ending so many outbreaks of disobedience and crimes of hatred because one group of people practiced or prayed a little differently than the others. Perhaps it was more because of his long friendship with her father and wanted to keep peace among the people no matter what they believed. It certainly didn't stop Joffrey and especially Cersei from taking retribution on those that prayed to the old Gods, those pagans that were hunted down and forced to accept the new religion. It seemed it was only if you prayed and practiced the new religion, where you allowed to do it your own way, in your own right.

Petyr was about to climb in the carriage when a local man distracted him. Sansa stood still listening to the man. He was old, that she could tell but his voice and the way he preached sent chills down her spine. Religion had become popular again in the countryside among the smallfolk. Economic turmoil from King Robert's reign had transferred to his son, Joffrey. Joffrey, a cruel and greedy boy cared nothing for his lower subjects and they suffered for it. Petyr knew this and Sansa had seen it firsthand since losing her family and becoming the lowest lady of the ton. The commoners were looking to God in their time of woes while the gentry and wealthy aristocracy used religion purely for political advantage, pragmatism and academics. Then there were those like Petyr, who sneered and ridiculed such fanciful things. Praying to one God was just as preposterous as the numerous gods of old.

As prosperous as the Riverlands had become in the past few years, it seemed strangely odd that a new minister would be preaching so harshly to the people. They hated the King, and that disquiet had been building since her father's own failed rebellion. Even Petyr's distaste for the aristocracy was strong, he was going to over throw Joffrey if he could. He hated everything about the politics of the country. He was low born himself and yet, this minister's word did not have any effect on him. Did men like this serve a purpose in keeping the people's anger riled up. If Petyr was to depose Joffrey, he would want the people on his side. He would most likely use his low born status to rally them to him. Sansa did not know how he was planning to bring them down but that feeling of dread was always present even in its tiniest form. Cersei, the Queen Mother died suddenly and rather suspiciously and Petyr swore he had nothing to do with it. Sansa wasn't sure she fully believed him but considering the news from the capital, Joffrey wasn't grieved at all at the loss. Perhaps the lioness had tried to hold on too tightly to her cub.

Petyr was true to his word on that part. He did keep Sansa informed – with the truth. Cersei was controlling and it wouldn't have been a surprise if she outlived her usefulness to the ruthless King and his queen. Joffrey wasted money building new palaces, on the unsuccessful war to take the colonies across the ocean back and the people suffered for it – all except in the Riverlands and the Vale. That's how savvy Petyr was. He kept those under his control out of danger. The rumor was the crown was going bankrupt and yet Petyr seemed to have an endless supply of gold and goods. He stored it, moved it, spent it when necessary but kept much of it quiet. He knew just when and how to buy, sell and provide but in ways that weren't extravagant under the scrutiny of a king who was spending like a madman. Petyr told her, that the Lannister's gold mine had dried up and that the king was unaware. Cersei would have sniffed it out sooner or later, so perhaps her timely death was a peculiar advantage. Petyr wanted the king to rely solely on him as much as possible and indeed that seemed to be playing into his hands. The aristocracy was still filthy rich and so were their allies in the Church. That was what this man, dressed in a simple weave of the old Catholic monks, was preaching today.

"There are sinners among us. Yes, they are everywhere. We have forgotten God's laws, bent and twisted by men, bought by those that keep you under their boot," his voice rang out and Sansa found herself walked toward the gathering.

"All immortal souls are equal in the eyes of our Lord," the old man spoke fervently. "Our sins are alike. Those who hold your chains think they are above His law. Those masters have been cast out on the mainland and across the sea!"

A lady of the gentry scoffed and complained to her well-dressed husband as Sansa neared, "How vulgar! The nerve of that man! Comparing us to common folk."

The woman said it loud enough that many smallfolk frowned and jeered making her shrink back a little. Even though few gentry stood nearby, Sansa would have had enough sense not to say such a thing amongst so many commoners. One day they would realize they outnumber the aristocracy just as they had across the sea. Sansa heard from their wealthy 'friends' that men such as this were banned from pulpits in the larger towns and not allowed to preach at all in the capital. Terrible rumors from the North traveled down at how Ramsay Bolton, the new Duke of Winterfell was

handling uprisings against his authority and that of the King. The North still very much believed and practiced the old ways, and it seemed the young duke was executing many defiant people. The Church never truly took root up there and it was being used more forcefully instead.

"I have seen it my brothers and sisters. I have been to the West, the North and now here. I see it in your eyes. Greed is a disease. Across the country, children go hungry, crops are dying, the pagans assault the righteous up North. What do these high and mighty lords do? They eat their cakes and drink their wines. They dine with gold and silver while you toil away on their lands," he preached. "I used to serve them as you do now. I saw their sins every day as a servant in a great house. The debauchery, those gluttonous men rising high and taking everything they can, the whores dressed in fine clothing passing as ladies..."

It was then Sansa held her breath. Duncan stood on that ledge of the fountain overlooking the mass of people listening to him. The cross that dangled from his neck was simple and plain as his garb. He was the everyman, humble and pious spouting his venom. He spoke for the common man and that didn't really bother Sansa. She knew what it was like to be low and shunned. She never wanted her people to suffer. She and Petyr made sure of it. Grain was available when it was scarce, and supplies brought in when needed. How other people were suffering elsewhere in the country, those here were doing well and so was the Vale.

She couldn't have imagined this is what Duncan became after disappearing from Harrenhal that night. Sansa remembered his many grumblings against her and Mrs. Ames but one thing that struck in her mind was that day in the garden.

God puts His faithful servants where they are needed most... even to protect those who do not believe they need it.

"The true monarchy is dead. The lords and ladies that headed the great houses are long dead and replaced with pagan worshippers, men who laugh at God's teachings and pray to gold. These lords over you have all but destroyed the faith and those that would preach its truth," he roared as he scanned the crowd. Sansa froze as their eyes locked. The seconds ticked by like hours and the man's suddenly smiled at her.

"You may have fruit now, but it will wither and die. Who will answer you when these lords of gold close their doors? They will, I promise you they will. The true church has been snuffed out while those clergymen who drink from gold cups and wear fine silks reap the rewards of their high masters. True men of God do not suffer these things. For hundreds of years the people only needed and respected the word of God and did not use it to push down the faithful. Men's laws will never supersede God's laws and it is times like these that we must return to the fold, denounce these sinners – those that will eat cake while you starve for a crust of bread," he bellowed and not once did his gaze leave Sansa. It rooted her to the spot.

"We did not suffer pagans and non-believers. We pushed them North where they belong," Duncan grinned. "Don't despair my children. There are good men and women of title. Those that punish evil-doers. Great ladies that spread God's will by gentle teachings to those who would follow and His wrath to those that oppose His word."

"What is this? I wondered where you disappeared to. You're not listening to this rubbish are you?" an amused voice japed behind her.

Sansa turned as the smile fell from Petyr's face.

"That son of a bitch," he growled holding Alex. His eyes were sharp daggers on the former butler preaching from his fountain pedestal. Petyr signaled and Sansa saw Brune and two men move into the crowd.

"Petyr, *no*," she pleaded suddenly and clutched his forearm. "Don't be a fool. There are too many people."

"I told you I would kill him if I ever found him," Petyr scowled and held Alex to him tighter. "Lest you have forgotten what he did to you."

Sansa glanced around them in terror. Petyr's men were moving closer.

"I haven't forgotten," she whispered harshly. "You can't kill a priest in front of everyone!"

"I don't care what he pretends to be... You almost died because of him!"

"Petyr!" she breathed and forced him to look at her. "Not in front of these people for God's sake. I don't care what he did to me. They see a man of God. If you, the man he is preaching against, kills him... what does that tell the people you are trying to gain favor? You're smarter than this."

Petyr took a few ragged breaths and after several tense moments, signaled again to Brune and the men retreated back into the back of the crowd. Duncan continued on and it was all Sansa could do to calm her raging husband. She had never known him to be irrationally impulsive. She should be flattered by his need to take revenge on the man but it did not comfort her.

"Brune will find him and when he is alone..."

Sansa's mind tumbled and turned the idea over. She hated Duncan, that was for certain. She wanted revenge as much as Petyr, or did she? Sansa looked at Alex tucked away in Petyr's arms and stilled. They were not murderers. They were better than that. How could she teach her son to be a good man when his father killed out of spite? They would be no better than this old butler spouting hate and fear. Let him, she decided.

"No," she said calmly and stared Petyr in the face. "You will do nothing of the sort."

Petyr blinked at her as if she had gone mad.

"Sansa, he left you for dead, he may have done Myranda's bidding," he breathed.

"And what does that make us if we kill him? Duncan is a grumbling, pious old chamber pot," echoing Mrs. Ames words from long ago. "*Listen to him*. He sounds like every other fanatical

minister to come through these parts. No one will take him seriously. But if he dies suspiciously, and he was known to speak out against you or I... People *will* take his words sincerely.”

Petyr was still frowning but the logic didn't go unwarranted. He knew she was right but was not happy about it. Shaking his head in anger, he refused to look at his wife. She knew he wanted revenge badly and Sansa might never know if he decided to do it, against her wishes and hide the evidence.

“We don't want to bring any unnecessary attention to ourselves, right? Not when we're so close?” she pleaded to his reason. “Let him grouse and belittle us. The people know better. We take care of them as we have these past few years. The ton already thinks we're beneath them. What? They have new gossip if it even travels that far? He isn't saying anything new. I'm the northern whore and you the sinner with pockets of gold.”

“He doesn't deserve to live,” Petyr growled under his breath. “Don't tell me you've forgiven his crime against you.”

Sansa glanced back at Duncan and couldn't find the fury she once had for him. He was a sad, pathetic, bigoted and angry old man. He had nothing but his hate to fuel him. Was this his revenge on her for living through the ordeal? Duncan was staring at the both of them even now. He was trying to goad them and Sansa would be damned if she gave the man the satisfaction.

“It's not forgiveness but a release. It's letting the past go. Not letting it hurt me any longer,” Sansa sighed. “If I let you kill him, it will stay with me forever. What will your son think of you? You're not a murderer, Petyr,” she scolded gently and took Alex back into her arms. “You did save me from those men in woods, but I refuse to believe you would kill a man out of pure revenge after so many years. He left me there, yes. I might have died but you came for me. I had nothing to live for except you. In a strange twist of fate, he may have brought us closer together. I was already dying before he found me. I chose to go into that labyrinth. Maybe I wanted to die a little because my heart was so broken. No one could have saved me but you.”

Sansa stood tall and faced the man. No, he couldn't hurt her anymore. He didn't matter anymore. Nothing Duncan said would make her feel less than the woman and mother she was. Shaking her head with a smirk, Sansa turned on her heel and walked back the carriage.

I am better than this. I will prove it to my child right now. I will prove it to everyone here.

“There they go, sinners with their innocent and damned child – who won't understand until it's too late that his mother is a whore and a northern pagan. You cannot fool us, girl. You might be able to buy blessings from corrupted parishes but God sees what you do. You cannot hide behind Harrenhal's walls... nor can you *Lord* Baelish. You worship a God of gold and will burn in hell with your traitorous, whoring wife.”

Sansa turned and watched Petyr. His scowl transformed into his mocking smirk and tipped his hat to his former majordomo.

“At least my God pays better. I don't remember you protesting so much under my roof, Your Holiness,” he japed to the eruption of laughter within the crowd. “Such eloquent pontification from a humble and devout man of our Lord's teachings. Such a miraculous transformation from the man that happily slapped, tormented young maids into tears. One that seemed overly thrilled to serve those wealthy and miserly lords before me – who let their people starve. The man that not only threatened my wife on many occasions but also left her for dead in the snow. I must admit, as I am the heathen you say, that such actions are far from saintly. God doesn't fill the stomachs of the hungry, God doesn't seed the land that cares for so many. Where was God before my sinful gold? I can hardly say I've hoarded it for myself. Look around you, you should have chosen the capital, where I guarantee the people *are* suffering. Or perhaps head North. I hear they are having a dreadful time up there. You did say you were honored to work for a great house. The Duke and Duchess of Winterfell are proving their greatness, so it seems. Their God isn't providing for the starving, homeless and those tortured into submission. Maybe yours will be more successful. Here in the Riverlands, the best we can expect from the Almighty is rain and fair weather from time to time.” The laughter flittered in and around the locals and Sansa couldn't help but smile as her husband tossed Duncan's war or words right back at him. “But by all means, continue with your rehearsed objections to what our Lord and Savior might say is a blessing to those here. Good day to you, Duncan.”

Petyr tipped his hat again ending the bloodless battle as he returned to her side. The old man stood speechless at the exchange and Sansa couldn't care less at anything else the man spouted from his black lungs. Men like him were why Sansa never cared much for the new religion her mother insisted upon. Some of the teachings were good and righteous, but it was nothing different than the teachings of the old gods. The *pagan gods*, the people feared so. Love was the key. Be good to others. Don't take what isn't yours. Don't covet, murder, dishonor... all those things that were praised as the ultimate teachings of God. If one read thoroughly enough, you found horrible things said and done in the name of God. How was any of that justified? The stoning of women, slaves, sacrifice...

Perhaps Sansa was more like Petyr than she realized. Unlike her mother, she would not force her children to learn or raise them by such doctrine. Sansa hated it as a child and Petyr was obviously not a true believer, so why would either of them subject their children to it? She would teach them love, respect and morals she believed everyone should follow. However, this world was full of the unexplained and the new sciences were discovering things every day. When the time came, Sansa would let her children decide for themselves. In the end, she may indeed go to Hell, for her husband would most likely be there as well, but that fire and brimstone was not what she feared. The evils of man scared her more than the Devil. She had been witness to it her whole life. The well-being of those she loved was all that mattered.

Sansa wondered if having a child would change Myranda. Petyr told her the news from the North. She was with child. Alex changed Sansa and Petyr, whether it was for better or worse, she really couldn't say. Sansa discovered how impatient she could be as the years passed by. Alex was a handful and more trouble than her little brothers combined. When Petyr was away, he could be a holy terror. Refusing to mind his mother, doing things he wasn't allowed knowing he would be in trouble. Petyr would come home and he never understood why Sansa complained. Alex was a

perfect angel for his father. Whatever natural duplicity his father possessed, the child inherited. He wasn't terrible like young Robert by any means and the staff seemed to adore him. No, the conclusion Sansa came to was that Alex just knew how to alienate his mother. Careful observation of the boy's interaction with others proved it was not like it was with her.

Alex bonded more with Petyr than her and Sansa couldn't deny that she felt a strange jealousy in that but it also made her feel such terrible guilt. Petyr loved his son, that much was obvious. She should be elated at her husband's happiness. If Alex fell or was upset, he ran to his father first. If Petyr was away on business, his son would be sulky. It wasn't as if the boy disliked his mother. There were so many little memories she loved that were of only her and her child. He would crawl into her bed some nights, and their favorite game was that of hide and seek. The boy would squeal in delight when Sansa caught him. All too soon his explorative way became a hazard in such a grand house that Lady acted as one part nursemaid and guardian to her new pup, following the boy everywhere.

Unlike his father, Alex had no real interest in music or art. He was fascinated with everything in Petyr's office or he wished to be outside. He was an intelligent boy from the start, that was clear enough. Alex inherited his father's brilliance for numbers. He was a quick study and enjoyed building blocks and spent so much time with the globe in Petyr's study, Sansa wouldn't have been surprised if he learned to read by the age of five.

He was an independent child and did not care for that of a coddling mother. His head was a mess of dark curls that refused to behave. The more Sansa fussed with it, the crankier the child became so she let it stay wild. Watching him as he played, Sansa wondered if this is what Petyr must have looked like. He kept his hair short, but when it grew too long, those curls were defiant. Alex was so much like his father it was almost scary. His fifth birthday was on the cusp, but the boy was older than his years. He was well spoken, courteous, and fiercely intelligent at such a young age. Sansa thought back to her own brothers at that age. They were instructed in politeness and by all means none of them were stupid, but Alex seemed to have a strange maturity about him. He was his father's son.

The smile on her husband's face warmed her heart. He was a different man with her and Alex. She knew of the business he conducted and what lay ahead but when he was home, he devoted the most of his time to them. Alex had been a difficult birth and took a toll on her body. Mrs. Ames recommended that she be careful about conceiving again too soon. She needed time to heal and Petyr was more than patient. There was more than one way to make love she discovered that didn't involve him being inside her. Where Petyr learned these pleasurable little talents, Sansa never wanted to know.

Time passes too quickly when one is happy and content, Sansa mused. Before she knew it, Alex was walking instead of crawling. He was forming sentences instead of simple words. After a couple of years, Sansa started to despair when after many lovely attempts, she couldn't conceive and it wasn't the lack of her husband in her bed. She loved Alex with all her might, but she wanted what Mrs. Ames said would be. She wanted another child. How many years was she to wait for that blissful moment again? Alex was every bit Petyr's son, and there were times when that knowledge hurt. Was she so terrible that she wanted another child to love as well? Perhaps one that would come to her first, be more like her?

These were the thoughts that made Sansa cry in silence. She felt awful to have such feelings but at the same time loved her husband and son unconditionally. Only Mrs. Ames seemed to understand and Sansa could never tell Petyr these deep and darkly kept contemplations. She was a horrible mother, she lamented to the old housekeeper. The woman smiled and patted her hand and continually told Sansa to be patient. A child would come again when she was ready, when the time was right.

Unfortunately, those feelings weren't the only thing she spoke to Mrs. Ames about. The voices and ghostly happenings had all but disappeared until one early morning. Sansa was rocking her son after he awoke from a night terror and Petyr snored softly on the bed. From some reason, if he ever woke from a bad dream, it was his mother he desperately wanted. She hummed a sweet tune and Alex was almost asleep, one of the rare moments when it was her and him.

"*Is buachaill é – it's a boy –*," the girlish voice said.

The air surrounding Sansa seemed to frost over. *She was here.* She hadn't left after all. Lady perked her ears up and whimpered a bit. That was all Sansa needed to confirm her fears. Closing her eyes, she willed it to go away. The little spirit had fallen silent since that fateful day in the labyrinth. The spring following Alex's birth, Petyr had the giant maze burnt to the ground. It was a hazard she told him. Sansa had such terrors that their children would play or explore in those hedges if given the opportunity. Her siblings were willful to a fault and Sansa knew her children with Petyr would be the same if not moreso. Such nightmares she had of a child falling down, down, down into the abyss. Petyr never questioned it, and in turn had the Mad King's torture chamber leveled with any and all oubliettes filled with earth.

"*You don't talk to me anymore,*" the voice sighed in anguish. "*Are you angry with me? I only wish to help you.*"

Sansa glanced to Petyr's sleeping form. Should she wake him?

"*You wanted a girl,*" it said dreamily but it was anything but pleasant. The breath was cold on the back of her neck. Alex deeper into her breast. Sansa sat, frozen in fear. Why had it come back after so long?

Go away, she willed silently in her mind. *Please leave me alone.*

Sansa knew it was a boy. She knew it in her heart and soul. Petyr teased her and it wasn't cruelly meant, but she couldn't explain how she knew. Had a girl been born to her that night, Sansa would have been genuinely surprised. Everything in her being said she would bring a son into the world.

"Petyr, wake up," Sansa's voice squeaked but he didn't hear her.

"*He will never understand until the hand bleeds and the bark heeds the burn,*" that little voice

echoed in Sansa's head. *"He will never leave. The old man grows young. The two are one."*

Sansa shivered all over but neither the boy at her breast nor the husband in her bed stirred at the voice and chill in the air. Lady growled and started pacing the room. What kind of terrible riddle was this? This thing had been friendly and warned her before, even predicted things to pass. She learnt of Petyr because of this little spirit, it had protected her and Lady in the woods, it told her about the music box and yet it wanted desperately for her to follow it into that Other World. Now, years later, not only was it speaking to her in the presence of Petyr, who adamantly did not believe in such things, but throwing about some cryptic riddle.

"Her name is carved in music," it sang sweetly and dread filled Sansa completely. *"It waits in its dusty tomb, hidden from time. Only then will the truth you find."*

After that night, the girl didn't return and Sansa debated on whether talking to Mrs. Ames about it. What did it all mean? She found the music box Petyr made for her mother. Her name was carved in the bottom and she shattered it. Just like the spirit said needed to happen.

It wanted her to listen and Sansa refused to converse with it. Was her young child in danger? Or could it be Petyr? Sansa knew he was growing ever closer to ending this game but a nagging feeling couldn't be contained. What if everything he was doing was wrong? Joffrey and his family were miserable people and did not deserve to live but what if Petyr's plans did not work the way he intended? She couldn't very well tell him to stop because a spirit told her to. Mrs. Ames said they were nothing but trouble and never to accept their help.

It troubled her endlessly and Sansa worried every time Petyr left. It didn't matter if it was to town, to meet his merchants, to the capital and the few times he went abroad to the mainland. He always came back unharmed and everything seemed to be working in his favor. They were happy. Alex was healthy and strong. It just seemed like something was waiting in the midst and Sansa couldn't put her finger on it. Petyr would think her mad if she told him not to go because a faerie was warning her with riddles. It very well could be about someone else or anything else. It could be a trick, some terrible ruse.

The weeks flew by and the girl never spoke again and Sansa began to believe that ignoring it was the best option. Perhaps it was only trying to get the best of her, to scare her into believing its lies. Petyr was fine. They were ignored completely by the king and his fashionable minions at court. Alex would turn five soon and life at Harrenhal was blissfully quiet and content. Perhaps it was all in her head. The nightmares had stopped once she gave birth. They were the same one of the little girl and the grave stones. Over and over Sansa dreamt it. The girl telling her she didn't belong here. Maybe those dreams were manifestations from the spirit too. Trying to spin her mind like a top.

The dreams stopped with Alex, but then the girl returned to frighten Sansa with riddles. Now, weeks later, all was quiet and good but it didn't stop it from filling her troubled mind from time to time. Even watching her son ride around with Petyr couldn't quell those demon thoughts from breaking through on a day such as this.

Her embroidery forgotten, Sansa stared off into the distance where the labyrinth once stood. A barren and burnt graveyard of the once majestic hedges. The fire had lit up the sky for days as it burned. Somewhere in there could have been her tomb if she had given up, if Petyr had given up on her. The spirit had been wrong. He did come for her and now she was a mother to a beautiful boy.

"Mummy! You're not watching!" Alex bellowed.

Sansa blinked and quickly smiled finding her son on the horse as Petyr held the reins.

"I'm sorry my love. I was day dreaming. You look very dashing. Like a storybook knight," she beamed even though Sansa did not like him sitting alone on the horse. Petyr's stallion was gentle as her mare but Alex was still so small. She took a deep breath and kept the smile on her face despite her reservations. She would have a talk with Petyr later, in private.

"Papa said he's going to get me a horse of my own!" the boy exclaimed with glee.

"Perhaps, you should start with a pony first? You're not even five years..."

"No, Papa said so. I don't want a pony," Alex shot back defiantly and Sansa frowned at Petyr. He at least had the decency to wipe that smirk off his face.

"*Alexander,*" Petyr's voice dropped in warning. "You don't speak to your mother like that."

The boy pouted for a moment at his father's reprimand. "Sorry, Mummy."

"I know you want one, but you're not big enough yet for a full grown horse, darling," Sansa smiled sweetly at her crest fallen son and then sighed. "Your father and I will discuss it."

The boy's head shot up so fast, Sansa thought he might fall off the horse. Petyr lifted him down and Alex ran to his mother, knocking her embroidery to the carved stone terrace. He hugged her around the waist fiercely before running into the house yelling, "William! Mummy said I can have a horse for my birthday!"

Sansa picked up her embroidery and frowned at her husband who handed the reins to a stable boy. Tucking his hands behind his back, he casually strolled up the steps and stood before her with one of his most winning smiles. Sansa tried to keep her scowl, for why shouldn't she be angry with him? He knew damn well she was right.

Petyr leaned in for a kiss when she turned and it glanced her cheek.

"Are you terribly sore at me?" he hummed and leaned in a little further. His breath was warm on her neck. "I forget children aren't the best at keeping secrets."

"Keeping secrets from me with our son, are you? Really, Petyr? A Horse? You know he isn't old eno -"

Petyr cut her off with a searing kiss. He had grown a moustache and it tickled. Their son forgotten for a heartbeat, Sansa opened her mouth to him.

"Mmmm, I have a mind to take you right here in broad daylight," he sighed kissing her deeply.

"You are a scoundrel and I never should have married you," Sansa retorted sarcastically, letting him pull her into his arms.

"Darling, I haven't been a scoundrel in years. I'm a reformed man, haven't you heard?" he teased. "You have become a saint!"

Sansa slapped him on the chest making him grunt a slightly and pushing away a bit.

"You were downright scandalous last night. What if Alex had heard? Walked in?" she admonished him.

"I locked the doors," he chuckled, trying to take her waist again. "His constant roaming is rather... unfortunate. I told you we would be regulated to the bedroom after having children."

He didn't realize it, but it made her heart sink at that one word. *Children*. They only had one child and Sansa was beginning to believe that Mrs. Ames was wrong after all.

"Oh Sweetling," he purred, taking her in his arms at once at his words. He knew her so well. "Maybe I'm to blame. I'm not a young man anymore."

Petyr wasn't wrong. Having Alex seemed to age him a bit. Threads of silver laced his moustache and even more grew along his temples. Five years had taken a toll. Sansa wasn't sure but perhaps it was the added stress of her and Alex to worry about.

"Do you ever regret it?" his voice cut through her thoughts sharply. "You could have had a younger man. Handsome and full of vigor. One that didn't harbor the threat of danger to you."

Petyr's voice was solemn and had a touch of fear. How often did he wonder about such things?

"No," she expressed strongly and held him tighter. "I regret *nothing*. I don't like hearing you talk this way."

"I'm sorry, sweetling," he sighed. "Sometimes I can't help but ponder if I've made you happy. Alex can be troublesome, I know. It's just that I see a sadness in your eyes at times and I wonder..."

"I do want another child, I won't lie," she breathed and pulled away just enough to see his face. "It's just – you're away so much lately. Are we boring you? You're not exactly a provincial life kind of man."

"We're almost there, Sansa," he smiled. "After Alex's birthday and we head to the Vale. I can almost taste it. It's that close. I know I've been away a lot but it's not because I want to be away from you. When this is all over, I never want to be more than this far away from you."

Petyr kept his hands on her waist, conveying his meaning. Was it really coming to an end so soon? He hadn't mentioned much until now. Miranda had twin boys and the North was worse than ever. Ramsay truly surpassed his father's reputation for cruelty. Petyr had more control and Joffrey was hated and would soon be bankrupt. He would have no money to wage a war.

"Be patient with me, my love. Just a little longer, then everything will be ours for the taking. We can go anywhere we wish, do anything we wish. I'll send Alex to the finest schools. Just a little more time. Give me that," he pleaded softly.

Sansa smiled and nodded in agreement, taking his hands. She picked a blossom that landed on his head and laughed.

"So what have you planned for your son's birthday?" she grinned and walked with him along the terrace. "If I see a horse, I'm going to kill you in front of all our guests."

Petyr howled with laughter and took her arm in his.

"It's *months* away, my darling. I haven't given it any thought."

"Of *course*, you haven't. Except your son has spoiled that ruse only moments ago," she smiled. "If you keep spoiling him like this, he'll turn out as bad as Robert."

"Hush your mouth, little witch. I'm already dreading the day they meet," he chided gently.

"That's not what I meant and you know it," she retorted.

"Yes, I know, my love. I know," Petyr sighed a bit. Sansa knew he loved doting on him. Why shouldn't he, it was his only son. "I will abide to be more studious of such things."

That afternoon, Alex blissfully played for hours in his nursery that Petyr constantly filled with new toys. The boy's newest obsession was maps, and gratefully it kept him occupied and left the downstairs peacefully quiet.

Petyr read by the window and Sansa was able to have the afternoon to paint. Most of the time, Alex wouldn't allow her the time to do so. She had a vision of the spring garden from this morning but after constantly glancing at her husband, she began to sketch his relaxed form sitting in the chair.

He had a striking profile with that straight nose. His lips pursed every so often at what he was reading. Those dark curls were a bit messy on the top of his head from riding this morning as he didn't care to fix it. Petyr was, if anything, an elegant man. His beautiful hands and the angle his

held the book. The contrast between his dark hair and pale skin. Eyes deep in thought, and the afternoon sun streaming in caught the flecks of green instead of the grey that was surrounded by dark lashes. He didn't believe so, but Petyr was a attractive man. Not in the way that young girls would swoon, handsome fellows like Harrold, but everything about him was mysterious, beautiful and dangerous. Yes, that was it. Petyr wasn't necessarily handsome, no, he was beautiful.

Sansa captured everything she could while the light was good and committed the rest to memory. She knew every angle, curve, strand of silver, the glint of gold on his finger... she would finish it when he was away on business knowing he would scrutinize every little brush stroke or even refuse to let her paint him in any fashion. Sansa was still annoyed that he didn't join her in the portrait hanging in the grand foyer. She had sketched him a dozen times and hidden the charcoal drawings away, but this time she loved the way he looked in this moment and decided to paint him. It would be finished before he could object.

That night when the day's events exhausted Alex and he was fast asleep, Sansa changed for bed wearing her thin silk nightdress. It was a warm evening and all the windows were open, letting the southern breeze flow. She brushed her hair, letting it fall down in long waves.

"Dear God, you're beautiful," his voice breathed in admiration behind her.

A deep blush graced her cheeks as she saw his reflection in the mirror. He was still dressed in his shirt sleeves and trousers while leaning against the door frame.

"Are you very tired this evening, my lady?" he grinned mischievously.

"Not especially, my lord," she smiled back through the mirror.

Petyr stretched out his hand from where he was standing.

"Come with me."

Following him into his bedroom, Sansa figured he wanted to make love in his bed tonight. She wasn't complaining. When he pulled her into his dressing room, Sansa wasn't sure what he had in store for her tonight. Petyr opened a panel in the wall and lit a candle.

"After you, little witch."

Sansa gave him a confused look when he gestured to the passageway. Stepping inside the dark space, the long corridor stretched out before her. They had used this passageway many times to avoid the servants. No more ghostly pianist in the middle of the night. It was dank and a bit hot when she heard the door click. His candle illuminated the narrow path as she followed him. Creaking wooden stairs wound down and around and Sansa lifted her skirts as to not snag or trip. This passageway always twisted and turned until Sansa saw the locked oak door on the right and knew where she was. The air was damp and hot and Sansa grinned wickedly. She loved it when they came down here.

The torches lit, the cavern flickered with their shadows. The steam billowed and it was almost too much. Petyr removed his shirt and trousers before coming to stand before her. It had been months since they came down here. After Alex was born, it became one of Sansa favorite pastimes. She would soak her frustrations away, helping her to sleep through the night. Sometimes they would make love and others were just to relax in their little secret hideaway.

Petyr lifted her gown over her head and draped it over the broken column as they always did. Taking her hand, he guided her down until the water engulfed them and they both sighed. Petyr complained occasionally on his aches and pains, such things that came with age but he still didn't look it other than a few wrinkles and the greying hair. He was a little fuller around the middle but not much. It came and went depending on what he was doing. Petyr gained a little after she gave birth but Sansa thought it was because they weren't *'fucking like rabbits'* as he called it, on a regular basis. The meals at Harrenhal were hard not to devour. Petyr bickered constantly about how horrible the food was when he traveled and couldn't wait to come home to delicious meals every day.

Years ago, Petyr brought down a smooth wooden bench that was far more comfortable than the stone ledge they usually sat on. Leaning against the stone, Petyr pulled Sansa against his chest and between his legs. Often they did this in the bath when coming down here wasn't possible. The hot water was just what she needed as she relaxed against him.

"Sometimes I wish we could disappear down here forever," Sansa mused and felt his chest chuckle.

"And slowly boil ourselves to death? We'd be a quite the meal for the spiders and rats."

Petyr's hand caressed her tummy before dipping to explore her curls. Sansa never tired of the way he could touch her so briefly to enflame that lust.

"There are no rats down here. I've never seen one. Unless they're all behind that door you won't open," she sighed as he toyed with her. One thing Petyr still had not showed her was the two padlocked oak doors.

"I don't make a habit of bringing the key. Why you want to see the torture chamber? Have plans to put me in the iron maiden when we have a quarrel?" he teased.

"Why not just take it all out? Rather morbid to keep it, don't you think? I hate that it's connected to this room by that door," she shuddered.

"The very idea scares the servants. Let it be, it's not as though we will ever use it. I should just brick up both doors," Petyr huffed but continued to play between her thighs.

"Have *you* ever used it?"

Sansa meant it as a joke but regretted it the moment his hand stopped and he turned her to look at him.

“What kind of man do you take me for? Do you really think I could do that to someone?” he spat angrily.

“Petyr, I’m sorry. I was only joking. Of course you couldn’t. You’re not like that, I know,” the words rushed out of her mouth to placate him. “I don’t know why I said that. Please, forgive me.”

He frowned at her and Sansa regretted her rash words terribly.

“Do you still think I killed Duncan?” he finally asked.

“What? No!” she replied. What made him think of Duncan after all this time? Sansa made the mistake years ago asking whatever happened to him, since he disappeared from the county weeks after that day in the town square.

“Or maybe I brought him down here and had my revenge, is that it?” he fumed.

“What’s gotten into you? No. Of course not. I trust you,” she pleaded.

“Do you?” he smirked.

Sansa turned around and straddled his waist, placing her hot hands on his face.

“Yes,” she said firmly. “I trust you with my life. Our son’s life. Good God, Petyr. I’m sorry for what I said. I love you. I will believe what you tell me. I would die for you and Alex.”

Petyr sighed and lowered his forehead to Sansa’s chest.

“I’m sorry. I over-reacted. I don’t want you to ever think of me as a monster. I want to be the man you need. That’s good enough for you.”

Where was all of this coming from today, she wondered. Petyr had nothing to prove to her. He was a loving husband and father. He loved them, took care of them. A woman could be so lucky.

“Why would you think that? After all these years, and what we’ve been through?” she tilted his chin up and kissed him softly. “There is no man I want but you. Only you will father my children. No matter what happens, I will love you. Trust you. I will wait for you forever in this life or the next.”

Petyr yanked her to him and kissed Sansa deeply. Their tongues danced and open mouths were hot with heavy breathing. She opened her legs a bit wider and rocked against him forcing a groan from his lungs. Petyr worried so much about his age, but she could get him hard without any trouble. It didn’t take any time at all for Petyr was grabbing her backside, wanting more.

She moaned loudly sinking down on him. The hot water, slickness of their skin, it was ripe for sex. Usually, Petyr liked taking control, but she wasn’t going to let him tonight. Sansa felt a need to show him how much she wanted him. Planting her feet on the pool’s floor, she rose up and down a few times slowly. Petyr was straddling the narrow width of the bench and she pushed his back against the wall to brace herself.

Without warning, she thrust down hard, her legs taking all of her weight. Sansa never told him, and it took a long while to admit to herself – but she loved it when he fucked her in his dressing that day she broke the music box. He knew how to please her. Even having his mouth make her come was new and exciting. When they argued, more times than not, they ended up apologizing to each other in bed. Not before a few bites and rough playfulness.

Duncan made accusations of debauchery and he couldn’t have been more right. Sansa followed Petyr into the depths of depravity. Things they don’t teach well brought up ladies. She couldn’t count how many different and delicious ways they had each other. Sansa shyly thought that a mother shouldn’t be enjoying such acts. She was the lady of the house, her son’s rooms nearby, and yet she was enjoying being fucked senseless into the wee hours of the night.

The hot water lapped around them as Sansa thrust hard and fast. Her full breasts bobbed and pressed against him. Petyr’s hands were insistent on her bum, begging for release. This was about his pleasure right now and Sansa was working hard to bring it about. His change in breathing, the tensing of his shoulders and the slight furrow of his forehead told her he was so very close. Petyr bucked up a few times and finished with a deep moan.

Petyr slipped out and his seed washed away, Sansa had not come at all and she didn’t mind. This was for him. Petyr held her to him and kissed her collarbone.

“You didn’t come,” he breathed hotly and found that lovely pulse on her neck.

“I did,” she lied easily.

“Never lie to me. I know,” he growled, hoisting her up on the edge of the pool. “You don’t think I know your every moan, sigh, the way you clench me, spasm, scream or the way you hold your breath?”

Petyr opened her legs and Sansa’s eyes rolled back. It was the perfect height and angle as his face was right where she craved it. His breath was cool against her hot skin as she waited with anticipation. His curled his arms around her thighs and yanked her to his mouth. Sansa loved watching him give her pleasure like this because he enjoyed it. The way their eyes would meet, or his would close in concentration. His tongue laved, and lips sucked. She was so close that when she felt his fingers, that’s all it took. She braced her foot on his shoulder and shook uncontrollably. Her moans echoed back to her but he didn’t stop. Petyr curled his fingers inside her and feasted on her overworked flesh.

“Oh, I can’t. Not a second time,” she groaned but he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“Yes you can,” he mumbled into her. “Do it for me. Come for me.”

Her hips were jutting up and he was right, she was going to come again. Sansa’s eye rolled back and closed. Her clutched her breasts to keep them from bouncing as he worked her over.

"Yes," he growled as she could feel it. "That's it, my little witch. You belong to me."

Sansa loved it when he talked this way. His words could be just as arousing as anything else he was doing to her. The pressure finally burst and Sansa cried out so loudly that surely she might wake the household.

Spent, she lay on the cool stone, her legs dangling in the water. Raising her head, she caught Petyr's smug smile, before he cupped water and rinsed his face. Sansa could barely move. Petyr was going to have to carry her back upstairs, she giggled to herself.

"What do you find so amusing, sweetling?" she could hear the smile in his voice.

"I was just thinking; we'll have to sleep down here tonight. I don't think I can move, quite honestly," she yawned.

"Is that your way of asking me to carry you up two flights of stairs?" he mused and climbed out of the water.

"I know you can't," she laughed and it wasn't meant to be mean.

"Really?" he smirked. "Oh sweetling, I'm not that old. Not yet."

Grabbing their clothes, he draped them over his shoulder while putting on his lambskin slippers. Sansa thought he was mad. He wasn't going to do it. She went to take her nightdress when he pulled her to him, threatening to throw her over his shoulder.

"Have you lost your mind?" she laughed.

"Are you calling me senile? I have at least another good twenty or thirty years before that sets in," Petyr smiled and tried to lift her.

"I'll break you damned back and then where will we be?" she pushed at him, when he wouldn't let go of her nightdress, Sansa stepped back at the gleam in his eyes. "Don't you dare."

Sansa bolted for the stairs in nothing but her skin and heard him come after her. She couldn't take the music room's door and ran towards the hidden stairs when she felt him grab her hand. Sansa squealed like a child. The lord and lady of the house were running naked in a secret passageway and it was hysterical to her. Her voiced echoed and she knew someone, anyone would hear her through the walls. If they weren't sure the house was haunted, they would be convinced tonight. Her laughter spurred his and they were like two children being naughty, hoping their parents never found out.

Reaching the dressing room panel, Sansa almost tripped out until his arms were around her again, pulling her up.

"You stupid arse," she giggled. "Everyone must have heard us."

"I sincerely hope so," Petyr was out of breath and kissed her. The clothes dropped on the carpet, he walked he back into his bedroom. In the dark, in this moment, Petyr shaved years off himself. It was as if he were a young man again. Young and ready so quickly.

"Again?" she sighed into his open mouth and feeling that excitement against her hip.

"You said you wanted another baby," Petyr smiled wickedly. "I would be remiss as a husband if I didn't give my wife everything she desires."

Sleep came quickly as Petyr held her from behind. She liked him curled around her, his arms holding to him. Petyr's nose was nuzzled into her shoulder as her hair slowly dried fanned out on the pillows. His breath was slow and deep. He was fast asleep. His seed dried on the inside of her thighs and Sansa smiled. She wanted another baby so desperately, that she would bed him every day until she knew for sure. She would get with child before the year was out. That was her goal.

The dreams flowed like the events of the day. Petyr and Alex were riding, and then Sansa saw a little girl with fiery curls picking flowers with Lady at her side. A daughter. Yes, she wanted a daughter. The wind picked up and the blossoms filled the air, almost blinding Sansa. Suddenly the water was steaming hot and she looked down.

Sansa was in the lake up to her shoulders with her dress on. It was heavy and it took effort to walk up to the shore in the boiling hot water.

"*You don't belong here.*"

Glancing up, the little girl was standing in her bedroom window pointing down at the little cemetery where the labyrinth once stood. An old man cloaked in black knelt down and wept but she couldn't see his face.

"*Here I'll stay,*" the man croaked in agony.

Sansa touched the man's shoulder and Petyr, handsome with his clean shaven face looked at her furiously.

"*Why are you here?*" he demanded.

The thunder cracked over-head and Sansa watched her bare and dirty feet as they stumbled on the wet cobblestone. The crowd jeered and the soldiers pulled her along.

"*Please, I'll do anything!*" a scared little girl screamed.

The crowd opened up and the fiery, little spirit was burning. Chained to a stake, she was screaming for mercy. Her hair the color of the flames. She begged and pleaded but everyone stood

silent. Sansa screamed and broke through the crowd, tumbling into the roaring blaze and burning her hands.

“Tóg dí! Tá sí mise! – Take her! She is yours! –” the girl screamed at the top of her lungs as the flames engulfed her completely.

Sansa woke screaming and sweating profusely. She was gasping for air, gulping it as if she was dying herself. Looking around, she was in Petyr’s bedroom. It was a dream. A most horrific dream. A heavy weight lay on her stomach. When she glanced down, Petyr was sleeping on top of her, his head resting on her chest weighing her down.

“Petyr,” she sobbed, jostling him awake. “Please wake up.”

“I couldn’t stop it,” his voice muttered against her breast.

“Petyr?”

She tentatively touched his head and it was cold. Ice cold. Her hands trembled and she tried to move but he was so heavy. What was wrong with him?

“Petyr, wake up,” she whimpered, jostling his cold, bare shoulder.

Sansa screamed when bloodied fists grabbed her. Petyr’s eyes were glassy and black.

“Mine for yours.”

In his blood soaked palms lay his gold ring.

His wedding ring.

Sansa shot up from the pillows and screamed and screamed. Her body was hot and drenched in sweat. Petyr woke with a start and grasped her flailing arms.

“Sansa, for God’s sake...” he grunted trying to pin her down. She screamed and cried as he pushed her down. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Sansa looked down, his hands were clean. No blood. His ring was on his finger.

“Look at me. You’re all right. Look at me, sweetling,” he pleaded, still holding her down with his body weight. “Breathe. That’s it. Breathe.”

Petyr was warm and naked on top of her. She could smell their love making and honeysuckle wafting in from the gardens.

“Jesus,” he sighed and let her go seeing that she was aware of her surroundings once more. His eyes bewildered and searching for an answer but Sansa couldn’t even speak. What could she say without sounding like the mad woman from years ago?

“A nightmare?” he offered, knowing the answer and Sansa nodded. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Immediately, Sansa shook her head in fear. He can’t know. He’ll put her away for good.

Petyr sighed in exhaustion and dropped onto his pillow.

“Sweetling, you better start confiding in me. You had terrible nightmares while pregnant and refused to tell me anything. For years, nothing and now this? You were out of you mind. *Talk to me,*” he pleaded tenderly.

Sansa sniffed and wiped her eyes. Suddenly, Petyr pulled her to him and she sobbed on his chest, wrapping her arms around him.

After several minutes, she finally spoke with barely a whisper and lied, “I dreamt of when my family was executed. I dreamt, I was standing with them and we all were shot.”

Friend or Foe

Chapter Notes

This is a shorty. Sorry. I have a bigger chapter next and then we start going to darker places. Sorry not sorry. :D

“And if his lordship produces a horse tomorrow during the festivities, I know you child, you’re not going to spoil it for the boy in front of everyone,” the woman smiled as they tinkered around the local bazaar. It was harvest time, and all the small folk were selling their wares.

“He knows I won’t and it drives me mad. Alex is so spoiled now that he is becoming insufferable at times. My mother and father wouldn’t have allowed it when we were little,” Sansa huffed, paying for the dried goods as the footmen loaded the wagon.

“Your mother and father were also high born with many children, my dear. His lordship has never had a real family I suspect and it is his first born. It’s to be expected. I’ve seen it many times with new fathers. They cannot help themselves. Frankly, I’ve never seen a man that could love a child so much. You should take that as a blessing. How many children never see a shred of that kind of love?” Mrs. Ames reflected sincerely.

“That kind of love is going to see my son riding wild around the countryside before he’s eight,” Sansa shook her head and hid her smile. She could see Arya’s defiance in Alex. She would disappear for hours with father’s horse into the woods and mother was beside herself with fear. She could remember the loud arguments between mother and father. Father didn’t see what the fuss was about and mother was livid. Sansa never understood until she became a mother. Petyr was just like father, letting the children do as they pleased and now she was just like mother, putting her foot down and setting the rules to be broken every day.

“Yes,” Mrs. Ames chuckled. “I daresay he will be. Don’t worry dear. You’ll have another to worry about. You might as well let his lordship take the brunt with your son.”

Sansa unconsciously touched her belly and smiled. It was a fortnight ago when she woke with sickness. Petyr had left early for the day and didn’t observe anything different with her lately even though they made love often enough to produce a litter of children. Perhaps he was ready for another child as well.

“The sickness seems more frequent this time around. You’re not eating as much,” the woman surmised.

“It’s mostly in the mornings and sometimes in the afternoons. I can’t even paint, the smell bothers me now,” Sansa sighed.

“Have you finished the portrait?”

Sansa spied Alex not far away playing with a few local children and goats were hopping around them. He did not know it, but his mother had invited many of the small folk and their families tomorrow. There would be more than enough food but mostly, she wanted other children around for her son to play with. Harrenhal was terribly out of the way from other townships and even though visitors frequented, she wanted him to socialize more with others children his age. Most importantly, Sansa wanted him to learn to be kind and generous to those less fortunate. Her children would not be brought up with snobbery, only to look down on everyone else below their station. She knew what it felt like, and her children were never be raised as those born into privilege.

“My dear?”

Mrs. Ames voice brought her back from watching Alex and the children.

“Sorry, I was lost in my thoughts for a moment. No, it isn’t finished. I am no great artist. I’m not satisfied with it,” Sansa despaired.

“You don’t have to be a Michelangelo, dear girl. From what I have seen, it’s very good. Does he even know?”

Sansa caught the woman’s knowing smile, before picking through some autumn fruits.

“Good heavens, no. I would never hear the end of it,” Sansa laughed.

The children’s squeals of delight as they played could be heard over the chatter of buying and selling. A little redheaded girl chased Alex with a stick and Sansa grinned before remembering that terrible dream. She had it again a couple weeks ago when Petyr was away. Still the little spirit did not return and Sansa frowned.

“Mrs. Ames,” she began as they walked further away as not to be heard. “Why is the blue room, *her* room?”

The housekeeper almost dropped her basket, but quickly recovered, setting it in the wagon.

“What makes you ask about her so suddenly, my lady?”

“I was only curious. I never really asked at the time,” Sansa added nonchalantly.

“She is speaking to you again,” the woman said. It wasn’t a question.

“Oh, it’s been some time. I can’t remember,” Sansa half-lied. “I did as you told me. I ignored it. Has she always been at Harrenhal?”

Mrs. Ames didn’t answer and avoided Sansa’s eyes.

“There are many ghosts and memories best left forgotten at Harrenhal, child.”

Sansa furrowed her brows as the old woman clearly did not want to talk about it. Why?

“I thought you said she was a faerie spirit, not a ghost. Why does she take ownership of that room? Did she live here once, long ago?” Sansa pressed on.

“They are liars, my child. Don’t listen to them. I don’t know how many times I can give this advice,” Mrs. Ames sighed.

“You didn’t answer my question. Since you came to Harrenhal, has she always been here?” Sansa asked again and stood her ground.

“No,” the woman replied with her eyes cast down. “We noticed her not long after his lordship took over Harrenhal. There are ghosts here too. Make no mistake. A place that ancient will have traces of the past. *She* is no ghost.”

“You’re scared of her.”

This time it was Sansa’s turn to pose a statement instead of a question. Mrs. Ames was very old, but she was a sharp mind and probably had seen much throughout the years.

“Not scared, my dear. Wary,” she replied thoughtfully. “Not everything can be explained as his lordship might believe. I told you once, many years ago when you first came here. There are things, places that are so old – as if they are not of this world. They remember, even if centuries have passed. Whatever lingers in that house, those woods... I daresay will be there for an eternity.”

A chill ran down Sansa’s spine. She had read the histories on Harrenhal, all those books in the library, some so old, the pages were crumbling. How many had died there, it was unknown. Her knowledge and learning of the old gods and spirits from her upbringing in the North was as if was preparing her for Harrenhal. Not once, as a child in the North had she experienced anything like her years here.

“Why does she burn?” Sansa asked, remembering her dream. “I can’t imagine burning a child at the stake. I read about what the church used to do to women they deemed witches, but...”

“Sansa,” the old woman took her hands and Sansa was taken back at the use of her given name. She never recalled Mrs. Ames using it before. “Listen to me. *She is not a child*. Do you hear me? They become whatever it is to make you trust them - pity them. They will do things for you. Favors. They want you to trust them. That’s when it changes. You start asking them for things, for help. They wait until you’re most vulnerable.”

“Then what?” Sansa breathed, the night in the labyrinth playing in her mind.

“*They take you*,” Mrs. Ames stared at her. “They take the believers, the young, the strong and the beautiful. They take children the most. Ones, so young that they’ll forget their mortal parents.”

Sansa remembered the old tales of changelings. Back in the old days, if parents had a sickly child, it was believed to be a faerie changeling and their own healthy baby was living in the Other World. That place was said to be beautiful, like heaven. Desperate and heartbroken mothers would then take these faerie children back to the forest and leave them. Praying the faeries would return their mortal child. If the babe was found dead, then they believed that it was the changeling that died, not their real one. Perhaps, it was superstitious and silly, but maybe it was better to believe their beloved son or daughter was living happily in that other world instead of dead of sickness.

She glanced towards her son playing happily and feared. Once, in that labyrinth, when Sansa was willing to die, they wanted to take her. She refused.

You wanted a girl.

They were right. She always wanted a little girl. What if they wanted Alex? He was as strong boy. Did they know she was having trouble with him? What if this baby she carried now was a girl? Would they try and take him away? Petyr would die. If anything could kill him, it would be losing a child. Surely, he would love all his children, but Sansa could see it now. Alex disappearing would gut him. Would he blame her? If he ever found out that she knew about these immortal creatures and what they do, if she knew their son was in danger?

Her dreams were plaguing her. What did they mean? Was it faerie magic or a true warning? The nausea was building and Sansa knew she was going to retch. Mrs. Ames was quick and guided her to the other side of wagon away from staring eyes. Sansa barely made it near a lavender bush when her breakfast came up.

“Easy, my child,” Mrs. Ames hushed and rubbed her back. “Tell me the truth. Are you speaking to them?”

“No,” she coughed out. “You said they would leave me alone. Why haven’t they?”

“You are sensitive and vulnerable, my dear. You have a good heart, but you mustn’t let yourself be swayed by them. The world is changing so quickly. In my years, I still cannot believe all that I have seen. Everything is modernizing. The new religion has people forgetting the old ways.

Sciences are advancing and people just don't believe anymore. When they find one that does and is such a sweet thing as yourself..."

"But I don't believe. I don't even think there is a God most days," Sansa spit out the sour taste in her mouth as she took out Petyr's handkerchief she always kept with her. "I won't let them have my son."

Just then she heard Alex scream as a cart barreled towards the children. Two men swooped up him and the little redhead as the cart smashed into a stack of pumpkins. Sansa rushed over, with Mrs. Ames and William not far behind. When the man turned, holding her son, Sansa stopped in her tracks.

"Don't worry my boy. You're all right. Look here's your mother," the monk smiled. Duncan held him and Alex didn't look frightened at all, but his mother was terrified.

Sansa's mind searched for what to say and finally muttered a trembling 'thank you', as the old butler grinned and Alex toyed with the silver cross around his neck. "Give me my child, please," she added the necessity knowing he just saved her son. Why was he here? Apparently, Petyr hadn't killed or tortured him after all.

The others were full of smiles and praises to the priest for saving the young lord but Sansa, Mrs. Ames and William were speechless watching him as he acted every bit the good Samaritan with Alex in his arms.

"Such innocence. It's a good thing Someone was watching over him," he grinned.

Sansa didn't know if he meant God or as a slight that she, his mother, wasn't paying any attention to her son and he could have been killed.

"Duncan, please," she pleaded softly, reaching out for her child.

Handing Alex over to her, the boy's grasp on the cross snapped the leather holding it to the man's neck. Once in her arms, Sansa, mortified, took the humble necklace from her son, holding it out to the old butler turned priest.

"I'm so very sorry," she said sincerely. "I'll have it mended for you."

"No need, my girl. I'd rather do it myself," he smirked and the pleasantries left her shaken. Duncan observed her and the boy for a moment and then handed the cross back and Alex quickly took it before she could say a word. "On second thought. Perhaps he should have it. God protects the innocent. He might need it someday."

Her blood turned cold at those carefully chosen words. It had a different effect completely to those watching the exchange. Duncan's voice was soft and friendly. The monk that saved the boy and now had given him his symbol of godliness. Sansa didn't dare refuse or give it back. Not only that, Alex was mesmerized by the gift and she knew he would protest if she took it away.

"A good mother must watch over her children," he said with a pleasing smile. "Be a good mother, my lady."

Sansa felt her lungs constrict. Tears stung her eyes as her head felt faint. She couldn't breathe at all. Suddenly, there was no air and she could feel Mrs. Ames grabbing Alex before William caught her falling body, then all went dark.

Autumn's Leaves

Chapter Notes

Well, I thought the shit would hit the fan after this chapter but I decided to break it up instead. So, one more before things starts to head south for the winter and this fic takes a much darker turn.

The combination of smelling salts and the carriage ride home had Sansa forcing them to stop a few times to heave an empty stomach along the side of the road. Her nerves were raw and nothing could put them at ease. Alex rode with William in the wagon, impatient to get home and he fussed each time they stopped. Petyr was coming home today from Lannisport, for he would never miss his son's birthday tomorrow. Sansa knew Mrs. Ames and William would not say a word if she asked, but Alex told his father everything and there was no way to keep Duncan a secret.

All too soon, they crossed the stony bridge and Sansa closed her eyes. Petyr was home earlier than expected. He and Brune rode alone as both their horses were being tended to and Sansa could hear her son's excitement from the wagon behind. They pulled up the drive and it was all they could do to stop before Alex was jumping out and running up the front steps.

"Papa! Papa! I played with goats!" he yelled as the footman opened the door for the little lord.

Sansa took a deep breath. Maybe he would forget all about Duncan and tell Petyr about the children and animals, but somehow she knew it was foolish thinking. She wobbled a bit as the footmen helped her out of the carriage and Sansa dreaded walking in the house. She knew Petyr. He would be furious. He had a temper like no other and it was quick as lightning to strike. He was moodier these days and something told her that the end was somehow near. Normally, she was apprehensive in regards to his business trips, but it was an odd blessing the past fortnight. Sansa needed the time to sort herself out, knowing she was with child again. Once he returned home, she would surprise him with the good news. Now, she wondered if his disposition would be well enough to handle both a child and the reappearance of the man he loathed.

Sansa collected herself and put on her best smile as she walked into the house. She was going to have to face him sooner or later. She might as well get it over with now. Alex's dark curls were a blur as he raced passed her looking for his father. Just then, Petyr came from the direction of the library and the boy squealed with delight.

"Papa! Papa! Papa!"

Petyr smiled brightly and scooped the boy up making him laugh as it echoed loudly throughout the gallery. Under different circumstances Sansa would have been gleeful at the sight of father and son. Petyr loved him very much and he was Alex's whole world. Stamping down that tiny bit of jealousy that threatened to make itself known, Sansa smiled at her husband.

"Papa, I want a goat. May I have a goat for my birthday?" the boy giggled and perhaps something good would come out of this after all. A goat was safer than a horse, she mused.

"A goat? Is that what I smell?" Petyr chuckled, throwing the boy up in the air, much to Alex's delight. "What else did you do today?"

Sansa froze.

Here it comes.

"We played all day. I climbed pun-kins...there was one bigger than me. Millie chased me. She has mummy's hair. I like peaches..." the boy rambled on and for a moment Sansa thought she was in the clear.

"What do you have here?" Petyr laughed and took the leather necklace from Alex's fist.

The cross dangled and the silver caught the light, reflecting it on his face. Suddenly, those eyes lost their smile as they slowly rose to root Sansa to the marble floor.

"Alex, where did you get this?" his tone changed instantly and Sansa couldn't stop fidgeting with her skirts.

"The man gave it to me... said I needed it."

"Father Gregory gave this to you?" Petyr asked and his eyes never left his wife.

"No. The old man did. He saved me..."

Sansa's ears were full of a strange buzzing noise as she watched Alex tell his father everything that happened. Petyr's face was stone cold and Sansa felt sick all over again.

"May I have this?" he turned to his son with a smile.

"But he gave it to me, Papa," the boy whined.

"I'll give it back, I promise. I want to fix it for you."

Alex did not question his father at all and Petyr set him down.

"I brought you a gift, it's in the nursery. Sarah will fetch you for supper. I want to speak to your mother," Petyr smiled and patted the boy on his bottom.

The boy took off, running towards the stairs and Sansa's breath hitched for two reasons.

"Alexander! Don't run. You'll fall down the stairs," she called out to him but the boy never listened to her. Sarah was already meeting him half way on the staircase.

Sansa knew Petyr was standing directly behind her. Sometimes he moved as stealthily as a damned cat in the night. She could feel the anger emanating off him without having to see his face.

"Are you going to even bother listening to me or have you already passed judgement?" she asked.

"How very presumptuous of you, Lady Baelish," he scolded lightly as if she were the child, turning Sansa around to face him. "Not even a simple 'welcome home'. I was merely going to kiss my wife. I've missed her terribly."

His tone was sarcastic and it only fueled her rising anger. Was he really silently blaming her for this interaction with Duncan today? Petyr leaned in for a kiss and Sansa turned quickly, his lips grazing her cheek.

"So it seems only my son missed me whilst I was away," he teased, caressing her cheek and Sansa gritted her teeth. She hated it when he was like this. Gratefully, it wasn't often she told herself, breathing deeply. In over six years together, they did have their disagreements and full-blown arguments. Sometimes Petyr reverted back to that cad she met in Riverrun so long ago, and she wanted to smack that smug look on his face. Many times, those heated arguments would turn to even more sizzling adventures in the bedroom, but there were nights where she slammed her door in his face, locking him from her room. Sansa knew he had a key, but never once, in the entirety of their marriage did Petyr ever disrespect her or her need for privacy – even if it was only to cool off for a night.

"Out of respect for *our* son's birthday on the morrow, I will not dignify that with an answer. I have no desire to explain to our guests why the Marquess is not presentable. If you're looking for a row, I'm not in the mood... *my lord husband*," Sansa snarled, brushing his hand away roughly. "I've already had quite a busy day, I don't need your snark."

"You're the one that told me not to lay a finger on him, if you recall, sweetling," Petyr chided and took her wrist, refusing to let her leave. "Now, out of the blue, he's saving *our son* from a dreadful accident?"

"You weren't there, Petyr," she spat, pulling away. "They saved not only Alex but the girl as well. What would you have me do? Curse him? Throw that cross back at him in front of all the villagers?"

"He said you fainted. Is that true?" Petyr paced. "What else did Duncan say to you? You're not telling me everything. Would you have told me at all if Alex hadn't said anything?"

"Oh, so this isn't even an argument, it's an interrogation, is it? Are you going to have our son spy on me in the future? Tell you what you need to know while you're away? Or maybe William? You're never here, Petyr! You said months ago to be a little more patient. I'm tired of being patient. Alex doesn't listen to me. He has grown stubborn and willful. You let him get away with anything and everything and I'm the one that has to instill some kind of discipline for him and he hates me for it! You're the one he runs to..."

Sansa was feeling dizzy and light-headed again. She needed to get out of this dress and corset. She needed to get away from him. She was going to tell him that she was pregnant but now was not the time.

"Duncan told me to be a good mother. There, will that satisfy you or shall I call your son downstairs? We haven't seen the man in years. He has done nothing to us. What are you going to do, go have a pleasant chat with him? Thank him graciously for saving your son? Or will that be a birthday gift, his head on a platter? Yes, I fainted. I'm tired. I want to rest. I want..." she sighed. "What I *don't* want is to talk to you right now." Sansa turned away from him and walked towards the stairs expecting him to stop her. Putting her hand on the bannister, she paused only for a moment. "Welcome home, Petyr."

Sansa didn't bother going downstairs for supper. Let Petyr think whatever he wanted, she huffed in annoyance. This lack of trust and listening to a child before even letting her speak a word was enough for today. Her supper sat untouched on the table by the fire. Sansa didn't have the stomach for it. Mrs. Ames was right; she wasn't eating hardly at all lately. What was the use? It was only going to come back up again.

Gazing in the mirror, Sansa sighed. She really was too pale. Her supper now cold, she couldn't think of asking Mrs. Ames to cook her something new this late at night. God, if it was this bad now, how would she ever get through another seven months? Would Alex love or hate his new sibling? Would it be another boy? What about the faeries? She couldn't tell Petyr any of this. She couldn't even tell him she was with child again.

He had rarely been home all summer and it was taking its toll on Sansa. Maybe she was going mad after all. Sansa felt as if she was suffocating in this house lately. Ever since she found out she

was pregnant, it felt as though the world was closing in on her. Alex was grating her nerves it seemed every day. How often was she yelling at the boy? The best day they had in weeks was today at the market and Duncan had to ruin that. Now Petyr was home and they weren't speaking.

The tears came quickly as she lay down on the bed. She was a terrible mother. A wife that didn't feel like a wife. They made love whenever he was home, but Petyr never stayed for long. There was always something more important demanding his attention, leaving her alone at Harrenhal with an unruly and willful child. Petyr didn't understand. He was never here. Sansa was lucky to become pregnant considering how often he was away.

If Brune did not travel with Petyr, he was acting as a guardian over her and their son. Everywhere they went, there was Brune, watching every move. Did he send Petyr regular reports? Sansa had wanted to ask him on several occasions.

She had been happy here for years and Sansa couldn't understand why, all of a sudden, she felt like a prisoner. Was it only because of the new child she carried? Would Petyr let her travel with him and Alex to see Robert at the Eyrie, once he knew? She sobbed softly into the duvet, the satin wet with tears. Sansa did not even hear the knock on their adjoining door, let alone the soft footsteps into her room.

The mattress dipped from his weight and she felt his hand ghost down her back, asking permission to touch her.

"I've come to ask your forgiveness," he spoke softly. "I didn't realize how unhappy you are."

It felt like years instead of months when they were laughing and running naked up the secret stairs. Sometimes Sansa would walk around the house as if it was the first day Petyr brought her here. How many times had they made love in this room? The song he wrote for her swam through Sansa's mind when she gave birth to Alex on this bed. Something was changing. Something, just out of her reach, was on the horizon and Sansa didn't know what it was. The nightmares were constant and Petyr wasn't there to hold her and tell her it would be alright.

"Can't we go back to the way we used to be?" she sniffed. "I've hardly seen you at all in months. I'm going mad here. Your son hates me."

Fingers threaded through her hair, drawing it down across the bed.

"No he doesn't. He loves you," Petyr hummed near her ear. "You're right. I unintentionally made you the disciplinarian. I will set new rules and have a long conversation with him. I've been overly indulgent. I suppose I wanted to give him all the things I never had. Perhaps, somewhere in the back of my mind, I've been afraid that he will be our only child... when this whole business is over, I swear I will make it up to you. I promise."

Sansa laughed bitterly, "When it's all over. When? Next year? The year after that? I need to get out of here before I lose my mind."

"We leave for the Eyrie the day after tomorrow. You know this, sweetling," he tried to be soothing.

"Perhaps you and Alex. Will you let me go?" she breathed, her eyes glassy as they stared off into the distance.

"Why wouldn't I? Don't you want to go?" Petyr stopped running his fingers through her hair. "I'm afraid you've lost me. You said just a moment ago you wanted to leave Harrenhal."

Sansa sat up and dried her eyes. There was no time like the present, her mother used to say. She stood and started pacing the room. The idea of both of them leaving her alone actually started to have some appeal. Was she that horrible of a person after all? If she couldn't travel in her condition, perhaps she could have some peace and quiet?

"What is it?" Petyr asked with concern as he left the bed. "Either you're ill or..."

Sansa stopped in her tracks and finally looked at him. It dawned on him and Petyr's face lit up. At first it was his eyes and then his mouth followed suit with a lopsided grin. That instant joy, broke her at last and Sansa nodded, forcing a smile.

Petyr rushed across the room and swooped Sansa up, twirling her around, with such a loving laughter in his voice.

"Oh, my love. Please, forgive me. Even after so many years, I'm not exactly good at this sort of thing," he set her down, looking her over as if she were a china doll about to break. "When did you know?"

Sansa couldn't meet his eyes. "I knew for certain about a fortnight ago. I haven't been feeling well at all. I'm having terrible dreams, Petyr. Just like before."

Petyr pushed the hair back from her face, studying her. Worry written in his eyes. Tilting her chin, up he seemed to have difficulty finding the words to say.

"You – don't want it, is that what you're trying to tell me?"

The pain was crystal clear in his voice and Sansa honestly didn't know how to answer him now. She was thrilled when she found out but after today... she didn't know what to think anymore.

"I don't know. I'm not a very good mother. I thought after growing up with my siblings and dealing with Robert, that I could handle anything. What if this child doesn't like me either? What if everything goes wrong? What if you're not here... I have so many fears, Petyr. I want a little girl so much, but sometimes I think it would be better if we didn't have anymore... Oh God, I don't know what to think... I'm so confused," she cried as he took her into his arms and held her tightly.

For the longest time, he held her and didn't say a word. Petyr seemed to be lost in thought as well and Sansa wondered for the first time if he wanted another child or was he pretending to be happy

for her sake? Sansa didn't know why she felt this way, but more and more over the summer she felt as though she and Alex were becoming a burden to him. He told her that his plan was to put Robert on the throne. That he had men and plans set to bring down the Lannisters so quickly that they wouldn't know what hit them. He had everything set like clockwork, Petyr told her. If they were so close to the end, a new baby would put an added stress on him. Earlier this year, all Sansa could think about was having another child. It was all she wanted. Petyr seemed to like the idea, he certainly did not object. Perhaps in hindsight, he was now really considering the ramifications of a new pregnancy at this point in time. Perhaps, he was only thinking of her happiness and not the grand scheme of things. Or worse, he really did not believe she would conceive after all this time. Petyr was too quiet, and that was more unsettling and seemed to silently answer those exact questions. She could read his mind.

"Sansa," Petyr took a deep breath. "If – you don't want it... I won't force you to. I won't lie, the timing isn't perfect. I think we both know that. I suppose my desire to make you happy, blinded me to other things. You wanted a baby. I wanted to give you another, if I could."

He was struggling, Sansa could tell. She waited patiently for whatever it was he needed to say. Sansa was almost preparing herself to hear that he wanted her to get rid of it. That they could try again later.

"I could send you and Alex away, but it would be too obvious now if you're with child. It would raise questions. I truly think the safest place for you is Harrenhal. Nothing is going to happen out here. It's too far out of the way. Other than Edmure, there's no one else of importance in regards to title and loyalty nearby. Everything will be so sudden, there will be no one left to take revenge. Even then, they won't even know it was me all this time, until it's too late. It will be all over before any of them realize what is happening. I've planned this down to the tiniest detail for years. There's no reason in the world the Lannisters would come for you. Not once in six years have you even been mentioned... except in... ahem – things a lady should never hear."

Sansa leaned against his shoulder, letting him draw circles on her back. "Oh, I'm sure gentlemen have only the loveliest compliments when I come up in conversation at parties. The only thing I am good for is giving you an heir. Tell me, do you stay silent or remove that mask of yours and defend my honor? Or would doing so ruin your plans?"

"Everything I'm doing is for us, Sansa. For all of us," Petyr sighed. "I know it hasn't been easy. I promise I'll make it better for you. You deserve your revenge on them for what they did to you and your family."

"You started this before I had anything to do with it. What's your revenge, Petyr? You lost to Uncle Brandon in a duel over my mother. Is this your way to win against them all?" she breathed.

"It needs to happen, sweetling. They need to fall. To build anything new, you first must destroy." Petyr said calmly, his hold on her tightening ever so slightly. "You said once, that everything had to happen the way it did or we would never be here, now, together. You were right, in more ways than you could have ever known. In that world, I would never have been good enough for you. I would have remained lonely and unhappy the rest of my days. No one would have ever allowed you to marry someone like me. How can I bring up our children in the kind of world? Heritage, title, bloodlines... whatever my motivations then, have changed since you. I can't be on my deathbed and worry that my children won't have the future they deserve. Beholden to no one. Don't you want that for them?"

Petyr was no crusader, but Sansa could not deny something had changed over in him since becoming a father. Her own father said the same when Robb was born. Your choices were no longer selfish. When you held that child in your arms for the first time, it can change who you are forever. Sansa had to believe that what he was doing was for the best. What else did she have to cling to? Fear and worry?

His anger about Duncan was coming from a place of worry. Petyr did not take chances and someone as insignificant as Duncan in Sansa's mind, was a question mark in Petyr's. He worried about them. What he was doing was dangerous and they were all going along for the ride. There was nothing of value as far in the Riverlands except the gold it brought in. No one cared about Edmure Tully or the shunned dandy lord and his harlot wife. It was the truth, everyone probably mocked them for a chuckle or two. Alexander was no one to fear, the son of a disgraced lord. They would never allow him in their circles or marry a girl of good family. Petyr was right. What future would they leave their children unless they moved away.

It wasn't as simple as that. Petyr was much older and that deep seated hate burrowed down to his core for years. Sansa would never be able to understand how he came to be. She only endured it for maybe ten years. Petyr had a lifetime of it. It started before they met and it was going to end by his hand no matter what she said. It was a matter of trust. Her nerves were on edge not only because she was pregnant, but Sansa knew it was close. Before, she could ignore it as the deadline seemed so far away. Now, she could feel it in her bones. That change in the air wasn't the beginning of autumn, it was the beginning of the end. However, Sansa wasn't entirely sure what that end may be.

"I trust you, Petyr," she sighed. "I'm just afraid. If something goes wrong... what will I do without you? I can't do this on my own. What will I do? Where will I go?"

For the longest time, Petyr was silent and it was making Sansa ill.

"I have – made provisions, in case of such a thing. As I have said, I have planned this down to the smallest detail, if it should ever come to that," he gulped and took a deep breath. "Perhaps, once we go to the Eyrie, I could secretly book passage for the two of you to the mainland or even the colonies for a while. What good am I if I cannot spin a convincing lie?"

The very idea of leaving to another country without him was unthinkable. Abroad with a young child and carrying another? Sansa did not know which scenario scared her more. Everything she knew and loved was here. She had Mrs. Ames, the servants... how could she leave them all behind? She couldn't take them with her without people wondering why the Marquess was sending his wife, children and household out of the country. Sooner or later someone would talk and the news would spread. Whatever Petyr was planning needed the element of surprise, she

figured. Attracting attention to either of them would most likely work against him.

If it was only bringing down the Lannisters and by default the Tyrells, since Margery still had not produced an heir, and placing young and controllable Robert on the throne, the threat against them would be wiped out with the succession of the new king. Robert would do nothing to or against his beloved uncle and he still had affection for her, as Petyr told her. No one was riding all the way out to the Riverlands for her or her son. If Joffrey had any clue or anyone in the ton had the slightest inkling something was amiss with Petyr, they would have had him executed already. Joffrey had done so to many in his service in the past year alone. Petyr kept the target off his back. How, she couldn't fathom?

"I'm sorry about what I said a moment ago. You must associate and brunt the ridicule from these people face to face whereas it goes unseen and unheard out here. I understand why. I don't care what they say about us or our children."

Sansa embraced him firmly and retreated to her bed, pulling down the bedclothes.

"The news from town this week is that West is in ruin. The Lannister gold has run out. Is that true?" she asked climbing into bed.

"Yes."

"The North is such turmoil that they fear a rebellion? Such horrible things are being said about what Bolton is doing to Northerners. They say Joffrey is on a killing spree. Everyone that disappoints him has been hung or shot. They say, for the first time in ages, The Reach's crops are failing," she recited as if reading a new periodical.

"Hence why the king is relying heavily on The Vale and Riverlands now. I am withholding much about our harvests. It's becoming increasingly difficult to hide much more from Lord Royce. I must move quickly in the next couple months before my little ruse breaks. Right now, the king believes the entire realm is suffering. In many places, it's true."

Sansa lay down facing away from him. "I don't want you to return to the capital. Send your men, whomever you must," she sniffed. "I don't want you to go back. You can't."

"I know. We'll discuss it later, sweetling. Get some rest. We need to put on happy faces tomorrow," she could almost see the half-hearted smile on his face.

She heard him walk to the door and it was about to close when her voice rang out.

"Petyr?"

"Yes, love?"

"Stay with me tonight."

The weather cooperated, and it was a beautiful day for a birthday. Sansa sat on the terrace and watched the children play with wealthy ladies from the town and county. They drank punch and chattered about things that were commonplace and mindless gossip. The servants were busy keeping everyone fed and satisfied but even here there was a segregation between the rich and poor.

The local small folk came to pay their respects to their noble lord that kept their farms prosperous and food on the table. However, the few gentry that came all this way into the countryside, stayed within their circles, some shaking their heads at having to be within breathing space of those lesser. Apparently, one didn't need old titles and family to put on such airs.

Sansa played her role as gracious hostess and listened to the ladies around her and occasionally gave her humble non-opinion on matters in regards to the monarchy. Even here, she was not about to draw attention to herself. She did not trust one person here with her life or that of her children.

Petyr would take her by the arm and stroll around the grounds, speaking and thanking all that attended, rich and poor alike. The harvest was bountiful and there was more than enough food and drink to sate all their guests. Children spun long, colorful ribbons around the may pole and their laughter lifted Sansa's heavy heart. They played and shrieked in enjoyment. Lady let the children chase after her but Sansa overheard several men grumble about the wild wolf. Petyr smiled and japed at how well trained she was, but Sansa could see it in their eyes. Some of them looked at her and Lady as other worldly. She may be of Tully blood, but some of these new merchants in town were true southerners. They were here out of respect for the wealthy lord and nothing more.

Sansa smiled and pretended she didn't feel like sticking her head in a basin. She watched Petyr, in full costume, play his role perfectly. He knew exactly what to say and when to laugh. The afternoon's pleasantries were ripe with whiskey and brandy for the gentlemen and teas for the ladies. It was fascinating to watch her husband slip on his mask and play up the congenial, witty lord, just short of buffoonery. He made them wealthy, that's all they cared about. The merchants weren't here out of loyalty or the young lord's birthday. They all played their parts, hoping to keep their pockets lined.

"Sansa," an old, yet familiar voice spoke softly.

She had not seen him in years but Sansa recognized him instantly. Edmure stood, fidgeting with his light brown, wide brimmed hat. Had Petyr invited him or did he hear about the party for his new nephew? Sansa cursed herself for not inviting him, but she thought that her uncle was through with her since the last time they met when she and Petyr paid their respects to Mrs. Cole.

He looked terrible then and was still on the drink. That stormy morning, the two last Tully family members only nodded at each other. Petyr, to his credit, did and said nothing.

Immediately, Sansa rose and hugged her uncle.

"It's so good to see you," she sniffed a bit.

"It's been too long," he whispered. "I needed to sort some things out for myself. I stopped drinking."

Sansa pulled back and smiled. "Yes, I heard. I should have written, visited, but..."

"It's all right. I understand. It wasn't fitting to have a young child around a drunken uncle," he grinned with sincerity.

"No, I didn't mean that –"

"Sansa, it's all right. I know what I was. It was unforgivable what I did to you that day. I could have hurt you. Petyr and I – well, it's never been easy," Edmure sighed.

Sansa nodded and hugged the man again. He looked too old for his age. Petyr was younger, but Edmure appeared as if he was ten years older than he should be. The alcohol had done such damage to her once handsome uncle. His hair was very grey and he had gained some weight.

"I wanted to wish your son well," he held her tightly. "Is he taking good care of you? Petyr. Are you happy?"

Sansa leaned back and then kissed Edmure's rough and wrinkling cheek.

"Yes, I am very happy," she smiled and it wasn't a lie. They had their fights, disagreements and such but she loved Petyr. He infuriated her to hell and back sometimes, but not once did Sansa ever doubt she loved him or that he loved her.

Edmure tried to smile but Sansa knew better. There were years of hatred between these two men, but he was here. Uncle Edmure was trying to make amends. At least to her. It would be a long time before a truce between the once surrogate brothers.

"Really, Uncle. I am. I love him. You probably never believed that after all these years, but I do," she held his weathered hands. "Petyr told me everything that day. I know he loved mother. That was a long time ago. You were children then. Things have changed. I have changed so much. So has he. He loves me and our son. I think Petyr was always meant to be a father."

They both turned and saw Petyr swing Alex up onto his shoulders as the boy squealed with delight. It was the truth. Petyr loved his son to heaven and back. One would have to be blind not to see it. Just then, father and son spun around and Sansa caught Petyr's eyes. He was shocked to say the least. He walked over with Alex still on his shoulder to where she and Edmure stood.

"Edmure," Petyr offered graciously. "You're looking well."

Sansa smiled at her husband. He wasn't cruel or even cracking a joke. He was being that pleasant gentleman that did not know how to be rude to his guests.

"He's a fine boy, Petyr. Truly," her uncle replied sincerely.

"Alex, this is your uncle, Edmure. *Lord Tully*."

Petyr lifted the boy down and Alex was well prepared, just as Sansa instructed him.

"Please to meet you, my lord." Her son glanced at her with a questioning and Sansa realized she never taught him about how to greet family. "Mummy, do I call him 'my lord' or may I call him 'uncle'?"

"Uncle or Edmure is fine," the elderly stranger responded with ease. "Do you wish to be called 'my lord' or should I call you Alex, Alexander..."

"Alex," he grimaced quickly. "Papa and Mummy call me Alexander only when I'm in trouble."

That broke the ice and everyone laughed heartily. Sansa glanced between Edmure and Petyr and seemed to be waiting for the moment when the ruse ended. Petyr didn't falter and she was proud of him. Whether he invited Edmure or not, it took effort for her uncle to come here today.

Suddenly, Alex grabbed his uncle's hand as if they had always known each other.

"I want to show you my horse..." he ran towards the stables, tugging Edmure along. "It's a secret, don't tell Mummy."

Sansa gasped, even though she knew in her heart Petyr was going to do it months ago. She frowned and turned towards her husband, who didn't even have the decency to look at her. His hands behind his back, Petyr smiled thoughtfully.

"Petyr Baelish..." she growled and he took her hand, kissing it tenderly.

"You need to work on feigning such shock, my love," he mused, holding her hand. "I can read you like a book."

"If that boy breaks his neck, I'm going to curse, hex, and then kill you," she muttered and then realized she said it loud enough for the ladies behind them to chuckle at the new parents.

"My darling, he won't ride by himself until he's older, I promise you," Petyr kissed her cheek chastely in front of their guests and whispered in her ear. "Did you invite Edmure?"

Genuinely shocked this time, Sansa faced him.

"No, I thought it was you."

Both of them glanced at the pair near the stables. She felt Petyr's hand tighten ever so slightly in hers but he didn't move.

"He came of his own volition," Petyr sounded surprised. "He quit drinking, I hear."

"Yes, so he said."

Petyr nodded to Brune standing nearby and the man slowly made his way towards the boy and his new uncle.

"He apologized for that day in town. He wants to make amends," Sansa lied a bit to aid her uncle. Petyr may not have, but Sansa saw it in Edmure's eyes. He was truly sorry. "He wanted to wish us well – especially Alex."

"Us? Myself included?" he japed softly, watching his son intently.

"Yes," Sansa gripped his hand. "I told him how happy I am; how good you are to me."

"Took some convincing, did it?" Petyr smirked and walked her into the garden, his eye always on Alex and Edmure.

"Petyr, stop it," she dug her fingernails into his palm and yet he didn't flinch at all. "He's trying. Do it, if not for my sake, your son's."

Petyr halted and sighed, facing her. "Yes, you're right. I can't make any promises, sweetling, but I will try. We'll most likely need him when this business is over with."

Sansa jerked her hand from his. "That's all you can really think about, isn't it? Business. Using him for your plans. Petyr, he is *my* family. All I have left. Can't you just let the past go?"

"I thought I was your family. Your children and I," Petyr frowned, gazing at her corseted tummy. "Did you forget that he let a stranger take you away, keep you? He threw you away like rubbish, almost killed you, not to mention he hasn't written or seen you in years or did that just vanish from your memory?"

"If it weren't for our guests, I would slap you right now," Sansa sneered. "I know who my family is. Don't you ever forget it. I can forgive. I can let the past go. Clearly, you cannot."

With that, Sansa turned on her heel and strode in the direction of her uncle and son, leaving Petyr behind. Her emotions were running wild. They were either hot or cold. She didn't remember being this way when she was pregnant with Alex. This baby, in only a few weeks, was driving her mad. Sansa could go from being deliriously happy to sad and angry on the turn of a coin.

Sansa avoided Petyr for some time, choosing to stay with Alex and Edmure. She learned that he spent Petyr's allowance wisely and was rebuilding Riverrun. Without Mrs. Cole to take care of him, her death seemed to be the calling he needed to either die or live his life. There was a village girl he hired and by his demeanor, Sansa could tell he fancied her. She couldn't help but smile. Sansa wanted to be happy for him. He lost so much, just as she did. Sansa found a life and love and he had not for many years.

"Lord Tully! Come have a drink with us!" a portly man of the gentry called out as they passed.

"Thank you, Haddington. I do not partake any longer, so I must decline. I'm enjoying my niece's company far too much today," Edmure bowed slightly.

The roses still were colorful with the last blooms holding on so late in the season. Edmure excused himself and Sansa walked along, enjoying the chatter hidden behind the bushes. She hid her laughter at a few young ladies mewing over Petyr and Alex. Petyr looked dashing today and that moustache only gave him a regal appearance. He was growing more handsome with age, she smiled to herself. Alex, as young as he was, looked just like his father.

Just then she heard his voice as a few men called for him to join them.

"A fine boy you have there, Baelish. You must be proud," one man chuckled.

"Indeed, very proud," Sansa heard the smile in his voice. She kept hidden behind the bushes and listened knowing she was eavesdropping on her beloved husband.

"Take over the family business, will he?" a drunken voice lauded and a few men laughed.

"Rather surprised you don't have more, Baelish. A man of your vigor and reputation? Thought those Tully women were supposed to be fertile. Well, except for Her Grace... dreadful woman," one man mocked. Sansa frowned and remained silent in her hiding place.

Tell me, do you stay silent or remove that mask of yours and defend my honor?

"Not to mention that ripe little strawberry you have there. You should be on your third by now!" the vulgar man roared and the men chuckled with him.

"Careful, Thorne. That's my wife you speak of," Petyr warned but his tone was still light.

"Oh come now, man. She's a Stark. It's not as though you chose to marry her. Bed her, most definitely. Her mother might be of good breeding but, those northern women are only good for one thing. I must say, she's a beauty. But then again, Lady Catelyn was a stunning woman," another remarked and Petyr was silent. Sansa peered through the foliage and she could see his face, if barely. His lips were smiling but Petyr's eyes were hard and grey as stone.

"Ah, if I had a young thing like that, I'd keep her on her back every night for a good rutting. Give her to me, old man, I'll put a child in her belly for you –"

The man didn't get a chance to finish, when Petyr grabbed him by the neck, backing him into the shrubbery, his drink spilling to the greens below.

“Out of respect for the ladies and children, I won’t break your neck for that. I demand an apology for the slander of my wife. A good woman and mother of my son. Perhaps, I’ll think twice about telling these gentlemen how your wife squealed like a pig when I fucked her senseless...how long has it been? Looking at her today, the years haven’t been kind,” Petyr’s deathly grip and the ice in his voice chilled her to the bone.

A few men chuckled nervously, when Petyr released the man, tossing him back into the rose bush, the thorns tearing his coat.

“Christ’s sake, Baelish,” the man grumbled, pulling at the thorny branches. “One would think you actually wanted to marry her rather than the king forcing you. I’ll not apologize, I don’t care if she is your wife. Her father is a traitor and she’s a whore that would have ended up spreading her legs in any brothel. Be grateful you got a legitimate son out of it.”

Petyr lunged at him and Sansa quickly made a decision rounding the hedges with a bright smile on her face.

“There you are, my love,” she breathed. “Are you drunk, my husband? Lord Weatherby, I must apologize. Since returning home, Petyr hasn’t quite been able to hold his drink.”

The men broke apart with a few mumbblings of formal address and a some bowed out of courtesy. Sansa glanced at the old lord and he was furious but the man didn’t have the audacity to insult her to her face. Straightening his jacket, Sansa kept her painted smile on for the men and coozied up to Petyr.

“Darling, you son is looking for you. He fancies a ride on that stallion you bought him,” she grinned, kissing his cheek lightly. “You did make me a promise, did you not?”

“Oh course, my dear,” Petyr took a deep breath. “Gentlemen, forgive me. Duty calls.”

Sansa didn’t need to look behind them, to know those men were whispering and there was nothing kindly meant about it.

“Thank you, sweetling. Impeccable timing,” Petyr patted her hand as they returned to where Alex and the children were playing. “How much did you overhear?”

Sansa was quiet for a time as they walked. She could pretend, so he could save face, but Petyr would know she was lying.

“I heard everything,” Sansa said calmly and added with hushed tones. “You should have told them I was with child again because you *fucked* me every day and night. We northern women don’t *rut*.”

Petyr stopped and the look in his eyes was complete adoration. Not caring who was watching, he cupped her face and kissed Sansa deeply. A gentleman did not kiss a woman so publicly, even if it was his wife. The sheer scandal of it all had whispers everywhere in the gardens. Petyr knew how to apologize without speaking a single word. He knew she was angry with him today in regards to both Alex and Edmure. She also needed to let him do it. Battling with her turbulent emotions was taxing to say the least. She was nothing but a mess and needed to keep things right between them. After the Eyrie, he would be leaving soon. Sansa did not want to waste their time together with more arguments and unsaid things.

“Be sure to ask Edmure to stay for dinner tonight,” she breathed against his lips. “And then you can rut with me all night. I want to sleep most of the trip to the Eyrie. So be sure to exhaust me completely.”

Into the Wilderness

Chapter Notes

Finally... a new chapter. I know I'm apologizing constantly for the slow updates but my new job is just demanding sooo much of my time that I'm too exhausted when I come home. Hard to be creative when you're falling asleep constantly.

This chapter is the beginning of this story going to some majorly dark territory and so much of what I've laid down in previous chapters will begin to make sense. And then, hopefully, two events will have your heads spinning. *crosses fingers* and an ending none of you will see coming.

Buckle your seat belts... this story is about to change.

And there WILL be tears.
sorry/not sorry

Petyr smiled as he watched her dress Alex for the day. Why in heavens Sansa had the idea she wasn't a good mother was beyond his understanding. Petyr wiped his clean shaven face with a hot towel and leaned against the door. She fussed with the boy's cravat and stockings as their son clearly hated it. At home, Alex was used to running about and no one cared at his appearance on a daily basis. However, while at the Eyrie, Sansa wanted the boy to look presentable. It wasn't so much for Robert's account but the unexpected guests that judged their every move.

Sansa had been ill for the entire journey, even when Petyr opted to take the new steamboat up to Gulltown and save the last of the way by carriage to the Eyrie. It was much colder and the roads rocky here in the Vale than the Riverlands. Petyr didn't want to cause Sansa any more undue stress than necessary and catered to her every comfort, but it did not seem to help.

It was their first night when he knew this trip was going to be far from pleasant. His wife was worse for wear and had no stomach for dinner as it was, but that sour feeling only intensified when Lord Royce came down to supper with his daughter and grandsons. Petyr knew he would most likely face Royce but how his spies did not get word to him that Myranda, the Duchess of Winterfell was still a guest of the young duke, infuriated him all the more. Petyr's man had notified him before they left for Gulltown that the duchess was on her way back north, only having a brief visit with her father since leaving Kings Landing. Lord Bolton did not accompany his family and sailed straight for White Harbor instead. The news Petyr heard about the new keepers of the North was not pretty in the least. Bolton was a controlling man and it surprised Petyr greatly he allowed his sons out of his care and solely in Myranda's and her father's hands.

Last night, Petyr understood all too well. Myranda had no control over those boys. The twins, roughly the same age as Alex, well, there were no words for what they were. Cruel did not even scratch the surface. Roose was a horrible man and his son was far worse. It seemed that the family line continued on in the same fashion. By the look of it, those two boys were well on their way to becoming monsters in every sense of the word.

"Sweetling, I need to meet with our young Robert. He's ill this morning and refuses to come out of his bed chamber. I won't be breaking my fast with you," Petyr sighed, fixing his cravat in the mirror.

"Petyr, don't you dare leave me alone with them, please," Sansa gasped and came to his side and whispered. "I don't want to be anywhere near Myranda or those dreadful boys of hers."

"I know, my love," he kissed her softly. "We must keep up appearances. Do it for me. I won't be too long. I promise."

Tucking a loose curl of strawberry into her neatly pinned hair, Petyr smiled. Sansa was so lovely. Her lavender dress was so becoming and flattered her rosy cheeks and flaming hair. It was too early and she wasn't showing. It made Petyr very grateful. He did not need Myranda or her father knowing Sansa was with child again. For now, it would be their little secret.

"I don't know what to say to her. I don't want to talk to her at all," Sansa breathed and Petyr took her in his arms. "You dominated the conversation last night and now I will be on my own."

He understood completely. Petyr wanted nothing more than to kill Myranda for what she had done to Sansa. He knew in his gut she was behind that business with Duncan and the labyrinth. It would have been so easy to have her poisoned but Petyr knew it was too risky. He convinced himself each passing day to stay patient. She would get her comeuppance. She, her husband and the whole lot would meet their fate soon enough. Killing her too soon would raise suspicions. He needed them to believe they had the upper hand. Ramsay Bolton was in the King's favor due to his ruthless handling of the North and Petyr had to keep playing his part. His people were well placed.

Soon.

Robert complained of illness on and off for the past few months by many letters and Petyr suspected Royce from the first. The man tried to dig his claws deep into the young duke for years since his fostering began but to no avail. Robert hated the old man and continued to write to Petyr for counsel. Petyr began to wonder if Royce would begin to take measures to ensure the Vale fell to him. It would have been too obvious to poison the boy so soon after his mother's death. Royce was not a well-liked or respected man even though his family name was. Robert told Petyr, whenever Royce visited the Eyrie, he became dreadfully ill. The boy was too simple minded and equated the visit with a nervous condition. Petyr knew better. Since Myranda's arrival, Robert whined of feeling ill the entire time. Petyr had thought ahead, in bringing a new cook and two trusted servants from his Gulltown residence. He would not take a chance with Sansa and Alex in the household of the Eyrie. Over the past year, Petyr sent more of his men to watch over the young duke. Robert would need Petyr's men. Loyal and meant to protect the future king.

"Send them away, Uncle Petyr," Robert grumbled. The black-haired young man was almost one and twenty but still behaved as if he were pubescent. He had not taken much interest in the ladies of the county and fair enough, they did not seem to be interested in him other than his grand title. Robert, Petyr feared, was still enamored with his fair cousin – who was now the wife of another. Not just any man – his uncle.

"I could," Petyr drank his tea. "However, there is one rule I fear you should always follow. Keep your enemies close. Make no mistake, Robert. They *are* your enemy. I will be sending fresh supplies to you along with some new servants. Have no worry, they belong and answer to me. Do not take anything more from Lord Royce or those that he surrounds himself with. You are too dear to me, my boy. If he or anyone else means to harm you, I will make them suffer."

"You can kill them all right now and I wouldn't care one bit," the boy sat up, pushing his tray away. "I want those boys and their mother out of my house. How do I get rid of them?"

Petyr took a deep breath and hid his smile. Having the duke order Myranda and her sons out of his house would be delightful. The timing was wrong. Had it been just himself, Petyr would have advised Robert to do just that. However, with Sansa and his own son as guests... it would appear that the duke sent her away on account of his beloved cousin and that sort of news needn't be spread at this time.

"I will speak to her, your Grace, if it pleases you. However, you might not want to alienate Bolton just yet by slighting his wife and sons. Appearances do matter in your position. Don't worry, she'll be gone soon enough. She only stayed because of Sansa and I," Petyr tapped his fingers gently on the saucer.

"I don't like how she speaks to Sansa," Robert huffed. "She wouldn't dare if she had been my wife."

Petyr chose his words carefully, "Yes, I daresay that is true. The King made sure she and I were thoroughly ridiculed. Sansa would have made a beautiful duchess. I do believe I have unintentionally robbed you of that honor."

Robert got out of bed and stumbled to a chair, putting on his dressing gown.

"It wasn't your fault, Uncle Petyr. Even mother never wanted me to marry Sansa. I'm glad she is with you. You'll take care of her at least. I wish I could find a lady like her. I hate the ones here and in the capital. I know they don't like me. They only want my money and power," Robert complained and Petyr actually felt sorry for the boy. Perhaps he underestimated Robert's feelings for Sansa.

"You will in time, my boy," Petyr smiled sadly. "I only hope it doesn't take you as long as me. Be patient. The right one will come."

He knew it was most likely a lie. Robert had always been sickly as a child and if Royce was slowly poisoning him as Petyr suspected, it wouldn't matter in the end anyway. Even Robert was still a means to an end. He needed to serve his purpose and if he lived, Petyr would try to find a kindness for Sansa's sake and take care of the adopted nephew.

"Does she love you?"

That woke Petyr up. Indeed, Robert was still infatuated with her.

"I – well, I think she may have a fondness. After all, she did not choose me as husband," Petyr tried to placate the boy. "I am trying my best to make her happy."

"Do you care for her?" Robert asked and fidgeted with his robe. He didn't use the word love. Perhaps he was scared to know the truth.

"I do," Petyr did not hesitate. "We both care for her, do we not? I know that if anything were to ever happen to me, you would take care of her."

"Of course I would," Robert said quickly. "The boy too. I could be an older brother. I always wanted a brother or sister. Sansa was always so kind to me. And Alexander is not like those Bolton boys at all."

"I do believe they take after both their parents," Petyr smirked.

"They put spiders in my bed one day. And I've heard they killed one of my hunting dogs. I can't prove it and everyone thinks I'm mad. Lord Royce protects and makes excuses for them. I've even seen one of them cut his mother. She said it was an accident..."

Petyr chewed on his bottom lip and glanced at the door wondering where Sansa and his son were at the moment. His little witch was right. He should not have left them alone. At supper last night, the boys were utterly rude even for that young age, throwing tantrums until Lord Royce finally removed them from the dining hall. Myranda sat there, motionless and Petyr found it odd that she did not once try to discipline her sons. Had Alex displayed one tenth of that insolent behavior, Sansa would not have waited for privacy to scold their son – nor would have his father.

"I believe you, Robert," Petyr stood and patted the boy's shoulder. Robert had grown but was still a skinny lad and short – inheriting more from his late mother than Jon Arryn. "That's why I have brought you my trusted servants to care for you. When Sansa leaves for Harrenhal, you will refuse Lord Royce to this house. Her Grace will already be on her way to Winterfell, and you will never have to worry about her again. Trust me. Things are going to change in the future. I will always protect you, but you are a man now. Don't let Royce or anyone in the ton take charge of you. *You* are Duke of the Vale."

The boy blindly trusted him and Petyr was once again grateful. He didn't ask needless questions nor did Petyr try to educate or mold him. Let him believe he was a man grown with loyal support of his beloved uncle and cousin. Let him believe what he wanted. *For now.*

"If you are feeling better this afternoon, come down for tea. Sansa will play the piano for you. She has missed you very much. Plus, Alexander is excited to meet his new godfather," Petyr grinned.

"Godfather? Me?" Robert's eyes lit up.

"Who better? That is, if you would honor me and our son," Petyr bowed slightly in courtesy. The boy had always looked on Petyr as a father figure. Marrying Sansa made him officially a part of the family. It was favor the duke would not refuse and Petyr knew it – binding them even closer.

Petyr retreated downstairs, feeling uneasy. He did not leave them completely alone as Brune kept a close eye, never letting them out of his sight. He did not trust Myranda or Royce with anything. He knew Sansa well enough that she would avoid any and all conversation if possible. Did Myranda know that Sansa almost died that day? Duncan seemed far too praising of her to make Petyr believe otherwise. There was a connection there and wondered if Duncan was still in her service. Petyr said nothing to his wife in her delicate condition. For whatever her reasons, Sansa had forgiven or chosen to forget the priest's transgressions against her. His sweetling had a tender heart and kind soul. She was a better person than what Petyr knew himself to be. She did not need to know that side of him. The kind of man that would kill anyone that dared cross him or threaten the only things he loved most in the world.

At least Royce could be counted on as to ignore Sansa completely but Myranda was the wild card in the deck. Would Myranda assume Petyr knew about her treachery or that Sansa kept that information to herself? Perhaps, he would be lucky if she still believed that he did not care for Sansa at all. Men married women they did not love or were attracted to all the time. Even bedding them to produce an heir, only to go back to their philandering ways.

"So, she gave you a son. That must be a relief," a tired voice echoed from the sitting room as he was about to pass by.

"Good morning, Your Grace," Petyr stopped and bowed slightly, hoping to make this as short as possible. "And you have two. Equally satisfying, I would wager. I must commend the duke on his vigor. You'll have a litter before you know it."

"Is she not fertile or are you pleased with only one son? Perhaps you're bored of her already?" Myranda sneered from her spot on a small sofa.

"I'm quite certain your husband has found amusement elsewhere from the rumors coming out of the North. Myranda," he sighed. "We could play this little game all afternoon and it wouldn't matter at all. These are the cards we were dealt."

"With all your travels, you must be bored with her. Not content to play the happy husband and father are you? At least you can travel around freely," she frowned a bit and Petyr kept his mask on securely.

"As long as the child is legitimate, what else matters? I'm taking care of them, if that's what you're asking."

"Oh? Are we supposed to love our children? I just presumed you do what all men do. Hire a governess, occasionally bed your wife and then off you go to the gaming halls, gentlemen's clubs and brothels," she smiled thinly. "She seems like a good little mother, doesn't she? You never know, she'll probably poison him to punish you one day. So funny that women are expected to love children and be wonderful mothers."

"If she hates me so, why not just poison me? It rather defeats the purpose," Petyr played along very carefully.

"Oh, women are spiteful creatures, Petyr. It would hurt you more to kill your only son, your heir. Unless you don't care about him, which frankly is quite possible considering it's you," she sipped her tea looking out the window at the twins playing with long sticks, pretending they were swords.

"Do enlighten me, please. This hatred my wife has for me," Petyr crossed his arms and waited impatiently.

"Oh, some of the deepest hate comes from love. Didn't you know she's in love with you?" Myranda grinned. "If a woman already dislikes her husband, it doesn't matter when he's out whoring and gambling all the time. But if she loves him... oh, that hate will burrow deep and fester until it finally breaks."

"Your ambitions made you Duchess of Winterfell. Don't tell me you've fallen in love with Bolton? I hear his *tastes* run rather exotic, to be kind. Perhaps you're more adventurous than I gave you credit, Myranda."

She finally looked at him and Petyr kept his face unreadable. She had been trying to goad him with baseless threats. Myranda knew nothing about Sansa or him. Granted, Sansa did love him

and Miranda tried to use it against her that day. It mattered not. A broken clock was correct twice a day.

"This is your fault, you know," she frowned. "You condemned me to hell."

Petyr walked into the room and placed his hands on the chair across from the brunette and studied her.

"How is this even my fault? I think it's the king you should be spitting venom, not me," he eyed her warily. "I did not force you to marry Bolton. I do recall your being rather smug about becoming duchess. Clearly, the bloom is off the rose. I did try to warn you, if you remember. We both got what we were dealt, my dear. At least you have respect. Unless we're traveling in different circles, the last I remember is being ousted and ridiculed for the last five years."

"Yet, you have a pretty little wife, handsome son and quite possibly the richest land in the realm right now. I have a beast for a husband, a frozen wasteland and two monsters who are just like their father," she sneered and Petyr could see a bandage on her right forearm barely covered by the sleeve of her gown.

"Take a lover, stay here with your father... you have more options than I. I would have to go to the colonies to make a new man of myself," Petyr replied easily. "I am afraid I'm not a man made for the wilderness of the new world. I prefer comfort."

Myranda snorted, "Oh, *take a lover* he says. Ramsay takes plenty of women – and then beats me. What man would want me now? I'm covered in scars and not just by him. Those little devils do his bidding." Myranda glared out the window towards the boys that were now watching them with interest. "They see everything I do. Hear every word I say. I don't have a moments peace. I'm a prisoner with a grand title. And it's all because of you."

Petyr did not feel pity for her in the slightest. Miranda deserved what she got. Maybe this was her punishment for what she did to Sansa. Fate worked in strange ways. He didn't have to kill her at all. Miranda created her own castigation by ways of her ambitions.

"Cheer up, Your Grace," Petyr shrugged and took a step back. "Perhaps, the Northerners will rise up and kill your husband or if there is a gracious God, he'll strike the man with lightning? Maybe he'll fall out of favor with the king – it's happening so often of late. I, myself, am finding Westeros rather dull, as is married life. Plus, I've never cared for the cold. Italy could be charming this time of year. Send the little wife and child away to the colonies –" he smiled nonchalantly at such a lie and wondered at just how desperate Miranda might be. "Care to come with me to the mainland?"

Petyr was a betting man. She would refuse, she would have to, even if she was inclined to accept. Petyr knew what kind of man Ramsay Bolton was. The duke would kill her before Petyr had the chance. No one would really think much of it, considering Petyr's rakish reputation. What would the new gossip be? He was bored of his traitor wife, took the duchess as lover and the duke found out? The idea was sickening because Petyr wouldn't touch Miranda with a length of a may pole. Either way, it didn't seem to matter. Bolton was clearly taking his demented pleasures with his wife and soon both of them would be dead anyhow.

The ruse was pointless. For she would have to decline any offer from him.

"I don't like your sick jokes," she grumbled when soft footsteps alerted Petyr to someone at the door.

"You shouldn't be alone with my mother," a willful little voice spoke. "Father won't like it."

The boy did not look like his mother at all. Dark hair was pulled back with a ribbon and Petyr noticed a bit of blood on this white stocking. He had a steely and unwavering gaze that took Petyr off guard for a moment. He reminded him of Joffrey at that age. The blonde, even back then, was unnerving and one wondered to his mental state. Petyr glanced at Miranda and there was a definite fear in her eyes.

"Not to worry, my boy. I'm just an old friend. I haven't seen Her Grace in many years," Petyr smiled. "I don't believe your mother or grandfather introduced you properly –"

"Ivan," he spoke and pointed to his twin at the window pane. "That's my brother Ronan."

"Named surely after Ivan the Terrible, I see?" Petyr japed and he was the only one that uttered a laugh.

The boy's stare did not break once and for the first time in his life, Petyr felt uncomfortable in the presence of a child.

"We asked Alexander to come play with us, but Lady Baelish told us no. Mother doesn't like to play with us either – but Father does."

Petyr chanced a look at Miranda and she was staring at the twin outside while unconsciously rubbing her bandaged arm.

"Perhaps another time, Ivan," Petyr offered slowly. Something was definitely wrong with these two boys. "My wife and son do not feel well today."

"Tomorrow?" the boy asked and he never blinked nor moved an inch.

"We'll see," he half-smiled and turned to Miranda. "Your Grace, if you'll excuse me."

Petyr left the room and could hear the tinkle of a few keys from the piano down the hall. Brune was standing nearby and when Petyr neared, the man nodded slightly to something just behind them. Petyr turned slightly and Ivan was joined by his brother at the door of the sitting room. The twin boys stood there like stone statues staring at them.

Sansa and Alex were inside the music room under Brune's watch. Opening the door, Petyr whispered to his friend as the boys finally entered the sitting room and closed the door.

"Never leave either of them alone with those boys, do you understand me?"

"They can't be any older than your own son –" Brune began but Petyr interrupted.

"*Never* leave my wife or son alone in their presence."

"As you wish," Brune nodded and eyed the where the boys had stood just moments ago as Petyr closed the door behind him.

Sansa did not look up and tinkered with a little tune on the piano as Alex lay asleep on the lounge chair.

"Never do that to me again," she muttered, plucking a few keys.

"Never again, my love," Petyr replied softly watching her curiously. He understood the anger and fear in her voice. It wasn't necessarily Myranda but her sons that frightened her.

Alex was curled up and Petyr pulled the soft throw to cover him before sitting next to Sansa at the piano. Her right hand fiddled with a melody, it was simple and she seemed to be struggling as if trying to find the elusive song. She did not have his gift for impulsive composition.

"How do you do it? It comes so easily to you," she huffed, her fingers striking a few chords.

Whatever it was, she wasn't ready to tell him just yet and was using the piano as a distraction. Petyr scoot closer and placed his left hand on the keys and toyed with a few notes in baritone.

"I'm not quite sure, sweetling," he forced a smile, his fingers searching for a harmony.

"Sometimes I just hear it and my fingers somehow find it. I'm no Mozart. You're too hard on yourself. *Listen.*"

He played with his left hand, a rhythm beginning to form accompanying something similar to what she was playing a moment ago.

"Do you hear it? Close your eyes," he instructed, resting his right hand on the small of her back. It was as if he were a tutor and not this girl's husband. She seemed so young sitting next to him all of a sudden. More like a daughter than a wife. Vaguely, Petyr wondered if this time, she would give them a girl. He could see her right now. Fiery hair and blue eyes. Surely, she would be a beautiful as her mother. He could teach her to play, something Alex had no interest in.

Sansa began to find that melody again, simple notes taking more shape and Petyr could hear and predict where it was going. He knew her so well. Petyr could read Sansa like a book.

"Move up an octave," he told her, and she obliged. "There, now make minor changes and I'll follow."

He changed keys effortlessly, following her lead. It was a strange thing how in tune they were to each other when the moment was right. She was reading him as well and finally smiled. Sansa would let him take the lead, listening to how he could predict her every move.

"Now bridge back to that part before," he smiled and felt her spirits lift a little. Petyr loved moments like this. It was just the two of them. Before long, it was quiet again. Sansa leaned against his shoulder and took his hand.

"Are you going to tell me?" he asked, closing the distance on the narrow bench, wrapping his arm around her still slender waist. Sansa laced her tiny fingers with his and seemed to debate the question.

"Lord Royce pretended I wasn't even there. Which was blessing, I suppose. Myranda did not say a word in his presence. It wasn't until he left that all three started on Alex and I," she said plainly, her eyes never leaving the keyboard. "Those boys are wretched things. Wild animals are more respectful to their prey."

"What do you mean?" Petyr asked but feared the answer, glancing at their son.

"They both taunted Alex, called him rude things. They goaded him. It wasn't his fault. Myranda said and did nothing to stop them. I finally had to push one away and he..." she paused as if she decided not to tell him after all. That fear he felt before bubbled up with anger in tow.

"He did what?" Petyr fumed, gripping her hand firmly.

Sansa took a deep breath.

"He drew a knife on our son," Sansa whispered in horror.

Petyr's eyes flared, pushing himself up harshly, the keys sounding off and waking Alex from his slumber.

"Petyr..."

"A knife? *A knife?*" he breathed fire and moved to his son, pulling off the blanket and examining him for injury. "What in God's name... kind of children is she raising..." he muttered with fury.

"Papa, they wanted to play like soldiers..." Alex mumbled. "He didn't get me, though."

"Alexander," Petyr tried to keep his anger under control, hearing Robert's complaints in his head. "You're never to play with those boys, again. Do you understand me?"

"We were only playing, Papa," he whined a bit. "Then they got mean."

"When have I ever allowed you to play with a knife? That's not playing. Did you have a knife?" he demanded, holding the boy by his arms.

"Ronan called me a bad word," he whimpered and Petyr was rapidly losing control. "What's a traitor, Papa?"

"You're never to speak to them, be alone with them. Do you hear me?" Petyr lightly shook him when Sansa pulled him away.

"Petyr! What are you doing?" she cried out, taking Alex in her arms. "He did nothing. It wasn't his fault. They goaded him on."

"By God, I have a few choice words for that woman," Petyr growled and marched to the door, whipping it open.

To his surprise, the culprits were standing there in the hallway. They had been listening this whole time. What in the depths of hell had Myranda born into this world?

Unable to tell them apart, Petyr grabbed one by the shoulder as the other took off down the hall. "Did you threaten my son with a knife? You ever come near him again and I'll..."

"MUMMY!" the other cried out as Myranda rounded the corner, rushing to their aid.

"Let go of my son!" the duchess screamed and Sansa came out, holding Alex close to her.

"Petyr! For God's sake!" she yelled as Alex hid behind her skirts.

Myranda yanked her child to her, pushing Petyr back.

"You bastard! Don't you hurt my child. I'll kill you!" Myranda shrieked as Brune came from another room and pulled the brunette back. "Let go of me!" She pulled from his grip and slapped Petyr across the face.

"Since when do children wield knives while playing? Carving up dogs doesn't seem a bit alarming to you, is that it? You keep those two away from my boy or I won't be responsible for my actions," he warned the woman, feeling the sting of her hand on his cheek.

"They're just boys. Boys play," Myranda shot back. "It's not my fault yours is a milksop – just like his father and his pathetic, traitor mother..."

Without thinking, his hand flew on its own. The woman stumbled back a few steps, her own hand coming to her reddening cheek.

"Petyr!" her heard Sansa yell, pulling him back. "For God's sake..."

"You dare strike me? I'm the Duchess of Winterfell," Myranda muttered with rage.

"Then you should be used to it by now," Petyr retorted coldly. "Go back home to your beloved husband, *Your Grace*. I'm quite sure he has missed you terribly."

"My father..." one of the twins began.

"Yes, tell him I did him a favor," Petyr shot back, silencing the boy and turned back to his mother. "I think it's past time you left for Winterfell. I'm sure His Grace, Lord Robert, would agree."

Just then both Robert and Lord Royce came downstairs inquiring about the commotion. Petyr took Sansa by the hand and practically dragged her down the hall with Alex on their heels.

"Best prepare yourself for widowhood, Sansa. There are many desperate men in the capital these days, looking for a heavy purse... just waiting in the shadows," Myranda smiled wickedly when Sansa glimpsed back at her. "Then Ramsay and I will take Harrenhal off your hands. Perhaps we'll let you stay on as a maid? Your son can sleep in the stables or maybe I'll just send him to the workhouse? It's more generosity than Northern whores deserve."

"What's going on, Uncle Petyr?" Robert asked curiously.

"Nothing that a gag won't fix," Petyr seethed. "Her Grace is failing miserably at empty threats. And she just so happens to be leaving today."

"I know people in *high* places," Myranda yelled indignantly.

"And you have spread your legs for most of them. I'm rather surprised you can walk," Petyr scooped up his son and pulled Sansa up the stairs.

"Baelish!" Royce marched towards them. "How dare you speak to my daughter -!"

"Take your father with you," Petyr directed at Myranda without a single glance.

Slamming the door to their suite, Petyr set Alex down on the bed and couldn't stop pacing. Damn that woman and those little terrors she called her sons. Myranda's little threats didn't frighten him in the slightest. The capital belonged to him already. The men on his payroll weren't about to take orders from a jealous duchess, soon to be dead. What upset Petyr more was losing control. How many times over the years had lords and ladies of the ton insulted him and Sansa? Not once did he crack. The very idea of those little imps causing harm to his son, was too much. The insult was just the last straw and Petyr couldn't contain himself.

Brune's warning from years ago kept ringing in his mind for weeks and weeks. Sansa and his son were a liability. The man was right, Petyr did care about her and he loved them both dearly. Petyr was getting ready to make his last move in this dangerous game and all he could think about was the safety of his wife and children.

There was no way for Ramsay Bolton to bring any forces down from Winterfell to the Riverlands in such a short time. Besides, he would have heard of any movement of what little the duke had in forces. Myranda's little tantrum, even if her husband was swayed by it, would take too long to reach the north, and then move south again. Time and the element of surprise was on Petyr's side.

Joffrey was penniless and couldn't wage a battle, let alone a war of any kind. Petyr had to move quickly. If he took a ship from Gulltown, he could be in Europe and settle the last of the arrangements. The blockade would keep anyone from leaving or entering Westeros. Once the ravens were released, the timing set, there would be no one left in power but a sickly little duke from the Vale.

The new king would create local governors to keep the peace. Then men Petyr put in place and made promises to would reap the benefits of an open market without having to pay to the pompous aristocracy. The people would be happy with the downfall of those tyrants, and with all the food and supplies Petyr had been secretly storing, they would be seen more as gentle saviors.

Ramsay Bolton was a brute. His reputation had spread across the country and only fools would follow him. Myranda was a bitter woman. Her lofty position afforded her nothing. She and her cruel husband offered nothing but fear and retribution. The people hated Joffrey and wouldn't stand for another sadistic ruler. Petyr and Sansa's generosity and kindness to those in the Vale and Riverlands would carry greater weight.

Sansa sat quietly, watching him. She was frightened. He knew. However, Petyr couldn't send her and Alex away now. Going to Riverrun would raise questions with Edmure, he would just as soon avoid. Myranda and her father had not the slightest clue as to their fate. Her boasting was proof of that. Petyr revealed his feelings for his child today to someone he did not trust to use it against him. The local lords and businessmen did not care if a man displayed an affection or pride in a first born son, but they were not a vengeful woman. She was not to be underestimated. Not only that, but Petyr defended Sansa's honor, even if it was only a slap. That bothered him the most. He would defend her to his dying breath, but today was not that day. Petyr berated himself for letting Myranda get the better of him.

Collecting himself, Petyr sighed pouring a drink to calm his raw nerves. He needed to regain control of everything. Sansa and Alex needed to go back home and stay there. The sooner he left the quicker he could return and finish this once and for all.

"I'm scared to ask what's in that mind of yours," Sansa finally muttered from the bed.

Her intuition was right in more ways than one.

"You don't want to know, believe me little witch," Petyr tossed the drink back and it burned down his throat.

"Do we stay here?" she asked wearily but before he could answer, Alex whimpered from the bed.

"I want to go home," he cried softly and it broke Petyr's heart. "I want Lady. I don't like it here. I want to go home, Papa."

Petyr picked him up and the boy wrapped his arms tightly around his neck, sobbing. Alex was a strong boy but he was no match for those twin monsters or their mother.

"Sssh, it's alright. We'll leave tomorrow, I promise," Petyr hushed him, closing his eyes. Yes, he would die before letting anything happen to his child. *Children.*

Sansa moved from the bed towards the basin and filled it with water. She looked like a ghost in the mirror, her skin was so pale.

"You should rest, sweetling."

She splashed the water on her face, finding him in the reflection. She meant to speak but suddenly her eyes flew wide, before retching into the basin. Petyr took Alex to his adjoining room, asking him lie down for a while as he tended to his mother. Obediently, the boy went to his bed as Petyr kept the door open just a crack.

Her back arched and tensed with each sputter and immediately he set to unlacing her dress. Pouring a glass of water, he let her finish before opening the window and tossing the foul contents of her stomach out into the garden. Without a word, Petyr helped her out of her dress and corset.

The mother in her insisted on checking her son. They both knew he was safe, but she had to see him, touch him – only then feeling at ease, if only for a moment. Sansa pulled the bed clothes back and settled down on her side staring out the window. It was trying to snow, the grey skies stretching into the distance and the cold was setting in. Petyr sat next to her, stroking her side, until she took his hand in hers.

"Lie with me for a little while," she sighed and Petyr could deny her nothing as he climbed in, settling behind her and draping his arm around her waist.

"What are you thinking, my love? I can see those cogs turning," he murmured against her neck.

Sansa was quiet for some time and Petyr began to think she wouldn't answer him after all.

"You're not coming home with us, are you?"

Sansa always was direct and Petyr tightened his hold on her. After tomorrow, he wouldn't see her for weeks, maybe even months. She knew it too.

"No, sweetling," he answered. "Today has urged me to finish this as quickly as possible. I won't be gone long. Just a few weeks to work out the last bits. Brune will stay with you. I don't want you to leave the estate until I return. Not even to go to the market or town. Let Mrs. Ames or William do it. I need to know you're both safe. Do not take any visitors. Not even Edmure."

Sansa turned back to face him.

"Petyr, Edmure would not harm us. I know it in my soul, he wouldn't," she protested lightly.

"Nevertheless, I'm not taking any chances. Offer any excuse. You're ill – whatever you choose but do not tell anyone else you're with child. Who else knows?"

Sansa lay her head back down and sunk into his frame.

"Mrs. Ames and William of course, but I've told no one else. Sarah suspects though, she's seen me with the sickness many mornings. I wouldn't be surprised if the maids are gossiping as to it all," Sansa said.

"None of the other ladies, county folk... no one at Alex's birthday celebration?" he pressed.

"No," she snuggled deeper into him. "I would never tell those old nosey-parkers anything."

"Good. Let's keep it that way," Petyr nuzzled into her neck. "Not even Alex. We'll tell him when I return home."

Sansa nodded and sighed at his gentle humming against her overly sensitive skin. Little goosebumps prickled at his breath that made Petyr smile. His blood was still coursing from all that anger and he couldn't help the arousal that stirred.

"I need you," he purred, his hand drifting down to rest between her legs, making little circles.

"He'll hear us," she objected weakly.

"We'll be quiet," Petyr breathed and tasted his favorite spot below her ear. "Or at least I know how to be quiet. You're the one who can be heard throughout the house."

"And whose fault is that?" she growled softly as he manipulated and teased.

"Oh, my love, I admit it with pride," he smiled and unbuttoned his trousers, glancing briefly at the door, slightly ajar. Petyr willed his son to stay asleep. This little tryst would be brief.

Gathering her chemise just enough, that when their bodies touched, Petyr stifled a moan against her shoulder. She was wet and ready for him. He slid in with ease and from behind, he kept his hand working furiously to bring her to completion quickly. Petyr knew he wouldn't last long right now.

Lifting her leg a bit to accommodate him, Sansa gasped at the new angle. Silencing her with a searing kiss, Petyr lost himself inside her. He would never tire of the sounds she made, the way her body tightened around him, every quiver and sensation they shared. It didn't matter if it was a quick release or making love all night. Their bodies fit as if made for one another.

Knowing his wife too well, Petyr swallowed her moans, occasionally glancing fearfully at the door. This was not a conversation he wanted to have with his son just yet. Nor did a young boy need to see his father ravishing his mother in the middle of the day.

All too soon, her body bowed as she clamped down hard on him making Petyr hiss. It didn't take long as he pulsed into her, his mouth on the back of her neck. His hand slick and scented with her essence rested on Sansa's belly that would soon swell with their second child. Petyr couldn't help smiling at the thought. Everything he ever wanted was wrapped up in this woman. She was better than anything he could have ever dreamed of.

Sansa was too quiet. He could almost hear the questions she wanted to ask but wouldn't. She would never ask him to give it all up and run away, far away. He was selfish in that he needed to see this thing through. It was so close he could taste it. As dangerous as it was, Petyr was confident that it would all go to plan. He had not worked hard all his life to give up now. If Sansa truly loved him, she would understand. She did understand and that's why, even with reservations, she remained silent. There was no way out but forward.

"I'll return before the snows become too heavy. By the first of the year, if not before then, this will all be finished. No more games. No more secrets. We can live in peace and do whatever, go wherever we please," Petyr said. "It will all be under my control."

"Not everything is within your control," Sansa whispered. "Promise me you'll be careful. Don't go to the capital. Send someone else. I worry so much about you - that this time you won't come back."

It was a promise he could not make or keep if he wanted to.

"Sansa, don't let Myranda's words fill you with fear. That's all they were, *words*. She has no power, nor does Bolton. I'm not a fool. I wouldn't have made it this far if I were. Trust me. I know what I'm doing and whom I'm dealing with. There's only one man I truly trust and he will be watching over the three things that I love most in this world."

"You can't leave me alone in this world, Petyr," she implored with anxiety. "You must come back to us. To me."

Sansa fingered the gold band on his finger and Petyr held her close. She was having terrible nightmares just like before. Always worrying that he would not return to her, that something awful would happen to him. But Petyr always came home, came back to her unharmed. It was the end, and she had a right to be frightened but all Petyr could do was soothe her fears.

Bringing her hand to his lips, the emerald stone of her ring was cold against his skin. It was a heavy thing on her delicate finger but still reminded him that she deserves the best that he could provide for her and their children.

"I'll never leave you, my little witch," he breathed. "There's nothing in this world that can keep me from you."

Hide The Boy

Chapter Notes

Well, well, well... and here we go, my loyal readers. Down the spiral...the rabbit hole... to wherever it may lead. Sorry/not sorry in advance.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Slán le na laethe séala bhi dul haerach

Slán le na laethe bhi –

“Mummy,” the little voice echoed in the darkness. “Where are you?”

“I’m here,” Sansa heard herself say. It didn’t sound like her voice, so far off and lofty. Her vision was distorted as if a veil had been pulled over her eyes.

“I’m scared,” it whimpered. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’ll never leave you, my love,” Sansa said serenely. “You know that.”

“Papa never smiles anymore,” the voice started to drift away. “Will you speak to him?”

“I’ll try, darling.”

The grass was icy with a layer of frost that crunched beneath Sansa’s bare feet. Looking up, the window was softly lit as the shadow of a man paced behind the frosted panes of glass. He stopped and suddenly they stood still staring at one another.

Sansa couldn’t speak. The man wouldn’t understand her words, her pleas to listen. Only the child understood.

“You don’t belong here,” the little red-haired girl smiled from behind her. She leaned against a tombstone in the small cemetery. Sansa glanced back to the second story window, finding it dark and empty. “They’re all here but your places are hollow. Look inside and you’ll see. He is very old and the young man has forgotten himself. He will never leave as long as you are here. The winter rose entwines that blooms every solstice morn. The place where hands were joined in blood.”

The darkness engulfed her in that musty place, deep below. The piano was playing and Sansa scurried up the dirty steps, pushing hard on the secret door. Petyr kept his promise, her mind raced. When the panel opened, the music room was dark and silent. The smell was wrong. The room looked the same but didn’t. Something wasn’t right.

“Who are you?” a rough voice demanded harshly and a light, bright as the sun scorched her eyes, bringing her back to her bed.

Sansa woke in a sweat and panic. Alex was asleep next to her and Lady at the foot of the bed. The wolf raised its head and hopped up on the bed nestling in between her and the boy. Lady always knew how to soothe her jittery master nowadays. The nightmares were worse than Sansa ever remembered them. Mrs. Ames was growing concerned at the dark circles under her eyes but nervous about giving her a tonic to make her sleep. Sansa was terribly weak as the baby slowly grew. The old woman did not want to make matters worse and offered what remedies she could, but whatever plagued Sansa was beyond help. Sansa feared this child would kill her long before she could give it a breath of life. Alex had been a breeze compared to this.

Months had passed since Petyr left her at the Eyrie. That last night, Sansa had a terrible nightmare and begged him not to go. His hands, red with blood and holding his ring out to her, had Sansa fearing the worst. It was a bad omen. Petyr consoled and spoke of sweet nothings to calm her down. He made promises and told her not to worry. It was to be all over soon. He made love to her that very night. Every caress and loving touch convincing her to trust him. He swore on his life that he would come back safe. He would always come for her, Petyr said. Home before December he promised.

He would write, he told her. After three brief letters, meant to be as impersonal as possible if more than her eyes glanced upon them, nothing more came. He was aboard on business and would be home soon. Perfunctory and simple. No note of affection, love or mention of the children. The first day of December had come and gone and yet Petyr still had not returned. It had been rainy for weeks but no snow at all. Winter had not come yet which was very odd for so late in the year. Not one letter came from him and Sansa wrote a few but did not dare say anything crucial in case someone else might read it. No one suspected him, Petyr advised her that morning of his departure. She was worrying about nothing, he consoled again and again.

“Do not think on Myranda’s words. They are meaningless. I will take care of everything, sweetling. Trust me,” he purred and held her tight against his warm body.

“I trust you,” she sighed and snuggled deeper into his embrace.

“Do you?” he breathed into Sansa’s ear making her turn around in his arms.

His whiskers were rough under her fingers.

“Yes,” she whispered back.

“Then do as I tell you,” he instructed lightly. “Go home. Stay away from town. Just until I return home. It’s almost over, Sansa. You’ll never have to worry about anything ever again. We’ll be free – to do as we please.”

Sansa wanted to believe him with all her heart but those dreams were only getting worse. They had to mean something. The little girl, the graveyard...Petyr’s hands drenched in blood. He treated her like a child with night terrors. Kissing away her imaginary fears as if the mere press of his lips were the cure to her ailment. How many times did she stand in a boiling lake, see the girl burning at the stake, the voices constantly telling her she didn’t belong... In one dream, Sansa felt the bullet as she died next to her family, in another she was drowning. They were all horrific in one way or another. Her baby was dead and a changeling took her place. Alex crying, Petyr bent on his knees wailing...

Right before Sansa might learn something to explain these strange visions, she would wake and only remember bits and pieces, none of them fitting together. Petyr was wrong, there was something here. A warning. It had to be. Maybe there was something he wasn’t telling her. Petyr had plans within plans. He told her months ago that that he made provisions for her and the children as a last resort – in case anything went wrong.

The morning before they left for the Eyrie, Petyr took her hand guiding her to the secret panel in his dressing room.

“We hardly have time for this,” Sansa giggled at the dirty thought.

“We’ll barely have enough time if we hurry,” Petyr replied but didn’t smile, lighting a candle.

Petyr led her down the hidden stairs but stopped in front of the padlocked oak door. Sansa’s heart pounded as he fished the key from his vest pocket and unlocked it.

“Why are you showing me this – now of all times?” she breathed in horror.

“You need to know,” he replied simply.

Pushing the heavy door open, the smell was dank and metallic. Petyr entered but Sansa’s feet couldn’t move. She had wondered for ages what she might find behind this door, now that the moment presented itself, she was frozen.

“There’s nothing to fear, I am with you,” Petyr finally smiled thinly as he offered his hand.

Sansa took a deep breath and gripped his hand tightly, following him into the chamber of horrors past.

“Watch your step, sweetling. There’s a torch over here. Then you’ll understand,” he tried to ease her obvious fears.

Sansa stumbled a bit, lifting her skirts to walk. The floor was uneven and didn’t feel like stone. She held onto Petyr following him along when he suddenly stopped. A torch lit up quickly and Sansa screamed at the face in front of her, whipping around into her husband’s chest.

“Sshhh, my love. It’s all right,” Petyr held her, setting the candle down. Sansa opened an eye and saw that the face was made of iron. An Iron Maiden. The hollowed eyes were black as the metal female face stared blankly at them. Sansa had read about such medieval torture devices. A person was placed inside the upright sarcophagus where strategically placed spikes would pierce the body when closed, and the victim would slowly bleed to death. Arya was always curious about such things that riddled Sansa with terror. Surely such thing didn’t exist, they were just old medieval tales. Yet, here it stood and Sansa wondered how many people perished in such a terrible thing.

The vaulted stone ceiling and the many horrors flickered in the torch light. A table meant to pull a man’s arms and legs from their sockets, cages that hung from the ceiling, chains, a strange looking pyramid, an iron bull, shackles, and all manners of axes, knives... Sansa couldn’t look anymore. She hid her face in Petyr’s chest and wondered why he decided to bring her down here.

“I couldn’t very well give you the grand tour years ago, you might have run away for good,” Petyr japed, trying to lighten the mood in such a awful place.

“Why did you bring me here?” she mumbled into his clothing.

“It’s of vital importance, my love,” he began. “Things you need to know for your own protection.”

“Protection? I don’t understand,” she said looking up at his face. “What could possibly protect me in this god forsaken room?”

“Ever wonder why I *really* kept it locked?” he half-smirked, not attempting humor at all.

“It’s a bloody torture chamber, why wouldn’t you? Should have bricked it up like you said you would,” Sansa muttered, her eyes nervously darting around the room.

“Perhaps later, but there’s a reason I needed to show you this room,” Petyr observed her worried face. He lit another torch and pulled her along until coming to an indentation in the stone wall. “Here.”

“Wooden crates? Please don’t tell me they’re filled with the bodies of your enemies,” she squirmed at the thought.

Petyr pried up a wood plank and lowered the torch so Sansa could get a better look. Afraid of what she might see, Sansa slowly made her way the stacks of crates and finally peered inside.

Gold! A pirates bounty of it. Coins, bars, a few goblets and smaller trinkets, but all gold.

“Where did you get all of this?” Sansa asked in shock.

“I didn’t steal it, if that’s what you’re wondering,” he japed. “I’ve been hoarding it down here for years. It’s everything I have other than a few smaller residences here and there. This is the bulk of my fortune other than what’s in play at the moment.”

“Why are you showing me this? Why now?” Sansa feared his answer.

“It’s all yours, sweetling. Every coin. This is what I can give you if misfortune were ever to befall me. You take it and run. Go abroad. There’s enough here that you and the children will want for nothing. I used the crates instead of trunks. Less obvious to as to its precious cargo. Handle it with care and only whom you must,” her beloved instructed his wishes.

Worry and panic filled her core and Sansa couldn’t even fathom running away without him. Alone for the rest of her days? No, Petyr wouldn’t do that to her.

“You speak as if you don’t trust in your machinations. You don’t intend to fail, do you?” she muttered, feeling sick all over again.

“No, but I don’t make a move, construct a single plan without a contingency and another contingency,” Petyr explained slowly. “I cannot be selfish anymore. I have too much dear to me, too much at stake not to make sure what I love most is safe.”

“How am I supposed to get this out of here? You can’t fit these crates through that panel, Petyr,” Sansa whimpered. She didn’t care about this fortune he was giving to her. She couldn’t think about leaving without him.

“That leads me to the other thing you must see,” Petyr said, taking her hand once again. At the end of the room, was another door. It opened with difficulty as the dirt floor had built up around its edges. A long rocky corridor lay before them and Sansa did not want to go. “Come, you must see where it ends.”

They walked for several minutes and when her eyes finally had adjusted to the darkness, a hint of light showed them the way out. Sansa could hear the waves on the lakeshore and birds chirping. Roots and shrubbery had overgrown the exit and when they finally made their way outside, Sansa took a deep breath of crisp autumn air. That room and corridor had been suffocating. Glancing behind her, the opening looking nothing more than an animal den. It was large enough to carry out the crates but the overgrowth hid it well. It would be very easy to dismiss or not even see it at all – unless one was looking for it.

“Brune can be trusted. I have paid him handsomely and promised him a small fortune to make sure you and the children reach safety. William, I believe is trustworthy as is the old woman. Take only what and whom you must. It will be best to travel light. I don’t have to tell you to pay the servants well. Gold buys silence for a time – hopefully it will be enough to get you far from here,” Petyr wrapped his arms around her waist.

“You speak as if you expect the worst, just as I feared.”

Sansa held onto his arms but couldn’t look at him. The closer to the end, the worse it seemed to get. This was a very dangerous game Petyr was playing and she had no choice but do as he instructed. What choice did she have? None. Sansa had to think of her son and unborn child.

Petyr placed the key in her hand and did not say a word.

“You can’t leave us here alone. Take us with you,” Sansa begged, the key digging into her skin.

“No,” he breathed. “If you leave with me, it all goes to hell. There are too many eyes now. Be wary.”

“Then let it go to hell,” Sansa cried. “We can run away. Go anywhere. Live anywhere. Somewhere, where they’ll never find us. If you love me, you’ll let this thing go. I’m terrified, Petyr. We, your family, are not pawns in your game.”

“I know, sweetling,” Petyr hushed, taking her in his arms. “But I have to see this through. Don’t you understand? I can’t stop it. We are in this to the very end.”

Sansa stood, gazing out the bedroom window. The key was hidden in her dresser. Since that day, she had not ventured down there again. A fortune in gold lay underneath this house and Sansa could have left the moment she and Alex returned to Harrenhal. She tried desperately to convince Petyr to come back with her, not to go. He was stubborn in his revenge and nothing would deter him from it.

The idea that plagued her for months was whether she should leave now or stay and wait. Petyr didn’t get this far by being brash and stupid. Did she really trust him, his plan? Looking at her

sleeping son on the bed, Sansa rubbed her growing belly. The baby still small but before long she would be too big to move quickly or easily.

So many nights, Sansa sat at Petyr's desk and wrote letter after letter. Those terrible dreams haunted her every day. She wrote how much she loved him and wished he'd return home. Prayed for a letter from him, telling her he was all right. Was he thinking about them wherever he was? Sealed with wax and the seal of House Baelish, they were never mailed. Sansa thought of tossing them in the fire many times, but couldn't. Petyr would never read them. She wrote them only for herself. Pretending that everything would be all right. Glancing at her dresser, those letters were neatly folded and safely tucked away next to that damned key.

There was a strange atmosphere throughout the house. All the servants were nervous and last week, two maids left for town with Mrs. Ames and never came back. Brune refused to let Sansa leave the estate and would only tell her that Petyr would return soon.

Return soon, he always told her. How did he know? Petyr did not send anymore letters, there was nothing to inform Sansa if he was alive or not. Was he writing to Brune instead? Did Joffrey have any idea to the plot against him? He would kill Petyr for sure if even suspected of any crime. No matter what Petyr said, Miranda's threats haunted her. Her husband let his emotions fly that afternoon at the Eryie. A furious father wasn't necessarily a traitor with a plot to kill the king, but Miranda was certainly capable of doing something despicable. There was rage in that woman mixed with fear of her own husband and sons. Sansa turned the events over and over in her head. Miranda was smug in her perceived power. She knew the realm was suffering and only the Vale and Riverlands seemed immune. Immune, until recently that is.

The whole country was in turmoil now. Everyone at Harrenhal felt it. Every time Mrs. Ames and William ventured into town, they returned with less and less. Strange rumors were spreading of a sickness moving across the county in the past weeks. An unknown illness that struck even the local farm animals. Some of the southern merchants had left town on the Gulltown steamship and yet none of it seemed to bother Brune.

Did he know more than he was telling her? Did Petyr tell her everything? The doubts were building day by day. Sansa often wondered if she should defy Petyr and his man-servant and flee to Riverrun. Would Brune really allow her to leave if she wanted? Petyr said she could if everything went sour, but how would she know? What if he was dead, injured or held captive? Sansa wouldn't know anything until it was too late.

A sharp pain pierced just below her ribcage. The girl wasn't going to allow any sleep tonight. Just as Sansa knew she carried a son with Alex, she knew for certain this would be a girl. Dreams of that red-haired child were rampant. Sometimes she looked like the little spirit, the faerie that had blissfully remained quiet of late – that little girl who constantly told Sansa she did not belong here. Who didn't belong? Sansa? The girl? The dreamlike puzzle was beyond her comprehension. One thing was certain – it meant something. All Sansa could see was Petyr's bloody hands and feel his cold skin every time she woke from those awful dreams. They always seemed to end with him.

That afternoon's chill swept through the house, even though the fires were burning brightly in almost every room. William had taken Alex riding with Brune. The boy was fit to be tied in such seclusion. Going into town was forbidden and Sansa wouldn't allow him to ride his new horse, citing that Petyr had to return home first. It wasn't about Petyr necessarily. Sansa did not want that boy out of her sight and she couldn't ride in her delicate condition. She trusted the men, but whatever was on the horizon was itching closer and closer. If anything were to happen, Sansa wanted her child by her side.

When Mrs. Ames took Sarah to town, Alex was in a rage once again. There was no consoling him and the stress was making Sansa sick. Letting the boy ride was best for both of them. It wasn't his fault; Sansa's nerves were just as raw. Wanting to finish her painting before Petyr came home, Sansa couldn't even manage to do a thing with it. It made her angry. Petyr should be here with his family, sitting in that chair reading his book – not a painting of the man who was missing.

It wasn't right. None of this was right. Petyr wouldn't go this long with no communication between them. Something had to be wrong. Throwing the paintbrush across the room, Sansa gathered up the canvas and marched towards the stairs when Mrs. Ames came in weathered and beaten down by the cold with Sarah trailing behind.

"Damned, thick-skulled man..." she muttered before looking up and seeing the mistress of the house. "My lady. I'm afraid we'll need to make do with what we have until his lordship returns."

"It's become worse?" Sansa said cautiously, eyeing the young maid.

"Sarah, will you take these to the kitchen. I need to speak with Lady Baelish," the old woman asked kindly to the fearful girl, handing her the basket of goods.

Mrs. Ames seemed worse for wear as she slowly followed Sansa up the stairs and finally closing the door to her bed chamber. Sansa sat down and took a deep breath. Her instinct was right, something was very wrong.

"What is it?" Sansa finally asked.

"Whatever this plague, it's sweeping across the county. I don't know where it's come from. It's too sudden, my lady. I fear other forces at work here. I think – yes, I do believe that you should consider leaving," Mrs. Ames said as she paced the room.

"Leave?" Sansa stood shakily. "What do you mean other forces?"

The idea of mischief making faeries popped into her mind. Sansa had been reading more and more since Petyr's absence. Changelings, faerie mounds, wailing banshees, puca pools and shape shifters. Sansa wanted to take solace that since she had not seen a banshee which hopefully meant Petyr was safe from harm. They were rumored to come right before a beloved's death. However,

faeries and goblins were believed by many Northerners to create havoc. Items lost, fences toyed with so animals wandered from farms, spectral horses, sickness, disappearing children...

She is not a child, Sansa remembered Mrs. Ames warning from months ago.

"Whatever misfortune that has befallen the rest of realm has made its way here it seems," the woman started but seemed apprehensive to continue. "Two farms near the woods, all of their goats and cattle has succumbed to some illness overnight. It's been happening for weeks around the county, m'lady. The township feels more like a ghost town. More shops are closed up. The local folk are pouring into the church... and that pious, piece of..."

"He's come back?" Sansa asked knowing she didn't even need to say his name.

"I don't think he ever left, my child," Mrs. Ames muttered in disgust. "He's leeching on the people's fear. Some think it's the workings of the Devil and others... well, I haven't heard the smallfolk speak of faerie mischief in a long, long time."

"The Riverlands don't believe in such old beliefs. That's purely Northern..."

"Yes, and they're being blamed for it," Mrs. Ames sighed, sitting down. "I didn't want to scare you before, but there are Northerners coming through the county, heading east to the Vale. Escaping that damned Duke of Winterfell, if I had gold to wager. Old hatred is brewing again and whatever is spreading seems to be blamed on them coming south – at least that is what His Holiness is preaching in town."

"Oh God," Sansa exhaled and sat back down, her stomach lurching.

"God has nothing to do with this, nor the Devil," the old woman eyed her young mistress. "People have the capacity to let hate twist their minds and do the ugliest things out of fear."

"It couldn't be *them*, could it?" Sansa wondered.

"I can't see what they have to gain by this," she watched Sansa carefully. "Have they spoken to you recently?"

"No," Sansa told the truth. The dreams were a different matter, weren't they?

"No," Mrs. Ames wrung her old hands. "They protect animals. They wouldn't do this. I don't know what to make of it. Whatever is going on, nothing good will come of it."

Sansa noticed Mrs. Ames rubbing her wrist nervously. That scar, she remembered from years ago was bright red. The woman spotted Sansa's stare and stopped the scratching.

"It's old, from when I was a young girl. Some scars, never heal," Mrs. Ames sighed.

"What happened?"

"It's a burn. It never healed properly, my child. Nothing more. Sometimes it bothers me but most often I forget I have it," the woman smiled sadly.

Mrs. Ames was very old. Hard to believe, a burn, even a deep one would still give her grief a lifetime later. Then again, Petyr rubbed his shoulder with the scar. It bothered him from time to time. And what of emotional scars? Both Sansa and Petyr carried those... for years on end.

Sansa heard Petyr's voice in her head. He wouldn't have told her about the gold, and what to do if he wasn't positive that she and the children could be in danger. Against her own fears and judgment, Sansa stayed and waited. She worried that by leaving, she could put Petyr at risk. News would travel fast if she suddenly left Harrenhal by herself – without him. What would he do if he knew? Would he leave, no matter where he was on the chess board and seek her out? Would Petyr risk it all and come to her? What was more important to him? These questions plagued her every moment of every day. Sansa needed answers.

Observing the old northern woman, Sansa looked down at her hands and wondered. Holding her palms out, Sansa eyed the housekeeper.

"Tell me what you see," she demanded quietly. "You read them once."

"The lines do not change, child," Mrs. Ames smiled sadly. "It's not the future. The lines are what things *are*."

"Tell me what you see. Everything you see," she asked again, holding her palms up.

Reluctantly, the old woman sat closer and took the younger woman's hands.

The wrinkled hands were cold and clammy as a bony finger traced different lines and turned her palm this way and that way in the light.

"Two children, as I told once years ago. Two, you have," she smiled. "This here, is passion and love. I'm certain that is true."

"What else?" Sansa asked when the woman became quiet. "I remember my old nana telling me about fate and life lines. What do they tell you?"

"The 'lifeline' isn't always what you think it is, child," Mrs. Ames cautioned. "This line here can denote the people around you, how it affects you. And you have a fate line. Not everyone has a fate line."

Sansa's heart skipped a beat.

"The line starts here and see how deep it is? Then, here, it becomes entwined with 'life' and another line. I suspect that is your husband," the woman instructed but she was holding something back. "But here, it splits into three."

Sansa pulled her hand away and studied it. Mrs. Ames was right, it was a single line that entwined

like a braid but as her own finger trailed its short length, the braid split in three. A double line continued with breaks all the way down until meeting her wrist. The other two were cut off midway, abruptly fading into nothing.

“This split, what does it mean?” Sansa worried. “Is that me and fate parting with him, or the other way around? The children? Or does fate not matter after this?”

“I don’t know child. The most important things to you are your family – and I don’t mean the one that is dead and buried.” Mrs. Ames sighed. “Something significant is about to happen to you. Something that cannot be stopped. I don’t know what it is, but it’s very soon. Look here, see where you first entwined?”

Sansa nodded and could see what the woman was pointing to. That little braid was short, very short – denoting a small expanse of time. How long had it been since she met Petyr in Riverrun? The single line was long, from birth. The braid started a quarter way down and quickly ended at the split – a fork where the lines separated completely. There, the double braid had breaks in it all the way down.

Did she and Petyr continue on? Was one of them in danger of death? What about ...

“The children?”

Mrs. Ames closed her eyes and shook her head.

“I can’t tell you which is which, my dear,” she said sadly. “Two of you are moving on, and two of you are not.”

Sansa started to panic and felt queasy again.

“If I bring Alex to you, would you be able to tell from his hands?”

The terror was filling her and those dreams started to fill her mind vividly. Petyr ... and the girl. None of them had Alex in them. It was always Petyr and the red-haired girl. Was she her daughter or the faerie in tricking Sansa’s fearful mind?

“Perhaps, but I don’t know how much help it will be,” Mrs. Ames added. “The four of you are mingled. I’m afraid, you’ll only know when it happens. As I said, it’s not fortune telling, the past or the future... it’s what *IS* – what is meant to be. What has always been.”

Sansa’s stomach knotted and she had to lie back on the bed. They should have left long ago. Something was coming, but she didn’t know what or when. Sansa only knew in her gut that it was coming.

“My son, send someone out to fetch him. I need him here. We need to leave Harrenhall today,” Sansa whispered in anguish, looking outside at the afternoon sun.

“And your lord husband?” the housekeeper inquired meekly.

“If he’s alive, he will come for me. For us,” she whispered more to herself than the old woman. “If he’s...” Sansa couldn’t even say it and closed her eyes. “I’ll know. In my soul, I’ll know it.”

“What do you wish to take with you, my lady?”

“The bare essentials. We’ll need to move quickly. We will need a wagon. There are some crates that must go with us. I’ll need William and Brune to fetch two for now. I’ll pay the servants a handsome severance. Then I will say we are heading west to Lannisport and from there, book passage to the colonies,” Sansa instructed.

“West?” the old woman asked surprised.

“It would be obvious to head east and take a ship, so they might think I’m being clever and head west instead. Who would suspect a traitor heading to the royal family’s port city? I’m praying that’s what they think. If not, hopefully, we will be on a ship rounding Westeros by time word gets out. That is ...” she glanced at the faithful housekeeper and friend. “If you’ll come with me.”

Mrs. Ames, patted her hands and smiled gloomily, “Of course I will, my dear.”

Sansa sat up and almost fainted. She was terribly dizzy all of a sudden. All this fear had her nerves raw and now the room was spinning.

“Lie down, child. You need to rest for the sake of that little one you carry,” Mrs. Ames helped Sansa further on the soft bed. “I’ll send for your son and make the arrangements. Don’t you worry your troubled head anymore.”

“I want my drawings, music and the painting of him to take with me,” Sansa directed. “I must have them with me. They’re the only things I have of him.”

“I’ll pack it myself, my dear girl. Lie down and close your eyes for a few minutes,” the woman gently pushed her back down. “I’ll be back to check on you and bring something to eat. You need to keep your strength up.”

Her breathing was ragged, but Sansa closed her eyes and willed herself to calm down. Maybe she was overreacting, but couldn’t risk her children’s lives on a gut feeling she didn’t act on. Why didn’t Petyr write? The last letter she sent was weeks ago, and she waited patiently for a reply that didn’t come.

The mental and physical exhaustion was too much and Sansa felt herself drifting on that dizzying tide.

The house was empty and full of dust. In the main gallery, her portrait was partially covered with a heavy cloth with only that emerald ring on a porcelain hand visible. Fingers brushed dust off the tarnished plaque on the ornately carved frame.

Duchess of Harrenhal

A man's voice, in anguish, asked the painting, "Where are you? Help me find you. Talk to me, little witch, I'm begging you."

A somber melody echoed and feet wandered quickly to the music room. It was murky and empty yet the piano was playing by itself.

"I know this song," a man's voice said in wonder.

"That's not possible," Sansa's voice replied.

A bright light was blinding her once again as she fell to the floor.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" the man demanded. A terrible sound was piercing her ears and suddenly, everything was muffled and dark.

Sansa's feet were bare and covered in filth as she walked along the ice cold cobblestone. The crowd was silent as they watched and Sansa choked on the putrid smoke. The little girl screamed in agony as the fire consumed her and Sansa couldn't save her even as she lunged to pull at the burning timber. Her hands were burnt as men pulled her away from the bonfire.

"Cabhair liom le do thoil. Beidh mé aon rud a dhéanamh. Sábhail mé! – Please help me. I'll do anything. Save me!" – the girl wailed.

"Let her burn, for God's sake, she's dead already," a burly voice yelled, as he dragged Sansa away.

Sansa screamed and screamed in vain but no one was listening. The girl's tortured voice could still be heard inside the roar of the flames.

"Tóg dí! Tá sí mise! – Take her! She is yours! –"

"Dia, logh dom. – God, forgive me –" Sansa's voice uttered in grief and darkness enveloped her.

"There is no God," Petyr's voice resonated from somewhere. "God, nor the Devil have anything to do with this. If there is a God, He turned his back on me a lifetime ago – this is my penance."

Petyr was laying on the lounge in the music room, holding a stack of letters. They were worn by the years and he studied them as if searching for a clue to a puzzle. The floor was littered with her drawings of him.

"Papa? I want to go home," a child whimpered in the distance and Sansa wanted to hold the child and tell them it would be alright, but the room disappeared and suddenly she stood in her bedroom, the one they shared in love and sorrow.

"Come back to me, Petyr. I've come home," Sansa sobbed softly. "You promised me. Don't you leave me here all alone."

"Mine for yours," his voice gilded across the darkness.

Sansa turned around and there he stood, holding out his golden wedding band. She put it on her finger and gave him her emerald ring.

"Yours for mine," she echoed back.

"I couldn't stop it, sweetling," he groaned in pain. "It's all my fault. It should have been me."

His hands were drenched with fresh blood, making small pools on the floor. They looked like birds' wings, fanning out along carpet. Growing from the pools, the wings stretched out and one by one red ravens flapped and crowded, rising into the air above them. They circled and flew, their wings dripping with blood and streaking across the hazy sky.

"Petyr, what have you done?" she asked in horror.

"You were wrong, sweetling," he stared at her with lifeless eyes. "I am that kind of man...a monster."

Sansa's head spun like a top and from a foggy distance, she saw her beloved talking with a young and handsome man with dark hair. The carriage waited as the men were walking out of the tavern. They were laughing and Sansa called out to him but he couldn't hear her. The snow had begun to fall gently as each hot breath billowed into the icy air. Sansa yelled but her bare feet were frozen to the ground. The sound that emanated from her lungs wasn't human but finally Petyr glanced in her direction with a look of questioning in his eyes.

"Baelish, is it? Lord Baelish?" a man asked, walking around the carriage. His hair was dark and wild with the eyes of a devil.

Petyr turned to face the man, still staring at Sansa in the distance. She screamed at the top of her lungs when a gleaming blade thrust into her love's abdomen, taking him by complete surprise. Blood dripped, painting the frost in droplets of red. Petyr collapsed to his knees and Sansa couldn't stop wailing.

Blood raven, they called him. Send the ravens, he told them.

It ends today...

Sansa woke with tears spilling down her cheeks. She barely made it to the basin, when the contents of her stomach came up. All she could see was Petyr getting stabbed, again and again. The look of fear and regret in his eyes. He promised. He said he would come back.

He promised.

No, it was all a lie. It wasn't true. A few weeks, he told her, before the snow... it hadn't snowed yet. There was time. He was just later than he said. A delay. If he was dead... she would know. Sansa would know it in her heart.

He won't come for you...

That voice rang in her mind and Sansa marched down the hallway to the south wing. Knowing Mrs. Ames kept the door locked, Sansa was about to bang on the wood when it opened slightly. The door creaked a bit and she waited for a moment, not sure what would happen. It was quiet, and Sansa finally mustered up some courage and opened the door, striding into the blue room.

"What are you doing to me?" she bellowed at nothing. "Is he dead? Tell me the truth. Is he dead??"

Silence answered and Sansa cursed herself. Perhaps the spirit had gone for good and now Sansa was left with her own madness. Maybe Mrs. Ames had been wrong this whole time. The girl knew Myranda was coming, she knew and told Sansa about Petyr... at the same time she lied in the labyrinth.

"Please, talk to me," Sansa cried in vain. "Tell me he is alive. That's all I want to know. I've never asked anything of you. Tell me the dream isn't true."

"*You saw it yourself;*" it finally answered serenely. "*You know what is true. The boy will take his life...*"

No...I refuse to believe it. It's a lie.

"*The ravens will fly soon, bringing death to all. Poison fills their mouths and the boy will die. Curious, one by one, they answer the call. Poison fills their hearts and minds and they will all lie,*" it sang sweetly but the riddle filled Sansa with horror.

"No more riddles," Sansa whimpered, closing her eyes. "Stop this, I beg you."

"*You did it to yourselves,*" the voice answered ominously. "*Every choice you made. I tried to help you...*"

Do not take their help, the old woman's voice warned. Who should she believe? A deep fear coursed through her veins and every fiber of Sansa's being told her she should have left weeks, months ago. If Petyr was dead, then she had to run. There was no other choice. Her heart ached. He would come. He promised. That was the only reason she stayed. Sansa believed him. What was she supposed to do? A madwoman believed dreams were real and acted on them as fact. Was she mad after all this time?

"...now, they are here and you must choose," the girl's voice faded away.

Sansa ran to the window and looked out across the grounds. Three men were riding fast from the south by the lake and Sansa's heart dropped at the sight that followed.

Not waiting a second, she hurried down the stairs towards the south terrace, as Lady scurried after her mistress.

"MRS. AMES!" she screamed. "Mrs. Ames! Where's my son?"

Dear God, why did she wait? Why didn't they leave?

"Damnit! MRS. AMES!!!" she yelled again.

"Yes, child, I'm here," the old woman panted. "We were packing the carriage. I sent Jonathan to bring back your son, William and Brune. Are they not back yet?"

Sansa whipped open the door and ran out to the terrace just as Brune lifted Alex to the ground. The boy scampered to his mother excitedly, while the looks on the men's faces were nothing short of panic.

"Mummy, mummy! I saw real, life soldiers!" Alex squealed with delight in his innocence.

"Gold coats," Brune panted heavily. "Broke off from the Kings Road. They'll be here any minute."

The king's soldiers! Dear God in heaven, her mind raced. Mrs. Ames gasped as the other maids chattered nervously and one ran back inside.

"You're leaving right now, my lady," Brune directed with authority. "Leave everything behind."

"Where will we go? We'll never make it to the steamship at port and we can't go to Riverrun. We'll never outrun them in a carriage. I can't mount a horse..." Sansa rambled as Alex didn't understand the gravity of the situation. "This isn't the local magistrate, this is the King's men. They're here for only one reason."

Brune picked up Alex and Sansa screamed in terror. "Then I'm taking the boy," he said striding to his horse. Lady barked and tore at the man's pant leg.

"No! You can't take him! My son!" Sansa cried and William ran over pulling the boy from the older and larger man's grasp.

"You stupid woman!" Brune growled. "You want to see your son dead? They're here for you. Curse Petyr for his weakness. I warned him... I knew you both were going to ruin everything."

Alex wiggled free of Brune's hold and ran into the house. "I won't go with you!"

"Alexander! Come back here!" Sansa yelled but the boy was gone. Lady had chased after him and disappeared through the doors.

Cresting the hill near the edge of the lake, she could see them. There was no time.

"Is he alive?" she demanded of the man, climbing on his horse.

"You better pray he is, even then I don't think it will save either one of you now," Brune tossed back, looking at the approaching soldiers. "I'm not dying for you."

The man turned his horse and rode across grounds towards the woods and Sansa felt as if she would faint. He left them. The man Petyr entrusted to protect them, just abandoned them.

Sansa had to think fast. She picked up her skirts and ran back into the house.

"Alex! Come here this instant!" she demanded, looking in each room. Mrs. Ames gentle hand on her arm, stilled the young mother a moment.

Fear and confusion were on the faces of her loyal servants, no, *friends*. Sansa's eyes welled up and felt the panic rising in her chest.

"Mrs. Ames, I'll need something to keep him quiet. Something to make him sleep," she directed, trying to hold herself together.

"Perhaps if we all..." the old woman began.

"No," Sansa pressed firmly. "Brune was right. They're here for one reason. They'll tear the house apart. I'll give them what they want. William, follow me to the study. Mrs. Ames, meet me in my bedroom as quickly as you can."

The woman did as she instructed and Sarah followed the housekeeper with tears in her eyes. Sansa called out to her son, begging him to come to her. He was nowhere downstairs and Sansa knew where he might be. Entering the study, she found the boy hiding under his father's desk. Coaxing him out, Alex was already crying in fear and held onto his mother's skirts as she opened a secret panel in the desk. The leather bag was heavy and it was all she could give them.

"William, disperse this equally among the staff and run from this place. Thieves will turn this house upside down once the news spreads," she told him, handing the bag of gold over to the young man.

"My lady, I cannot leave you like this. Your son?" William hesitated and Sansa closed his hands over the bag.

"William, do as I tell you, please," she sniffed and held onto the man's shoulders, looking him in the eyes. "Alex is not here. He is with his father. Do you understand? I am here alone. Don't give them any reason to search the house. Let them take what they want."

Gathering up her son, Sansa quickly moved across the hallway to her bedroom. Mrs. Ames was already there and Sarah clearly had no intention of leaving either.

"Do you have it?" she asked the northern woman, receiving a nod.

Rifling through her dresser, she found the letters and key.

"William, meet me downstairs," she said and the young butler obeyed her command.

Out the window, the women could see the soldiers. There was no more time to explain much further.

"Follow me," Sansa said walking to Petyr's dressing room.

Opening the secret panel, she ushered the two women inside but her son refused to move.

"Alex, I need you to go with Mrs. Ames and Sarah right now. You behave and do everything they tell you."

The tears started to fall. Dear God, this was it. She may never see her child again.

"No!" he cried and held onto her tighter. "I want to stay with you."

"I know you do, my love, but you have to go. Your father needs you. He will come for you, I swear it," Sansa hugged him and prayed that it wasn't a lie.

"Hide with us, m'lady," Sarah sobbed and Sansa smiled weakly.

"No, if they have me, maybe they won't look for him. If we all disappear, there will be no where we can go. Nowhere to hide," Sansa explained. Yes, this way the only way. If Joffrey sent them, he was looking to get her or Petyr. He just might overlook the child. It would be easier for two common women to hide a child on their own. An aristocratic mother and son would be too obvious on the run.

Alex cried loudly and Sansa's heart was breaking. She didn't want to leave him but this was the only way. He had to be quiet or they would find him inside the walls of this house. Kneeling down, she held her child for what might be the last time.

"I love you, my strong and brave wolf. I'm doing this for you," Sansa cried softly. "Your mother loves you more than anything in this world."

The boy wailed and Sansa nodded to the old woman. A soft handkerchief was placed over his nose and mouth, all too quickly the boy fell limp and the young maid lifted him into her shaking arms. Sansa handed the key to Mrs. Ames with trembling hands with a single candle.

"Go down the stairs and the first door you reach, this key opens the padlock. *Don't scream,*" she told the women. "There's an old torture chamber down there. There are crates with gold. Take what you need. Another door and passageway will lead to the lake. It's well covered. Wait until they leave. No matter what you hear, do not come out."

Sansa gazed at her sleeping boy and couldn't breathe.

"He's all I have. Get him to his father if you can. I'm trusting you with his life," Sansa handed Mrs. Ames the letters with the only other address she knew of in Kings Landing.

The women heard a loud commotion downstairs.

"Lady Baelish!"

"Go," Sansa said wiping the tears from her face.

"I'll take care of him, child. You have my solemn oath," the old woman embraced her tightly. "You are stronger than you know."

Sansa closed the door and looked in Petyr's dressing room mirror. She quickly cleaned up her face and took several calming breaths. She had to convince them. Whatever happened in Kings Landing, Joffrey must know about Petyr. The sadistic king really didn't need a reason to do anything to Sansa as it was, but if Petyr's treason had been found out...

She was going to die. They very well might execute her right here. Sansa walked out of the bedroom and could hear the men downstairs and the see the scared maids at the end of the hallway looking down and watching the intrusion below. Sansa prayed for one kindness, that her son not see her dead body. Hopefully, the women would just run away and if Petyr was still alive...

He must be dead. He wouldn't allow this to happen. He would have sent a letter that he failed and they must run. Unless that letter was intercepted... Petyr would have come home if he knew. Brune didn't seem to be sure if Petyr was dead either. All Sansa had to hold on to was a shred of hope at least, if the God were merciful, son and father would be reunited.

Coming to the last step, the captain came around the corner as other soldiers were searching rooms and three marched past her, up the stairs. Sansa commanded herself to stay calm and kept a face of indifference.

"May I ask what you are doing in my home, Captain?" she asked politely and feigning a touch of surprise. Being haughty would not serve her in this moment.

"Where's your son, Lady Baelish?" the man asked pointedly.

"My son?" she raised her eyebrows with a questioning. "He's with his father of course. My lord husband took him on one of his business trips to the mainland weeks ago. They were due to come home very soon. Has something happened to my husband?"

The lies spilled out of her mouth easily hoping she made Petyr proud. He always told her she was a terrible liar. The best thing she could do is pretend to be the innocent and unknowing little wife.

"I haven't the faintest clue. I was told you and your son would be here," the captain eyed her suspiciously.

"Well, it seems you are misinformed, sir," Sansa replied calmly. "Search the house if you must, but you'll only find me and the servants. I'm very confused as to why the king's soldiers would come this far to Harrenhal. My husband is not here and I can't imagine what you..."

"Search the house," the captain ordered. "We'll know if you're telling the truth soon enough."

"Of course, I'm telling the truth," she paced herself. "You still haven't told me why you're here."

"You there," the man ordered another soldier, ignoring her completely. "Get all these servants out front. Empty the house and stables."

Sansa tried to act like Petyr did in public, that air of nonchalance was hard to drum up when her mind was screaming in terror.

Grabbing her arm, the captain pulled Sansa roughly through the foyer and out to the front steps. Pushed to the side, Sansa tripped and fell into the marble column. William made a movement to come to her aid, but Sansa shook her head, telling him to stay where he was. She was the lady of the house, wife of a Marquess, but by the way they manhandled her, Sansa knew her title afforded her nothing any longer.

Sansa and the servants could hear crashes and shattering of things as the soldiers pried through the house. Minutes ticked by slowly and with every passing second, Sansa stood in horror. What would they do if they found she was hiding her son? Men from the stables were escorted to where the rest of the house servants and their mistress waited nervously. Suddenly, Sansa thought of Lady and where she might be. That wolf was always at her side.

Just the thought entered her mind, a cold, wet nose nudged her hand. Sansa smiled at the loyal animal and waited.

"Corporal?" the captain yelled.

"Nothing, sir," the man replied and a wave of relief swept over Sansa. At least her child would be safe.

The captain walked over to Sansa scrutinizing her from head to toe.

"Search the woods. I saw men on horseback on our way here. She might have sent the boy off to hide," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," the man replied and a few men took their horses around the back of the house towards the woods.

"I told you he is with his father," Sansa finally uttered. "When my husband finds out how you've treated me..."

The captain laughed this time and Sansa's heart dropped to her stomach. Did he catch her in a lie?

That would mean only one thing...

"Your husband has no power over the king. I'm sure the king will deal with him accordingly when he returns... however, that's not my business. Will it be a surprise for him, do you think? Or did he always know what you were?" the captain smirked, taking a pair of shackles from a soldier. "Never shackled a lady before. I suppose there's a first for everything."

Before she could move, the man grabbed her wrists, and fixed the cold metal to them. Her mind panicked at the notion that Petyr was alive and did not seem to know about this.

"Lady Baelish, you are charged with offenses to his Majesty."

"What?" she scoffed. "I have done nothing! What offense?"

"You are charged and arrested for the practice of witchcraft and treason against his Majesty, the King. If the Marquess is found innocent of your heresy and treachery, the boy will be returned to his keeping," the man explained with a slight smile.

"I am no witch. Who accuses me?" Sansa protested in shock and pulled away only to have two soldiers grab her by the arms and drag her down the stone steps towards the captain's horse.

"Conspiracy against your king is punishable by death, and you are hereby taken to Lord Holloway's Town for sentencing," the captain continued.

Lady lunged and tore at one of the soldier's hands dragging her mistress. The man kicked the wolf but it did not stop the animal trying in vain to help her spirit mother in trouble.

"Kill that wolf!" the captain ordered and Sansa screamed in anguish.

"*Rith, mo mhíle stór! – Run, my darling! –*"

A soldier pulled his musket and shot at Lady, barely missing her hind leg. Two others laughed and aimed their rifles as the white wolf ran as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Run, Lady! Run!" Sansa cried out.

The animal disappeared down the grounds and towards the woods as a couple of soldiers ran after her.

"Hold! Come back here," the captain yelled and the two dejected soldiers walked back muttering in anger at their lost prize. "There's not time for sport."

Several maids were crying and others stood dumfounded at what was happening. Two men shoved Sansa into the horse, tying a rope to her shackled wrists, not caring to her obvious, delicate state.

"I hear they hang witches," one man chuckled, securing her wrists the captain's saddle.

"By God, you will not!" William roared and ran down, shoving two soldiers out of the way, attempting to help the young Marchioness.

"William, no!" she screamed and everything slowed down. He barely made it down the steps when the captain shot him. The young man fell to the ground and Sansa couldn't see through her tears. Women screamed and cried while soldier's of the king laughed at the boy's failed chivalry and loyalty to his pagan mistress.

One stable hand moved one step down, and the corporal aimed his musket.

"As you were," he warned and the man held his ground.

"Anyone else moves and you'll be arrested for sedition and tried for treason yourselves," the captain bellowed to the rest of the servants. He walked down and pushed Williams's body over in the dirt and readied his musket. "Are you willing to die for a witch? A Northern traitor?"

He kicked William in the head, rendering the boy cold. Satisfied with a smug grin, the captain mounted his horse and ordered his men to follow suit. Sansa stood sobbing uncontrollably, looking at the young man that tried to save her.

"It's a bit of walk, *my lady*," the captain smiled viciously and Sansa could see why Joffrey sent a man like this.

"She's with child," a little maid gasped loudly and Sansa cringed. Her belly was growing in her fifth month, but due to so much sickness, Sansa was still quite small.

"Child?" he chuckled. "A product of devil worship, no doubt. Does your husband know what he's raising?"

"As I said, I am no witch," she breathed harshly. "I am innocent. You, a God fearing man, would harm an innocent not even yet born into this world?"

"A Northern traitor, *innocent*?" he barked in laughter. "I served the Duke of Winterfell, girl. There are no innocent Northerners. All traitors and pagan, devil worshippers. You'll *walk*."

He jabbed his horse and the rope tightened, yanking Sansa along. She glanced back a few times, stumbling. The servants did not move as they watched her being pulled away.

"*Choinneáil slán*," she mumbled to herself. "Keep him safe."

Her pregnant belly ached as she tried to keep up with the horse's moderate gait. She would never make it to town. The townsfolk would see soldiers dragging her dead body by then.

"*Maith dom, ceann beag*."

Chapter End Notes

So, I've received some private comments on my Tumblr in regards to this chapter. I would just like to add... I'm asking for my readers trust at this point. This story is about to really change, then change again... and again. There are some chapters coming that will be hard to digest... but as I told one particular reader today,...if you knew the ending, you would understand. In the end, it all fits together (or I really fucked this story up---- always plausible lol)

If you've stuck with me THIS far.... hopefully, you'll stay through to the end.

Thanks to everyone for reading - and those who leave kudos and comments. It's lets me know what you're thinking. :D Always appreciated!

Bear False Witness

The sound of gentle rain was of little comfort as Sansa lay on the hard stone ledge, wet from the water dripping from the high and iron-bared window. She had made her peace with the thunderstorms that once used to keep her awake with terrible nightmares. Hoping the soft pitter-patter or droplets might lull her to sleep, Sansa did not know which would be worse – lying awake all night or dreaming of whatever horror awaited her.

One guard took pity, giving her a ratty woven blanket that did nothing to stave off the cold. Even without snow, it was bitterly cold at night and the rain only made it worse. Her whole body ached and the baby was restless. The girl was still so small but somehow it was as if she knew danger was upon them as well.

The porridge brought to her as supper, sat untouched by the iron door. Sansa was terribly hungry but she couldn't eat. Her mind replayed the day's events over and over, making her tummy queasy –

Hiding her son, whom she may never see again with the only person left Sansa trusted. Poor, sweet William falling to his death all because he tried to save her... Brune riding off into the distance, abandoning them.

Sansa cursed herself for that. Why didn't she let him take Alexander away? He could be riding to meet Petyr for all she knew.

You better pray he's alive...

What did Brune actually know? Sansa was positive he would be aware if of Petyr's whereabouts or worse, if he was dead. That uncertainty was killing her hope minute by minute. If Petyr was alive and well, he probably had no knowledge of this. The captain belittled the Marquess being ignorant of his wife's supposed heretic activities. That comment alone gave Sansa pause. If Joffrey did not know of Petyr's plans and this was some sick and demented form of entertainment... perhaps there was a shred of hope that her husband was alive.

That hope was only for the welfare of her son, as another chill racked her sore body. She had walked most of the way from Harrenhal until finally collapsing from exhaustion. Sansa expected the captain to drag her limp body behind but a soldier lifted her up on his horse the remainder of the journey.

Petyr, even if he knew what happened today, would probably be too far away to do anything about it. The best Sansa could wish for is that Mrs. Ames find and return their son to him. Once the captain accused her of witchcraft, Sansa knew this wouldn't have been something Petyr would have foreseen. He was more concerned about their welfare if the worst happened to him... not the other way around. Surely, Petyr would not risk her and his only child.

Joffrey was monstrous and vindictive, even as a boy. Everyone knew he murdered his own mother, for she meddled too much. Sansa was surprised Margery had not befallen some terrible fate considering she had yet to conceive an heir. His realm was going to ruin and finding some twisted pleasure in finishing the job he started at Winterfell all those years ago did not surprise Sansa. She had always wondered if leaving her to dwell in the country was too good for the last Stark, even if she was a Baelish now.

All too soon, morning came with the guard holding a pair of shackles. For all Sansa knew, she was going to her death this morning. There was no point in struggling or attempting to run. When she arrived in town, Sansa knew whatever friends she believed she might have after five years was a charade. Mrs. Ames was correct. The town was virtually empty. Many shops were closed with very few people in the streets. Those who remained, did nothing but stare and whisper as she was hauled into the local magistrate, hands bound, dress filthy with mud from her long walk of shame.

No, there was no one else to come to her aid. At least there was some relief knowing her son would not see her death. Sansa knew Mrs. Ames would take care of him no matter what happened.

Two guards walked her down a long, damp hallway until an old oak door opened to large room with three men seated at a long table. Sansa glanced around and didn't recognize any of them. The magistrate for the county was friend to Petyr. She could have pleaded her case to him at least. Sansa wondered what happened to the kind man.

"Bring her forward," a sharp voice commanded and the two guards pulled her along until she stood before a man in a powdered wig and sour face seated at the table.

She stood for some time as he dipped his quill in the ink and scratched on a few pieces of parchment. There was a chair nearby but Sansa did not dare ask to sit, even though her back was screaming in agony.

"Lady Stark," he began but one man seated next to him whispered in his ear. He scratched out something on the paper and did not even look up at her. "Lady Baelish," he coughed. "You stand accused of treason against the king and for the practice of witchcraft..."

"I am innocent of such accusations, my lord," Sansa pleaded softly.

"You will speak only when addressed," the man interrupted curtly and put down his quill. "The king himself has sent me to deal with this matter and I have no desire to be in this town for longer than absolutely necessary."

Sansa kept her mouth shut. This was no inquiry or trial. She was meant to be sentenced and dispatched for truth had nothing to do with this. She glanced at the chair again but didn't say a word in complaint.

The man's eyes followed hers and smirked. "I hear you're with child, is that so?"

"Yes, my lord," Sansa answered meekly.

"Bring that chair and let the girl sit," he ordered one of the guards. Sansa sat but it wasn't a relief as the men discussed her as if she wasn't even sitting before them. They addressed her as 'girl', not a lady. Whatever titled she possessed was nothing in their eyes.

"Considering she carries an innocent in the womb, wouldn't it be prudent to hold her until the child is born? Condemn the witch, not an unborn babe still pure in the eyes of God," the man to left argued quietly and Sansa tried to keep her tummy from fluttering. If they held her for a few more months, perhaps Petyr would have time to...

"My lords, we mustn't forget that she is a witch, a succubus of the Devil and that any child she carries would be an unholy thing," a familiar voice rang out and Sansa closed her eyes. This was getting worse by the second. "It is far more merciful to let it go back to God, than take one sinful breath on this Earth."

Duncan made his way from doorway leading from the street and stood at the end of the table. Sansa knew why he was here. Why he stayed. He had waited for such a moment, to see her finally fall before him. She could only imagine what he told these men since she was brought to town yesterday.

The men looked at each other and seemed to nod in agreement, making her stomach drop. No, there was no delaying this, whatever this sham was of Joffrey's making. Why didn't he just deem her a traitor and kill her? This nonsense about her being a witch wasn't like Joffrey. He was a king; he did not need a reason or proof. Her life was always hanging by a thread as long as he was on the throne.

Sansa unconsciously rubbed her belly. This child would never know how much she was loved. She would never see her father's smile, feel the warmth of her mother's breast. Sansa wasn't even sure what fate awaited her son and wondered in fear for him. What life would he lead if both of his parents were dead?

"I said, Lady Baelish," a voice sheared through her thoughts, "do you admit to pledging yourself into the Devil's service and conspiring against His Majesty, the King?"

She was dead either way, but Sansa would be damned if she would play their game.

"I am innocent, my lord," she jutted her chin up in contempt. "Any word by this man is a lie. I am assuming that's where all this is stemming from. Why should the king listen to such a man when my own husband, a Marquess, has never, in six years condemned me as anything so malevolent? I have been a faithful servant of His Grace and wife of my lord husband. No more, no less. Any and all accusations of witchcraft are nothing more than lies from a disgruntled former butler."

"A man of God, who wears the cross, you call a liar, madame?" the older lord smirked.

"If he is a man of God, honorable and truthful, then what does that say about God Himself?" Sansa glared.

"Blasphemy! Only a servant of the Devil would say such..."

"Truth? Is that what truth is now? Evil? Only spoken by traitors and heretics? I know nothing of the Devil, my lords, but I do know that this man is a liar," she pointed to Duncan. "If a cross and a book protect him to spread falsehood, then how am I to defend myself in anyway?"

The man sat back and smiled, scratching his wig.

"You are well-spoken, lady. Clearly, your father invested in your education. However, you are most ignorant of *His* teachings, not to mention loyalty. You northerners have been pagan far too long and are only now starting to come into the fold...even if by force. There can be no law without His law. And one thing I have learned throughout my own life, is that the Devil works his evil deeds in many ways. Educating women, I fear, has been one of the worst."

That one sentence struck a chord with Sansa. Petyr was right. This was not a world she wanted to raise her children in. Her unborn daughter, with men like this, would never be the woman Sansa dreamed she could be.

"Women are simple-minded creatures and don't understand when they let the Devil work through them. Or worse, when they choose to stand with Him and turn their face from God," he continued.

"This simple-minded creature is not a witch nor have I committed any such treason for which I have been dragged here before you," Sansa retorted darkly. "It is this man's word against mine. You can bring my entire household and they'll swear against him." Joffrey had made his decision and she knew there was no use contesting it for her punishment was coming no matter how much she denied it. By heavens, she was not going to admit to any of their lies.

"That would be very convenient for you, wouldn't it, Lady Baelish?" the lord scoffed. "A household that had been bewitched to say whatever you wish them to."

Sansa closed her eyes and shook her head. It didn't matter what she said, by labeling her a witch, any defense would be a product and proof of her evil-doing. She imagined this was what was happening in the north. Apparently, accusations were all there were needed to condemn a person.

Sansa felt like those persecuted women from hundreds of years ago. Any intelligent, free-thinking woman was clearly evil as far as men were concerned.

It wasn't enough to call her a traitor, considering all the turmoil in the realm. Labeling her a witch and devil worshipper would negate any word she said in defense or retaliation. Clearly, speaking or acting out against a tyrant, boy king, was more than just treason. It had to be bigger than that to strike such fear into people. Fear is what kept the common people in line. Not just against a king, but the fear of eternal damnation from a vengeful God. It was all so ridiculous, that Sansa couldn't help a soft chuckle.

"Do you find this amusing, madame?" the man growled.

"No, I don't. But that the word of one man is all that is necessary to condemn a woman, *anyone*, is insulting," Sansa barked back. "All this, is nothing more than a play, a farce. If the king wishes me dead, who am I or anyone else to stop him?"

"A farce? Now you are insulting His Majesty, and the wisdom of these lords of the court," the man retorted hotly.

"Yes, a farce when the king accepts one man's word against another as fact, without a shred of proof. That, sirs, is a farce," she huffed. "This whole charade right now is pointless. The king executed my entire family as traitors, all he had to do accuse me of treason if he wanted me dead. Calling me a witch is ridiculous. I am not even a traitor. What have I done? I have done nothing to anyone."

"Nothing, madame?" the man chortled. He flipped through several pieces of parchment. "I am not taking the word of *one* man as you have so contested."

He passed the parchment to the lord seated next to him.

"There have been accusations, madame," he began. "Even to the point where we will need to consult with the Marquess in regards to his knowledge about you, his wife."

"Accusations? By whom? I have treated the people of the Riverlands with respect and generosity... we have been prosperous and..."

"And yet, now that his lordship, your husband, has disappeared, the county has fallen into despair and disease," the portly man scanned the layers of parchment before him. "You have refused anyone to Harrenhal in the past months. No word on Lord Baelish's whereabouts and serious implications that some misfortune may have befallen him. His Grace has relied heavily upon the Lord Paramount to not only keep the peace in this region but supply the crown with wealth. As you say, the lands flourished under his guidance, at the king's gratitude, but now, have all but turned to ruin in only a few months with only you here. Very strange, isn't it? Years of bountiful harvests, thriving farms and now reports of failing crops and diseased animals."

"I have nothing to do with this," Sansa was aghast. "My husband is away on business to the mainland and..."

"When will he return?" the older lord demanded.

"I..." she stumbled, "He was meant to return this month..."

"Have you received word from him?" he pushed again. "Captain Dunmore said he found no letters when he searched Harrenhal. Very odd, that a man and father would not write at all to his loving and faithful wife? Inquire to that of his only son?"

"As I already told the captain, he is with his father. My lord husband been late before..." she protested weakly but it didn't seem to matter. No evidence was evidence in their minds.

"And if your household, as you say, is a happy and loyal one," he asked. "Why have you lost servants recently? Two maids were able to escape and told us much to confirm Father Duncan's accounts of his time at Harrenhal. Father Duncan told us how you ridiculed and spoke against His Majesty on numerous occasions..."

Sansa recalled the two girls. They were scared and heard of what was happening around the county. One, in particular, had a family just North of Lord Holloway's Town. A sick father, if Sansa remembered correctly. Did they really fear or hate Sansa to tell such lies? Or worse, they were coerced by fear. Many of the maids were scared of Duncan when he was majordomo. Sansa could only imagine what he threatened them with. Why was it so important to him?

"Then the diseased and dying animals..."

Sansa laughed at that one.

"My lords, are you suggesting that woman carrying a child is traipsing around the county poisoning animals? I cannot even mount a horse in my condition. The sheer audacity..."

"Which brings me to the accounts of witchcraft, girl," the lord judge interrupted. "I have accounts that corroborate much of Father Duncan's accusations. Let's see... we have sworn testimony from a Jacob Massey, that you cursed and also physically harmed him..."

Massey? Who is the world was that? Sansa did not know a man by that name.

"He says here, that you protected a wolf that was killing his chickens. You, with your dark powers, and speaking the witch's or faerie's tongue, turned his rifle to molten metal burning his hands. You then turned into fire and cursed him. You called yourself a *Mórrígan*? *Mórrígan* is a northern faerie, a witch, is it not?"

Sansa was going to be sick. She barely remembered that day so long ago when she found Lady as a pup. She and Petyr laughed about it.

The man pulled a thick tomb and flipped to a bookmarked page.

“A queen or goddess of war, that takes the shape of a wolf and has been known to be the bringing of death,” he read. “Strangely, you have taken a wolf as a pet and it has been known to roam freely. Mr. Massey said he has continued to see wolves at his farm. In fact, many wolves have been seen around the county. The Riverlands is not known for wolves, but the north is. Your father’s own sigil was that of a wolf. Since your arrival at Harrenhal, is the first anyone here has seen a wolf in their lifetime. Quite the coincidence. Not only that, but your...let’s see,” he scanned the next page. “This faerie folk, pagan druids, whatever you call them, tried to overthrow good Christians if these old stories are to be believed... sounds like something northerners would agree with considering their treasonous ways.”

“Therefore, your pagan ways are treason by default, madame,” the other lord jested cruelly. “But it doesn’t end there. If Lord Baelish hasn’t died by your hand, there will be an inquiry into his involvement, whether it had been voluntary or not. Father Duncan claims the Marquess knew of your witchcraft and often japed about it. What did he say, Father?”

Duncan smiled wickedly, “If my poor memory serves me... He told the girl, who was not then his wife, not to curse the locals or brew potions. She had quite the habit of disappearing into the woods where the Marquess would send myself and several men to search for her quiet often. I and others, do believe that she bewitched him with a potion or spells. He called her ‘little witch’ often and many of the servants at Harrenhal were appalled and then began to wonder about the Stark girl he brought home as ward. In fact, he never mentioned bringing home a girl. We were all shocked when she arrived with him. She could have poisoned his mind at Riverrun to bring her here. Now she has wealth and power. How very fortunate for a girl cast out by her own family and then suddenly marries a wealthy and powerful lord.”

“Quite,” the lord frowned. “Yes, ‘little witch’ was mentioned by the servant girls. And that you spent much of your time making potions with another presumed witch. Mrs. Ames, is it? Did you learn this craft from her?”

“My lord, the housekeeper, is a northerner too. Thick as thieves these two were,” Duncan interjected. “Instant companions they became when Lady Stark, I mean Baelish, arrived at Harrenhal. The woman used special teas, and so-called medicines when the girl was sick, I hear. Doctor Barnett, also signed a complaint that he thought the Marquess was employing a witch doctor. You’ll find his testimony there. They could have been planning God knows what evil-doings. Raising the spirits at night. All the servants were terrified.”

“They were terrified of you,” Sansa snapped back. “Everyone was happy when you left. Do I need to remind you why you left? Because *my husband* would have probably killed you after what you did to me.” Sansa turned to the men judging her every word. “He left me for dead. Did he tell you that? What man of God, leaves a woman to die in the freezing cold.”

“I knew what you were, girl,” Duncan replied evenly. “From the day you arrived. Now others see it, you, for what you are. I told you God puts his faithful servants where they need to be. I was needed here, to watch you. We’ll soon deal with the old woman when we find her.”

Sansa’s heart was breaking. She thought the two loyal women would go unnoticed with her young son. Now, they would be searching for Mrs. Ames and thus find Alex in her keeping.

“Even more recently, ladies at your son’s birthday celebration said you were angry with Lord Baelish and threatened to curse and hex him,” the lord scanned three pieces of parchment and Sansa couldn’t believe it. Petyr said never to trust anyone and she didn’t but when it came to truth and justice, there was none and people only saved themselves. It was easier to blame some innocent girl for all their woes.

“Why are you doing this, Duncan? What have I ever done to offend you?” Sansa sighed. “Is it Harrenhal you wanted? I don’t understand.”

“I know now my purpose is to protect good, innocent souls from the Prince of Darkness,” Duncan walked slowly towards her. “Your pagan kind is a sin that doesn’t deserve to step foot on promised land. You bring a false prosperity to these people and then when they don’t do your bidding, you curse them with disease and destitution. All these tactics are from Satan to bend the righteous to Him. You are nothing but an apostate, a seducer to such evils. Will you pronounce yourself as this dark queen, this *Mórrigan*? You came here, seduced yourself a powerful husband and are now using that power to overthrow our King. The Duke of Winterfell and Her Grace, the Duchess are weeding out your kind in the North. Now, your people are coming down here to you – their *queen* in the Riverlands who will protect them. You’ve planned all of this. This is your revenge for the king killing your ungodly and traitorous family. If King Joffrey had not defeated your father, I can only imagine what rule this country would be under.”

Kneeling, Duncan raised her chin to look at him. His smile was vicious. If there was a real devil, it resided in this man before her.

“My lords, don’t be fooled. She looks and acts oh, quite the innocent with her little child growing inside her. She’s fooled many of us with this, as the girl is quite the actress. She poisoned the Marquess against his betrothed, seduced him... and perhaps even played the king to make this marriage a reality. She has everything to gain by it. A son, an heir... she prayed on the weak common folk of the county by being overly generous and gaining their trust. Who will they come to in their time of need if we don’t stop her? Will she then corrupt their minds against the king as her northern brethren have? She is calling on her people to migrate down here to do just that. And that is not only my word you must heed.”

A loud creak of the door, and a rush of cold damp air filled the room. Sansa saw that Duncan’s eyes caught a glance of whom came in and they twinkled.

“My lords, I came as soon as I heard. Thank the graces of God, I was still in town. I knew there was a reason for me to be here. I sent word to my husband, that I will be detained one more day. If some of your men could escort me and my sons home due to the terrifying hordes of northerners moving south I would be forever grateful. Even my father in the Vale is concerned,” a sweet voice rang out.

“Your Grace, please sit,” one of the lords rushed to Myranda’s side. “You are very brave to come

here, to stay during these turbulent times.”

Sansa refrained from rolling her eyes. Now, she knew. This wasn't Joffrey's doing. It was, but now Sansa knew where it originated from. She felt like her insides were burning and churning from the hate that swelled up.

“I simply had to, my lords,” Myranda sighed and made a sign of the cross. “When Father Duncan wrote to me, telling me of all the terrible things happening here. I knew I had to speak out. I knew it wasn't just happening to me. It was, I mean she is, far more sinister than I could have dreamed.”

Myranda whimpered and the man gave her a handkerchief. Petyr had underestimated her completely. She may not know of his explicit plans to kill of Joffrey, but she obviously knew he would be away and used it to her advantage. Who in their right mind would contest the word of the Duchess of Winterfell in this moment? Petyr wasn't here to defend his wife, to tell these men was really going on. The witch in the room wasn't Sansa but a jilted woman, made even more mad by an abusive husband and monsters for sons. Men didn't listen to women. Men's words were trusted and took more power over women. Only a more powerful woman, married to a terrifying and formidable man would have precedence with such men under the king.

Sansa couldn't stop herself. The laughter bubbled up and echoed in the room. It was all so absurd. This vengeful woman was the reason why William was dead, her son a fugitive and possibly the arrest and death of her husband. All for what? Money, title, power.... respect and spiteful revenge?

“You see? Listen to her. She knows it. Doesn't care. She's a vengeful little thing. Casting her spells and curses. Don't let her cast doubts on you, my noble lords. Once I told the king what she was, he didn't hesitate. He knew he should have killed her years ago. It's more than treason,” Myranda sniffed. “If you need proof, just look at me. She seduced my betrothed and turned him against me, bewitched the king's mind to make the marriage and now she has taken control of the Riverlands. I knew it was a ruse from the beginning and that's why she cursed me. Cast spells on me, she did. Only Duncan understood. He could see it too, when we were at Harrenhal. She has raised the dead and the devil Himself in that place. I believe perhaps that a man of God such as him kept it at bay all these years.”

It was full sobbing now and Sansa chanced a glance at her adversary. She was smartly dressed in dark blue silk and black fur. Myranda was putting on quite a show. Yes, Petyr underestimated her greatly.

Best prepare yourself for widowhood, Sansa. There are many desperate men in the capital these days, looking for a heavy purse... just waiting in the shadows. Then Ramsay and I will take Harrenhal off your hands. Perhaps we'll let you stay on as a maid? Your son can sleep in the stables or maybe I'll just send him to the workhouse? It's more generosity than Northern whores deserve.

...I know people in high places.

Yes, it seemed she was telling the truth after all. A king and a high and mighty man of God. She used Petyr's departure to do what he never expected. Sansa wished she could reverse time just long enough to get herself and her children out of Westeros. She should have disobeyed Petyr and left immediately.

“She sends a spirit to hurt me. Even as I visited my father and the duke at the Vale, she hurt me. Her and her demon boy threatened my two sons. Once, I would have excused her son as an innocent in all of this, but I'm afraid he may not be the son of the Marquess at all. I fear if he lives and what he'll do. I woke one morning with this cut on my arm,” Myranda lifted her sleeve showing a nasty scar that both women knew came from one of her boys. She pulled her hair back and showed what looked like claw marks on her neck and bosom. “See these? She claws at me. I have many cuts, bruises, marks... and they're all from her. She hates that I am now duchess of her old family home. Ask my sons, they will tell you. She has that wild wolf as well. She made it attack me at Harrenhal. She can embody that animal as a spirit, I know it.”

The old lord raised his hand, halting the brunette's well-rehearsed soliloquy. Myranda dabbed her eyes and sat down while Duncan patted her gloved hand gently. Sansa could not even stomach looking at the pair of them. Myranda wanted her dead and this was her way of getting it done by the king. Treason would be a bit more difficult to prove considering no notion of anything from the Riverlands remotely suggested it. Petyr kept their lives quiet and boring to the rest of the ton. If Joffrey wanted her dead, he would have done so long before now. He had essentially forgotten she existed until Myranda. Petyr said he was too obsessed with other problems in his kingdom to wonder about a little northern girl at Harrenhal.

“Your Grace, as Lord Tatterham said before, it was very brave of you to come forward. As His Majesty commands and with the overwhelming evidence before us, we shall move to sentencing,” the old lord announced.

This was no trial, no one to come to her aid, not one commoner, businessman, local farmer to say she was a good woman and all of this was pure rubbish. Myranda had employed Duncan in some fashion years ago to keep watch. He believed her to be some grand lady worthy of title and governing the people. Myranda played him so well. She was no believer and Sansa thought the only times that woman had ever been in a church was to be baptized and married. Myranda painted quite the convincing picture of a devout, Christian woman. Sansa knew her for what the woman really was.

Only yesterday, Sansa was painting in the sitting room waiting impatiently for her husband to come home. In less than a day's time, she was charged, shackled, dragged to town for what was nothing more than a short hearing to end her life. There was no torture, no demand to recant her crimes and working with the devil. She wasn't tortured, tested or even shamed publicly as the old history books portrayed the process of trying a witch. She was just another woman to be disposed of... only a reason was needed and Myranda gave it to them gleefully.

Petyr wasn't here to protect her. He was either already dead or didn't know what was happening back at home. Even if he did, he'd never get here in time. He would find out she was executed,

before being questioned himself. For the sake of their son, Sansa prayed he would deny all knowledge, play the part and find Alex in Mrs. Ames care. Sansa did not want to know what terrible fate her son would endure if Petyr was killed as well. Myranda's threat rang true. She would make sure the boy died or lead a miserable existence. However, it wouldn't be Sansa that became the widow. It would be the other way around if Petyr survived her thinly veiled threat.

Surely, nothing less than a death sentence for Sansa was to be announced. Myranda didn't put on a show only to shove Sansa in a cell. Joffrey wouldn't be content with that either. Executing the last Stark would be a pleasure and Sansa was surprised he wasn't here himself. Maybe the country was in worse condition than she believed if he had not come a much shorter distance than compared to Winterfell to kill a traitor.

Sansa sat and heard the voices deliberating her end. The portly lord suggested that firing squad would be too gruesome for the common folk to see. A woman clearly with child, even if a witch, was not a sight that would bode well being riddled by bullets. Sansa fully expected that to be the manner of death considering her family execution. It was a surreal thing, knowing one would die and very soon. Now, it was only the manner to be decided. Then men rambled on about the time it would take and if notice should be posted or to get it over with as soon as possible. One said the king wanted to make it a public display to any and all that might oppose him.

Let it be quick, Sansa's fearful mind repeated over and over.

"Lady Baelish, former Marchioness of Harrenhal," the older lord stood and Sansa could not even look at the man. "It is by His Majesty's will that you be taken to the town square tomorrow afternoon, where you will be hung by the neck until life is extinguished from your body. God will then judge your soul, and in His wisdom and mercy will you receive your eternal punishment. God save the king."

Blood Raven

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait. And sadly I had to break this up. The next chapter really needed to be on it's own.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The air was putrid as Petyr's ship, The Merlin King sailed into port. The lower end of King's Landing always smelled of rotten fish and overflowing sewers. The aristocracy, royalty and affluence of society resided further up the peninsula but depending on which direction the wind blew, one could never escape that unmistakable scent of shit. It seemed fitting considering who sat on the throne and those surrounding him.

Leaving the mainland coast, the last threads had been sewn and ships awaited orders. If the winds were kind, they could be here in less than half a day's sail. A storm was coming, which slowed Petyr's journey home across the channel. Brune, as well as other informants had kept him abreast of the goings on in the kingdom. Northerners were fleeing south and Petyr thought he could use that to his advantage.

What troubled him was the lack of correspondence with his beloved. It wasn't wise to send many letters back and forth, he knew, but it did not ease his anxiety over leaving them behind. The encounter with Myranda troubled him more than he could ever admit to Sansa. Brune assured him, everything was alright. There were troubles in the region but mostly superstitious ramblings, the trusted friend told him. Brune's messages were always encrypted with a code only Petyr's men could decipher in case of treachery. If any of Petyr or Sansa's letters were intercepted, they needed to appear normal and without emotion.

He had not meant to stay away so long. Expediting the timeline of his endgame took more work than expected and he instructed Brune to tell Sansa just that. He might not be home until later in the month, but he would come home before the year was out. In hindsight, Petyr thought he should have given Sansa the cipher and written himself but it was all too dangerous. Had anyone found such letters in her possession or at Harrenhal, she would be dead.

As the ship docked and the bustle of merchants and workers littered the piers, Petyr felt a sense of dread. Even when he left the mainland, there was something in the air. The captain said it was just a storm moving down from the north, but it was more than that. He could feel it in his bones. Half a day's journey was agonizing on the icy waters and it had nothing to do with the turbulent, and uncooperating winds.

All Petyr had to do now was say the word and it would be done. The men, after years of careful planning, were where they needed to be and knew their job. The tension was heavy with anticipation, waiting for that snap of his fingers. This was the best way, he convinced himself. Surprise and ruthlessness was needed to weed them all out. Those that remained were connected to Petyr in one way or another and all would be rewarded with land, new commerce with a very benevolent and accommodating ruler under the control of a sure and steady hand.

Only three wild cards gave Petyr pause. If they were dispatched successfully, the rest would be easy and the others would not put up a fight. He had enough provisions stored secretly in the Vale to feed and aid the rest of the country in need. No, they would not fight the usurping of the throne from a tyrant, boy king. They were all starving and tired of being under a rich man's boot. It would take very little convincing to rally them to the new king.

Men were unloading crates of merchandise when Petyr crossed the plank onto the pier. This shipment was a ploy, just to keep up appearances. He had been abroad and would be expected to bring back goods to those he dealt with.

"Ah! Lord Baelish," a portly man waddled down the pier with his gilded cane. "I was beginning to think you ran off with my gold and disavowed our arrangement."

Petyr chuckled and retrieved a folded parchment from his breast pocket.

"I hardly need your money, Whitmore," he japed, handing him the inventory. "It's all there. Much of it was difficult to procure, mind you. I'm not a magician. Ships from the colonies were delayed."

"A bloody note, would have sufficed," the man grumbled. "No matter, it's here before the winter sets in."

A few other merchants came over to chat and attempt business dealings and Petyr wanted nothing more than to go his townhome and clean up with a hot supper before traveling home. The men complained about problems from the north and king with his even more strange whims and tantrums that had the city plagued with fear. Petyr heard of multiple men being put to death in all sorts of gruesome manners. Men that had displeased him, bearers of more bad news... it was all falling apart and quickly.

Petyr had met with the king before departing, assuring him that the Vale and Riverlands were still in control and brought just enough supplies to prove it. The capital was far worse than when he left it. News traveled at a bird's pace and Petyr heard much of what was happening. It seemed to be mostly the north, the west and Kings Landing. No word from the Vale or Harrenhal if trouble was brewing that he needed to return home immediately.

The merchants moved on and Petyr was consulting with his men in regards to other plans when a soft voice drifted on a cold breeze. The ice grazing the back of his neck and sound made him turn, only half listening to his captain. It was a howl, a whisper... some language he couldn't understand. A man was making his way through the busy crowd and Petyr's stomach dropped.

Brune was wind-blown and panting as he reached the pier. Only the worst entered Petyr's mind for there would be no other reason that Brune would be here. He searched behind his trusted friend, believing Sansa and his son were not far behind, but he already knew that was a false hope.

"Petyr," he gulped, as the man must have run most the way to the pier. "I didn't know if you would be here yet. There was no time to send a message. It all happened so fast."

Bile threatened to come up and Petyr tried desperately to control himself. People were watching. He ushered the man to an empty area of the pier, away from curious ears.

"Where is she? My son?" Petyr inquired, fearing the answer. So many scenarios now raced in his mind and he could barely keep his breath steady.

"Gold cloaks," Brune gasped. "There was nothing I could do. I tried to take the boy, but..."

Petyr's heart stopped. No, he couldn't hear this. They couldn't be dead. His friend, colleague would not have left them if they were still alive. The anger was building a quiet fury and Petyr clenched his fists at his side.

"You didn't keep a scout on the southern edge of the lake as I instructed? You would have known, with enough time if soldiers were headed towards Harrenhal... to get them out," he fumed.

"We lost men, servants..." Brune quickly rambled, "Some sickness spread across the region and spooked some, others ran off. Northerners are coming down and it made more of the merchants and townsfolk leave. I thought it would pass, or for the better, take eyes off of us..."

Petyr grabbed the man roughly and his voice lowered to a deathly tone, "You thought? Why didn't you send word? I would have come back."

Brune stepped back and pushed Petyr off him, "Exactly. You would have come back and ruined everything for that shit. I warned you. I told you this would happen, but you didn't listen to me."

"That *shit* happens to be my wife, you bastard," Petyr growled. "And my son? Are they dead?"

"You selfish son of a bitch," Brune retorted. "That is why I said nothing. You needed to finish this. Do you think *they* care about your wife and son? You have greater responsibilities, to the cause." He gestured to the men on the ship trying to act as if they were not watching the argument between them. "This isn't about them. When you started this, it was all or nothing, remember? We, all of us, have worked too damn hard and long to fuck it all up because you got yourself some pretty little northern girl in your bed."

With that, Petyr connected his fist with Brune's jaw, feeling a knuckle crack.

"You left them," he roared. The rage Petyr felt was all consuming. He knew Brune for years and right now he wanted nothing more than to kill him, even in full public view. "Are they dead?"

"I don't know, probably," the man grunted, spitting out a bit of blood. "It doesn't matter. You can't do anything about it now. If they're alive it won't be for long."

Petyr pulled back and paced the rickety and rotting wood. "Gold cloaks only move on the king's orders," Petyr pondered aloud. "Why did they go to Harrenhal? If we had an informer, I would have been arrested the moment the ship docked..." Pausing for a moment, he tried to rack his brain for answers. "How much did you see before you slithered off?"

The burly man sighed and Petyr waited impatiently. Time was wasting.

"I watched from a distance," Brune began. "They searched the house for some time and then I heard a few shots. They left towards town not long afterwards."

Petyr's stomach lurched. The image of Sansa and Alex being shot burned in his mind. He kept seeing Cat's dead body lying in the rain and mud with her children. He was too late. He couldn't save them.

Petyr couldn't breathe. This wasn't happening. Why in God's name did he not take them with him? He could have, the game be damned. He could feel the tears building in his eyes and blinked them back. God Almighty, he should have taken them and run. They were dead because of him.

"Did you see them?" he whispered, a man broken. "For God's sake man, tell me it was quick at least. I need to know."

This time, his old friend had a look of true regret and despair. He was holding something back, and a glimmer of hope stung Petyr's dying heart.

"After they left, I went back," Brune lamented. Petyr steeled himself to hear that his wife and son were dead. Everything that he loved died with them. "They shot young William and took Sansa. They were treating the boy, and he could barely speak. Either he doesn't know or refused to tell me. I don't know where your son is. The old woman is missing and most of the servants were running away, some looting the house."

Petyr didn't give a damn about the house, his money. It meant nothing to him now. If they took Sansa, they would have taken Alex as well. She must have hidden him away. His little witch was smart. His son was alive somewhere, waiting for his father to come to him. Mrs. Ames was missing and William shot. The only two he would have trusted... was right to trust.

"Where?"

"Lord Holloway's," Brune replied. "They charged her with witchcraft and treason, Petyr. That's what I was told. She'll be dead before you can get to her, if she's not dead already."

Witchcraft? Had Joffrey gone completely mad? Never would Petyr have even considered such an outlandish possibility. Joffrey wasn't that intelligent or inventive. If he wanted her dead, he would have just charged her with treason and nothing more. He didn't *need* a reason. He was king.

This wasn't Joffrey's doing, not initially. Only one other person would have wished harm on Sansa or him. Brune said a sickness and turmoil had spread quickly since leaving The Vale. That pious bastard, Duncan, had stayed in the county for a reason. Northerners were fleeing south from Bolton's genocide. The timing was suspect and so was the woman most likely to use witchcraft as a reason to get the king to send his men. If she couldn't blame Petyr, she could blame the last Stark. Name her a witch.

Petyr sighed. Why didn't he see it? Was he that arrogant all this time to be played by a spiteful woman? Alex could still be alive. But his sweetling?

"When did they take her?" he demanded. "How many?"

"Yesterday afternoon," Brune answered with a strange look in his eyes. "It's only a small detachment. Joffrey doesn't expect resistance, I gather. It seemed more for show. I rode all the way here as quickly as I could."

They didn't execute her at the house. Would Joffrey bother with a trial? That twisted boy might want to make a spectacle of it for all the locals to see and fear. Maybe there was time. He wouldn't know unless he left right now. Petyr paced for a moment, deciding on a course of action and then strode back to the ship while Brune caught up.

"Captain," he ordered and a few trusted officers came down with him. "Send word to Captain Pensley immediately. It's time. Sail out without delay and meet the blockade, nothing and no one gets in or out."

"Yes, my lord," the man replied instantly, without question, and headed aboard the ship.

"Petyr!" Brune exclaimed in hushed tones, looking about them. "Have you gone mad? It's too early... you can't possibly... we're not ready..."

Grabbing Brune's collar, Petyr pulled his dagger and dug it into the man's side, just enough to break the skin but not cut deeply. He needed Brune, but if he refused, Petyr was prepared to kill him right now.

A commotion was brewing in the crowd and Petyr glanced behind his friend, to see the king's own guard approaching. Digging the blade a little deeper, Petyr leaned in and whispered venomously, "Is it you, old friend? A turncoat for the king?"

"Christ, Petyr," the man winced with pain. "Have you lost your mind? You did this. You put her and your son in jeopardy. How long before that brat decided to take some vengeance on her, no matter who she was married to? She was an easy target. If the king knows, we're all dead, myself included."

"Lord Baelish," the captain of the guard called out.

"If he does, I'll kill you myself. If you're a traitor, I'll make you wish you were never born," Petyr seethed. "There's only one way out of this now. Send the ravens. If I'm dead, they're all going to die as well."

"My lord," the captain of the guard approached alone which Petyr thought would be odd if they were here to arrest him. "The King has commanded I bring you to the palace."

Petyr found one of his men in the guard that waited. The man gave a simple gesture and Petyr knew what it meant. Sheathing his dagger, he stepped closer to his friend.

"I saved your life, remember?" Petyr reminded him. "I took you in when any other would have let you drown in your own blood in the gutter. There are two things you will do for me, without question and you will have more gold than you can spend in a lifetime. You know I'm a man of my word. Send the ravens. If the king doesn't know yet, he will soon. Time is no longer a luxury. We must strike now, or lose the opportunity. You will ride to Lord Holloway's Town. Gather the men you need along the way. Promise them any price. You know where the weapons are stashed. If she is alive, you will stop it. Kill them all. Even if she is dead. Kill. Them. All."

Petyr's eyes flared a bit, hammering in his full meaning. That fury was hot and churning inside his chest. They all deserved to die.

"Once I'm finished with the king, I will ride out to meet you and find my son," Petyr added as he straightened his cravat and cloak, putting on his mask with a congenial smile. "Woolsey, where is that crate of Arbor Gold for the king? It's a stunning vintage. Perhaps a crate just for you and your men, captain? Surely your hard work deserves a reward."

The captain eyed him suspiciously at first and then smirked. These men were used to drinking watered down ale from the pubs. They wouldn't turn down such fine wine as a gift.

Petyr returned to Brune and both men understood each other. Petyr did not trust him at all, but there was no one else to do this task. There was no way of getting out of meeting Joffrey. Petyr would find out either way if Brune betrayed him completely.

"Use the gold from Black's. Promise them any price. Send the ravens," he commanded darkly.

"This ends today."

The carriage ride to the palace was quiet as the captain sat across from him, watching his every move. Petyr did not bother with pleasantries as he normally would. He knew why he was going to meet the king. He had not been arrested yet, so that told him much of what he needed to know. Joffrey was desperate and did not have the men to seize both the Riverlands and the Vale. He was going to use Sansa's arrest against him in some fashion. That was the only reason he wasn't in irons in this exact moment.

Walking down the marble hallways to a private section of the palace, rooms Joffrey used to meet with his advisors in secret, Petyr turned his heart to stone. He knew this game. He was a master at it.

The guards opened the door, allowing Petyr to enter alone as they stood watch outside in the hallway. Joffrey sat at the end of the table slurping down a few oysters, with his feet up on the polished wood.

"Your Grace," Petyr bowed low, smiling.

"Sit," Joffrey commanded without looking at him.

Petyr did as he was instructed, setting the bottle of wine upon the table.

"I brought you a gift, Your Majesty. This vintage from the mainland is the best I've tasted in years. I brought you a few crates. Arbor Gold, I do believe, is to your liking?" Petyr smiled and relaxed into his air of nonchalance.

Joffrey did not answer and only observed the older man from across the table. He grinned smugly as if enjoying a private joke.

"You've just returned," the boy king said.

"Yes," Petyr began with ease. "I barely stepped off the ship when your guards arrived. Thank you for the escort and thought to my well-being. The city certainly isn't as safe as it used to be since my departure. How can I assist you? Do you need men? I'm sure we can find men easily bought to help keep the peace. These pesky Northerners are migrating everywhere it seems."

Playing to the boy's vanity and hatred seemed the best way to gauge the situation Petyr found himself in. He knew why he was here, but not if he was going to leave this room alive or in shackles.

"Yes, Northerners," Joffrey smiled. "That's exactly the reason you're here."

Petyr kept the fake smile on his face and waited.

"How may I aid you, Your Grace?" Petyr leaned back into his chair and feigned ignorance.

Joffrey watched him for a moment and smiled again.

"You – haven't heard the news, I gather?" the boy slurped down another oyster.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean unless it's the revolt happening up north with Lord Bolton," Petyr offered evenly. "I hear he's having a dreadful time with the commonfolk. Does he need supplies? I'll send what I can."

"Lord and Lady Bolton have been invaluable in their loyalty and service to me," Joffrey tapped his fingers on the table. "I don't think you'll have much to send from the Riverlands now."

"I'm afraid I don't follow, Your Grace," Petyr pretended. Let this play out, he needed information from this monstrous boy.

"Your wife, that you were supposed to control, has run amok in your absence," Joffrey sneered, watching the older man's every move for a sign. Petyr kept his blood cool and studied the boy across the table. "Did you know your wife was not only a traitor but a witch, Lord Baelish?"

Petyr laughed out loud, not only to fool the boy but because it truly was ridiculous to him. He stood up and walked to dark mahogany credenza with all sorts of wine and spirits in cut crystal decanters. Picking up a corkscrew, he opened the wine and filled two glasses with the golden liquid. Setting one glass in front of the king, Petyr returned to his seat and smelled the wine, taking in every aroma.

"We both know who her family was, Your Majesty, but a witch? Now, the girl was something particularly sinful in the bedroom but other than that. Nothing strange occurred in all this time. The locals have always been rather superstitious. I'm sure it's nothing. I'll see to it myself when I return," Petyr played it off with a light air.

"Oh, I've already seen to it," the boy jeered. "I gave her clemency once. Not a second time. I cannot have a traitor inciting the people against me and working with the Devil. You should have taken better charge of your wife."

"What is a wife really good for, Your Grace, other than pleasing a man and bearing him heirs? I would have never allowed such talk and actions against you. Something must have happened in my absence, obviously."

"The details do not matter. I was informed of her treachery by Lady Bolton. Either you were bewitched by the girl or you knew of her deeds. The Duchess said she was attacked by your wife's spirit and that the Northerners are moving south on this witch's command. They would folk to the last remaining Stark, wouldn't they? Are you telling me you never suspected your wife of anything, Lord Baelish?"

"Hmmm... I used to think it was the wine that clouded my mind, perhaps it was spells and potions after all?" he laughed and raised his glass to the young king. "Ah well, at least she gave me a son. Here's to be being a widower. Has she been executed yet?"

Joffrey tentatively picked up his glass but waited for Petyr to take the first sip. Petyr smiled to himself, the boy should be worried about being poisoned. He took a long sip and relaxed back into his chair once again.

The boy finally drank from his glass and grinned, "I underestimated you. I never expected you to be such a cold man. I suppose her beauty and cunning were quite the distraction."

"There are plenty of pretty women in the world. She served her purpose," Petyr japed but his heart was trying to claw its way out of his chest. "I still have a son, don't I?"

Joffrey grunted a bit at the delicious wine as he took another gulp, downing half his glass.

"Are you still in my service, Baelish? I can call my guards and have them kill you right here. I made you marry her as punishment, but you have done what you promised with the Riverlands and the Vale regardless of what Lady Bolton might say. I remember she was your betrothed at one time, was she not?"

"Yes," Petyr smiled and waited impatiently. "I'm sure Bolton is enjoying her wares. That's the only thing women are good for, are they not? I have always been your faithful servant, Your Grace. Perhaps my wife never did care for the duchess because of that. Women are spiteful things. At least I can say I've bedded a witch. I've had many women, but that's worth bragging about, wouldn't you say? How did she die?"

Joffrey poured another glass and chuckled, "Why are you so interested in her death if you care nothing for her?"

"Morbid curiosity, perhaps. I rather hope it wasn't done in front of my son. A boy that young doesn't need to see his mother shot before a firing squad, even if she is a witch and traitor. He did not choose his parents, I daresay."

"Perhaps a boy needs to learn what his mother is?" Joffrey shot back, testing the waters of Petyr's loyalty.

Petyr pretended to think about and nodded, "Yes, quite right. Speaking of the lad, that is if I am redeemed in your eyes, is he in safe keeping? May I see him?"

Joffrey coughed a bit and drank more wine.

"If you prove your loyalty to me, I will allow your son to return to you. All in due time," he smirked, wiping his mouth. "It really is a shame. If not for the danger of leaving the city, I would have loved to see that whore die."

Petyr tensed and tried to keep himself in check. He let the ice surround and protect him, hoping his feelings did not show.

"Is there still time?" Petyr asked gently.

The boy sputtered, "You really surprise me, Baelish. There's a dark side to you I never saw before. After all, you missed watching her parents die. It was quite the sight seeing them all fall, even those brats as they twitched. One died rather slowly, the girl. Stubborn, she was. Took some time for her to bleed out."

The acid was churning in his stomach and Petyr was afraid the crystal stem would shatter within his tight grip.

"Yes, it was unfortunate," the ice laced his voice. "I missed it by only an hour, didn't I? Perhaps, I'll be lucky this time? It would be a sight to see. One doesn't get to see his wife executed for devil worship every day."

The boy chortled loudly, "Well, we'll never make by carriage. I sent an emissary to handle sentencing. The last I word I received was the execution would be tomorrow. And your son is..."

Joffrey couldn't finish his sentence as he coughed and blood splattered onto the table. That churning in Petyr's stomach wasn't just from hatred, he felt the bile rising up, with a strong metallic taste.

The boy grasped his throat in panic and Petyr calmly reached into his waistcoat retrieving a small vile filled with a pale blue liquid.

"What is that?" he choked and coughed.

"Antidote," Petyr offered coldly. "... for the poison we both just drank."

If Joffrey confirmed that both Sansa and Alex were executed already, Petyr would have let the poison take him. Without them he had nothing. He knew Joffrey wouldn't drink anything without Petyr first tasting it. If he refused the wine, Petyr would have drove his dagger into the boy's body until there was nothing left before killing himself.

The young king choked and gagged, his throat closing up on him. Unable to yell, he threw the glass against the wall and Petyr waited, watching him die. He downed the contents of the vile as Joffrey choked on his own vomit and blood. When the captain finally barged in, Petyr did not make a move from his chair. The man collapsed onto the floor as a sword was driven through his

back. The guard wiped the blade clean on the dead captain when Petyr saw Joffrey finally fall to the floor.

"My lord?" the loyal guard asked with uncertainty. Not for the king dying on the floor but the turmoil that would soon follow.

"In a moment, Stephens," Petyr said patiently watching Joffrey grasping his throat as the blood poured from his mouth and nose.

Petyr had never enjoyed watching a man die but this was a mild pleasantry. He admitted he did relish that he had turned the tables on poor, inexperienced Harrold. Joffrey was always going to die but now that he set out to harm Sansa, Petyr wanted the most brutal death possible. How he would have loved to throw this boy into that torture chamber below Harrenhal. Take his time. This death was too humane, too quick, but time was now of the essence.

He did not even wait for the boy to sputter his last breath when Petyr rose and walked out of the room calmly. The remaining guards were all dead in the hallway as two other men on Petyr's bankroll stood by waiting for him.

"My lord, your nose," one pointed out and Petyr wiped above his lip seeing the fresh blood.

"Are you all right, my lord?" Stephens asked nervously.

"Yes, yes," Petyr waved them off. "It's done, gentlemen. Where are the rest of the men?"

"They are clearing out the palace on your orders, my lord," the young man replied.

"Good," Petyr coughed into his handkerchief, spotting it with little dots of blood. He hoped he had not waited too long to take the antidote. "Kill them all."

The men looked at each other with wide eyes.

"All of them, my lord? The Queen and her family as well?" Stephens asked nervously.

"All of them," Petyr laid down firmly. "There can be no one left to challenge His Grace, the duke. Only he will grant you and common folk the rights you are due. Do you understand? This is what you signed up for gentlemen. This is what revolution is. It is never bloodless and mercy is not for meant for your oppressors. Make no mistake, they are the tyrants that hold you under their boot. Would they ever show you mercy?"

Petyr knew what it meant, what he was doing but he didn't care anymore. They all had to die. Every single one of them. He didn't care who they were. All he knew, is that they were the reason why Sansa was on her way to her death. They would have killed her one way or another even if she was never his wife. Had Petyr died, both her and his children would have been fugitives, on the run, forever hiding. What would their lives have been? Even if there was no revolution, his children could never aspire to anything. The aristocracy would make sure they knew their place in life. No, these people were the cruel ones, the tyrants of Westeros. The country and people were better off without them. They all had to die.

Petyr strode out of the palace, with his black cloak floating behind him. The place was littered with the dead and dying. He heard a woman's scream and did not care. Did not flinch at the sound. All he could see was Sansa's sweet face, hear her voice screaming for him. She was calling out to him, he knew it in his heart and soul.

He would ride all night to fly to her side. If Joffrey was telling the truth, he had until tomorrow. When, was the brutal question. Brune was hopefully already on his way. Petyr was praying that last shred of trust was worthwhile. Hopefully, Joffrey sent only a small company of men. Just enough to scare the locals. Hopefully, he and Brune could gather enough to overtake them if need be. The more men Petyr could muster, the better. If he was lucky, maybe upon the news the king was dead, they would just disperse. Petyr was taking nothing for granted.

He arrived at his townhouse only to collect gold and his horse and it was already late in the evening. If only his ship arrived on time, if he had not been summoned by Joffrey... he would be closer to home, to her. Three men joined him and they would ride for the Ivy Inn on the Kingsroad to Harrenhal. There they would need fresh horses. Petyr would buy them if he had to, whatever he had to do to make it back home as quickly as possible. There he would know if Brune had kept his word. Either way, he was ready to ride for Harrenhal.

The dread he felt at seeing Cat's murdered body at Winterfell haunted him for years. This was not going to happen to her daughter, his wife... his love. No, this time he was going to stop this. The kingdom would be turned upside down before anyone in the Riverlands even knew what happened.

The ravens flew across to every corner of the country. The men knew what to do. The timing was set so it would all happen relatively at once. It wasn't just the de-throning of a king, the whole aristocracy was coming down. The messages the black birds carried was death. Their wings painting the sky with blood of those condemned years ago.

Panic filled the city where all the elites lived. Their screams could be heard everywhere. There was nowhere for them to run. Many had fled to the capital from the countryside estates in fear of the northerners. It made Petyr's job all the simpler to carry out.

The moon was rising as they rode north and Petyr could only imagine how Lord Royce would die. Explicit instructions were to protect Robert, the future king and bring him to Harrenhal when it was all over. Even though Manderly was not involved, he was also to be left alive. Petyr would need a man in the north, that knew and understood it and its people.

Lannisport, Highgarden, The Vale... everywhere he had men loyal to the cause. Ready to do whatever was necessary. No one of title was to be spared. No one of high rank in society that could that challenge Robert would survive. Even if it meant a child that would inherit. Only Petyr and Robert could hold the upper tier to take the throne.

Petyr had not intended to kill Joffrey himself, but there was no other choice. And there was a sick

pleasure he took in watching that wretched boy die. Would Cat have been proud of him for taking such revenge? Would Sansa? If it was as if ghostly bagpipes in the North were playing the song of revolution and victory, but it was not relief that the game was over or even the a hint of satisfaction at winning. The thing he loved most in this world was in danger and it was because of him. Brune was right. Whatever happened to Sansa and the children were all on him.

He knew at this moment, that the Boltons were meeting their end and Petyr wished he could have been one of those ravens silently observing from above. He wanted Miranda to suffer. Everything she did to Sansa, deserved a violent death. Petyr knew she did this, set Joffrey to kill his beloved. Miranda had nothing on Petyr and he knew it. That's why he soothed Sansa's fears that the duchess' threats were nothing. She couldn't touch him, but he was wrong. The woman found the best way to hurt him and orchestrated it all under his nose. The knowledge that not only she and her husband would be dead and gone along with her horrid boys gave Petyr no comfort. Miranda may be dead, but she embedded a dagger deep in his heart before succumbing to her own demise.

The inn was still so far away. Calculating in his mind, the time to take new horses and possibly gather more men, Petyr sighed in horror. He would make it to Harrenhal by morning if he was lucky and he still had to ride to Lord Holloway's Town. It was bitterly cold and riding in the middle of the night with little protection from thieves and refugees from the north did not help the situation. They could ride across the country and around God's Eye lake, avoiding the main road but Petyr wasn't sure if such a diversion would take longer or give him more time.

Now, it was all a matter of time. History could not repeat itself. This time he had to get back. He couldn't let her die like her mother. If there was a God or the Devil, Petyr would gladly sell his soul if it meant her life. He would die, if that's what it took.

Please God, let it be me. Don't punish her for my sins.

"I'm wagering that you wished you took my advice years ago and put stones in your pockets," a smug voice echoed from the oak door.

Sansa didn't have to open her eyes to know whose voice it belonged. The stone ledge was ice cold and she wasn't even trying to sleep. It was blind hope that she could be found dead tomorrow morning from the cold. Why couldn't she just close her eyes and will it to happen?

She couldn't even have this last night on earth in peace. Miranda wasn't satisfied enough with condemning her to death, she obviously needed to make sure Sansa knew she won in the end.

"If you've come to gloat, Miranda, you're wasting your breath," Sansa growled.

"Come now Sansa, you really brought this upon yourself," Miranda chided and closed the door. "I often wondered what you'd look like in a cell such as this. It is where you belong. You should have died with your family like the traitor you are."

Sansa finally opened her eyes and gazed at the brunette in her fine clothes. Her hair was pinned up under a wide-brimmed hat with lace and feathers.

"I thought I was a witch casting my spirit to torture you? Either way, I'm proud to be both," Sansa sneered. "By the way, how are your sons? I see they have showered their mother with more love."

Miranda only smiled as she approached the rusting iron bars.

"How refreshing, I rather expected to find you crying like you always do," the woman clucked her tongue. "You've always been such a pathetic little thing. Suddenly now, at the end, you've found a backbone."

"I find the word pathetic best describes you better than I," Sansa chuckled and sat up, her back aching. "Harboring a grudge for years over something that was in neither of our control... you never loved or wanted him."

"You seduced him and by doing so, you ruined my life," Miranda barked back. "I was meant for better things, a rich life. Now I'm married to that brute and stuck raising his monstrous boys. Winterfell is for peasants. Barren and cold. No place for a lady like me."

Sansa laughed out loud at Miranda believing she was some high lady of the court demanding respect. She was nothing short of a whore, digging for a rich husband and they both knew it.

"Mother always said, 'You get what you deserve'," Sansa sighed at those words for they had a different meaning for her entirely. *Did I get what I deserved? Did my family get what they deserved?*

"Where's your son, Sansa?" Miranda demanded suddenly, making Sansa's head jerk up.

"He's with his father, thank God," Sansa lied.

This time it was Miranda's turn to laugh.

"That is a lie. We both know he left Gulltown alone," the woman jeered. "Where is he?"

"You could torture me all night and I would never tell you," Sansa replied calmly. Of course Miranda informed the soldiers to search for Alex. She knew he was here. All Sansa could do was

pray for his safety now.

"I'm sure I could arrange that," Miranda smiled sweetly.

"Why do you want him? He's no threat to you. You have me. Kill me and be done with it. Take Harrenhal, the Riverlands, even the bloody Vale if you must, but leave my son alone," Sansa felt fear rising in her belly.

"What do you think Petyr would do if I send pieces of your boy back to him one at a time?" Miranda's eyes widened with mad delight. "I wasn't sure if he ever cared for you. You gave him a son; you did your duty. But he undoubtedly loves his son. Do you think he'll come for him? He certainly isn't coming to your aid. Shows how much he cares about you, doesn't it? Does he know you're with child? Does he care?"

This was the game she tried to play that day Sansa fell in the labyrinth. Miranda was only toying with her. She was trying to frighten and goad her. At the same time, Sansa felt Miranda was more than up to making that a reality. Petyr underestimated her once, but Sansa didn't. Plus, everything these men said since her arrest led Sansa to believe that Petyr was still alive. Was he aware of what was going on? He knowingly wouldn't let this happen to her, would he?

"Well, the king will decide his fate. He could be facing death right now, at this very moment. What manner of execution do you suppose waits for him? Maybe he'll hang like you. Hard to believe a husband would be completely ignorant of his wife's treachery for so many years," Miranda taunted knowing full well Sansa was completely innocent of the charges against her. It wasn't just Sansa she was after, she wanted Petyr to suffer also.

"That's because I cast a spell on him, I am a witch, am I not? Perhaps, I really sent my spirit to your boys to torture you," Sansa smiled wickedly and stood up, slowly walking towards the bars of her cell. Two could play at this game. Sansa was already dead. Maybe she could scare Miranda into leaving Alex be. "You've lived in the north for several years now, don't you believe in witches... *spirits*, Miranda? I assure you, they believe in you. Watch everything you do. They see what you do. Didn't you ever read the stories of northern faeries? The Morrigan is real. My wolf knew what you were. Maybe I casted a spell on you too, that you would be forced to marry Bolton. You have no idea of what I'm capable of. Hang me tomorrow, it won't matter. I will haunt you for the rest of your days. Do you know what spirits have in excess? *Time*. I will be free of my mortal body to follow you wherever you go. I will slowly drive you mad and one day, you will climb to top of the turrets of Winterfell, believing you can fly...only to fall to your death upon the rocks below."

Miranda's eyes widened for a moment as she stepped back. Living with Bolton had driven what little sanity she had into a downward spiral. Miranda had always been a vicious woman from the moment Sansa arrived at The Eyrie. Whatever that man had done to her, made her believe Sansa was the reason for all her woes in life. Now, she was going to make Petyr and Alex pay as well.

"You touch one hair on my son's head, I will make you wish for death every day," Sansa threatened icily. "If I don't kill you, Petyr surely will. Go ahead, kill me. After everything, it will have afforded you nothing in the end. Petyr has done nothing treasonous," she added trying to protect her husband. "Joffrey values him more than you. You, *Your Grace*, are nothing."

"Nothing, am I?" Miranda raged. "The king listened to me! I gave you to him. He always wanted you dead, but everyone convinced him to keep you alive as a warning to other traitors to the crown. He wanted to be seen as merciful. He should have killed you long ago. You deserve no mercy. You need to go back to hell where you belong. I will find your son, I will find him before your lecherous husband will."

"Then we will burn together, Miranda," Sansa roared. She was going to die but Sansa wasn't about to let this woman have the last word, gloat her childish victory. If she could instill even a hint of fear, it would be worth it. She wanted Miranda to look over her shoulder all her life... *wondering*. "If I'm going to hell, I'm taking you with me. I swear by the sun and stars that you will pay for your crimes. You will live an eternal nightmare."

Sansa reached through the bars and grabbed Miranda's arm, her nails digging so deeply into the skin, she drew blood.

"*Curse mé tú!*"

The words spilled from her mouth and Sansa knew it was no spell but the fear in Miranda's eyes said otherwise. The woman was truly mad, Sansa decided.

"What you have done to me, you have done to yourself. My death will be yours. Of my blood, your sons will die. I promise you that," Sansa cursed the woman.

Miranda yanked her arm away and stared at the redhead in horror.

"*Witch*," she breathed. "No wonder your family cast you out. No one will come for you. Tomorrow, I will watch you die."

"Then tomorrow is your first day in hell," Sansa replied, feeling the blood on her fingertips. "Sleep well, Miranda. For I will be your worst nightmare for the rest of your days."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for some of you first readers on this chapter... Some copy/paste errors. Damn. There were full sentences missing. Weird. I edited and tried to fix everything. Sorry, again.

The Choice

Chapter Notes

And here is the turning point.... Awaiting the stones coming my way.

Petyr threaded his fingers through her hair as she sat between his legs in front of the fire. The library was warm as she leaned her head against his knee and watched Alex play with Lady. Petyr read to them from his leather chair and Sansa felt the girl suckle from her breast. Everything was as it should be and Sansa closed her eyes.

The room was like ice and she was about to tell Alex to close the window, but she couldn't hear him anymore. Blinking, the library was cold and empty. Sansa sat in front of the barren fireplace and what touched her breast wasn't that of a baby. She looked down and the porcelain face of a china doll stared back. Those black eyes were lifeless as Sansa clutched the doll in its tattered dress and matted red hair.

"I couldn't save her. I was too late," Petyr's voice lamented in the darkness.

Sansa looked around and she was alone. Suddenly, she could hear the piano playing and dashed across the house to the music room. The house was covered in dust and it was bone chilling cold. Pushing the doors open, the piano stood playing by itself. It was the saddest song Sansa ever heard.

"Petyr?" her voice echoed in the emptiness of the house.

"It should have been me," his pained voice sobbed. "It's all my fault."

Hands touched her shoulders turning her around slowly. They were wet with fresh blood and Sansa shuddered. Petyr's face was deathly pale and full of sorrow.

"This is my penance," he said.

Something tugged on her skirts and Sansa turned at the sweet, little voice.

"Mummy?"

The little red-haired girl stood in front of the piano and Sansa couldn't breathe. It was as if she had gone back in time. Sansa was looking at herself when she was a very young girl.

"Yes?" she answered nervously, not knowing what to say.

"He left it for you," she said, holding a carved music box in her outstretched hands. "It must be broken."

"I don't understand. I already smashed it. He doesn't love her," Sansa replied with tears in her eyes.

"You must make him remember," she sighed and started to fade from view.

"Remember what?" Sansa panicked. "Tell me, please."

"What are you doing here?" the man asked in confusion.

Petyr stood in the doorway with his arms folded, studying her.

"I am your wife," she pleaded. "I've come home."

He chuckled darkly, "I don't have a wife. You... don't belong here."

Sansa couldn't breathe. Was he mad?

"You gave me this ring."

She lifted her hand but her ring finger was bare. On her thumb, instead, was his gold band. Glancing at his hand, Petyr was not wearing his ring.

"You promised me... You promised..." Sansa whimpered and felt herself drift on an icy breeze.

No, this is a lie, a voice in the back of her mind told her. This is a lie, a lie... It's all lies...Wake up, Sansa, wake up.

Petyr, he will come for me. He is coming... I know he is coming....

Sansa shivered and could feel water dripping on her head. She was burning up and wanted the sky to open and drench her in that cold. She didn't wake from fright as the other terrible dreams. Now, when she dreamed, Sansa desperately tried to remember the details.

It had rained all night and the water was coming through her barred window. Her head pounding, Sansa felt her forehead. She was hot to the touch. Being in this wretched cold, was bringing on a fever. A fever could spell disaster while being pregnant but it didn't matter now. Judging by the light, it was almost mid-morning. Sansa had not slept at all during the night, but somehow fell to exhaustion in what felt like only an hour ago.

The baby kicked and Sansa rubbed her belly softly. It wouldn't be long now, she sniffed.

I'm so sorry, my love.

Mrs. Ames had been wrong after all. She would only have one child after today. She would die this very afternoon, the men told her yesterday. Listening to them building the scaffolding before Myranda came to her cell last night, Sansa wished it was already over with, but of course Joffrey would want to make her death a spectacle. Myranda would make sure that happened. Sansa expected to see the woman with her loyal servant turned priest at her side. Did she bring her boys, Sansa wondered? It wouldn't be a surprise. Those little monsters would probably enjoy watching a woman murdered.

How many townfolk and locals would witness her execution? Did they truly believe these lies or come out of morbid curiosity? Surely, civilized people wouldn't want to watch a pregnant woman hang. Sansa chuckled at the irony of it all. She refused to let Petyr punish or kill Duncan. Not once, but twice. He would have done so without a moment's thought, too. Myranda would not have had the ammunition if it had not been for that man. Sansa thought she was being a good person, but in the end, she signed her own death warrant by not signing his.

Last night, Sansa scared the daylight out of Myranda, threatening her with curses that would haunt her beyond the grave. Sansa didn't know if God or the Devil were real, but something else was out there. Hell didn't frighten her, she was already in it. Soon it would be over and Myranda ultimately would have the last laugh watching her rival murdered out of spite.

Activity was picking up in the streets from what Sansa could hear – hammering, and men talking, horses and carts passing by. One would think it was a normal day in town. Did everyone know what was to transpire in a few hours? Clutching her head, she couldn't stop the barrage of questions. Why couldn't it just be over?

Sansa sat back against the cold stone and closed her eyes. She was filthy, mud caking her dress and the nasty smell in her cell. They hadn't even changed the bucket to pass water in. She smelled worse than pig sty. Petyr would be appalled at the condition she was in....

Petyr...He was on his way. She just knew it. Petyr wouldn't let this happen to her. What little time she had left, Sansa tried to keep some hope alive. She imagined Brune came back for Alex and he was safe and Petyr was rushing to her aid as fast as he could...

There is nothing in this world that can keep me from you...

Petyr didn't save her life three times to let her die now. No, they were supposed to grow old together, watch their children grow up in this new world Petyr promised her. He kept his promises. He would come. She wasn't dead yet. Until her last breath, she wasn't giving up.

A horse whinnied loudly as it came to a halt just outside and a man's voice started yelling, making Sansa open her eyes. She knew that voice and smiled. She was saved!

"Let go of me! I demand to see the magistrate!" her uncle's voice boomed. "Sansa! Sansa!"

Sansa climbed onto the stone bench and tried to peer through her little window. She could barely see over the top and knew he was right outside.

"Here! Uncle Edmure, I'm here!" she yelled.

"We can't let you or anyone in, m'lord," one of the guards explained.

"On whose orders! Lord Baelish and I have authority here," Edmure barked.

"The King's orders," the guard replied forcefully.

"Let GO of me, damnit! I'm the Earl of Riverrun. I'll have you both working in the deepest cesspool in the marshlands!" he cursed and Sansa felt his hands grasp hers through the bars. Edmure would stop this, her heart told her.

"Are you alright? Did they hurt you?" he pleaded. His gloved hands were warm and Sansa did not want to let go of him.

"I'm alright. Tell them this is all a mistake. I'm innocent, Uncle. I swear," Sansa cried. "Is Petyr with you?"

"Petyr? No, why isn't he here?" Edmure demanded and the anger was unmistakable in his voice towards her husband. "Where's Alexander?"

Suddenly, Petyr's warning came to mind. He still wasn't completely sold on Edmure's transformation. He did tell her not to allow her uncle at Harrenhal while he was away. Sansa could trust her uncle, couldn't she? Were other people listening? Petyr was either dead or too far away to help. This could be Sansa's only chance to have her uncle find her son and give him safety. He did betray her father and mother and sided with the Lannisters all those years ago to save his own title and lands. He hadn't spoken to Sansa until Alex's birthday after that day in town when he and Petyr drew swords on each other. Oh God, Sansa didn't know what to think. Who to really trust. The paranoia was too much.

"He's with Petyr, Uncle," Sansa started sobbing. "Please tell me you've heard from him. He's

coming, isn't he?"

"I haven't spoken to either of you since the boy's birthday," he replied and then muttered lowly, "Damn him. Damn him to hell. I knew it. *Coward.*"

"Please help me, please," she begged and gripped his hands tighter. "They're going to hang me. Please don't let them kill me."

"I will sort this out," he told her and let go of her hands. "Don't worry. I'll have you out in no time."

She could hear her uncle arguing for several minutes until the captain's voice ushered him inside to speak with those in authority. Sansa sat down and all she could do was wait and pray that her uncle succeeded.

The minutes ticked by like hours and Sansa kept her ears perked to any sound. She waited and waited and no one came. She didn't hear her uncle's voice and truly began to wonder if he only came to ask about Alex. Had he turned against her? Maybe that resentment for Petyr had finally found a mark after all these years. Perhaps he waited for revenge and Myranda handed it to him. All sorts of terrible thoughts ran through her mind and Sansa did not hear the door open, or the person that now stood in front of her cell until she unexpectedly glanced up.

"Petyr!" she gasped and ran, reaching her arms through the bars. "You came! I knew you would."

"Did they hurt you?" he asked and there was a strange tone to his voice. She grasped his hands and they were ice cold. He must have ridden all the way once he found out, she smiled.

"I'm fine, really," she cried softly. "Get me out of here."

"And the child?" he asked simply, looking at her belly.

Sansa was taken aback. Not because he asked about their baby – it was the *way* he asked. Something was wrong here, wrong with him.

"How did you convince them to let me go?" she wondered, curious to his answer. He wasn't holding a set of keys. No guard at his side. No Edmure.

"You have to give them something, if you want to leave," he said without emotion and Sansa started moving back against the wall.

"Give them what?" she asked warily. This was not the Petyr she knew, the man she was in love with, the father of her children.

"The child," he said.

"Alex? They want our son?" Sansa eyed him with disgust and he only stood there, unmoving. Looking down at his hand, something was missing. He wasn't wearing his ring. He was dressed in clothes he wore around Harrenhal. Petyr wasn't wearing gloves, traveling cloak... in this cold, he had to be freezing. *She* was freezing. Nothing about him was warm... alive.

"You are not my husband," she recoiled and the man smiled.

"We thought it might be easier for you this way," the man said in Petyr's voice but without any of his mannerisms or emotions.

Sansa didn't need to question what he was. She knew.

"Why him?" she demanded. "You didn't think I would know my own husband? He would never..."

"Leave you to die? But he has..." the man said.

"Stop it. Stop pretending to be him," she railed at the thing that suddenly morphed and a little girl took his place. Her red hair hung in ringlets and looked like the girl of Sansa's dreams. Another lie, she thought. Was it really Edmure just moments ago, too? Was he just another trick?

"I can be anything you want me to be," she said in such a sweet and delicate voice. "Choose any form you wish."

"Why are you here?" Sansa pleaded. "What do you want from me?"

"We tried to help you, but you refused and now you will die," the girl smiled sadly. "Only we can save you now."

"Petyr," she knew he wasn't dead. She just knew it. "He will come. He has always come for me."

The girl's eyes were wide and unblinking. She touched one bar and slowly drew her hand across each one until reaching the end and leaned against the wall.

"He won't come for you," she said in a sing-song voice and the eeriness of it chilled Sansa's bones.

"You're a liar," Sansa seethed. "You said he wouldn't come in the labyrinth and he did. You are only trying to trick me. I won't go with you."

"We don't want you anymore," she giggled. "*We want the child.*"

Sansa's eyes bulged in shock. She would rather die than give up her son. She wouldn't give Myranda one shred of information about Alex. What made this spirit think she would so easily give her boy to them?

"You're mad. Never. I'll go to my death," she spat. "I'll never give you or anyone my son."

The little girl giggled again sat down on the floor, playing with her frilly dress.

“Not the boy,” she grinned innocently and pointed at Sansa. “We want the girl – the girl you carry in your womb.”

You wanted a girl...

Sansa covered her belly as if some unseen force might pull the child out of her.

“No,” she gasped and felt the tears welling in her eyes. “You can’t have her. She is my child.”

“Then she will die with you... and very soon,” the girl offered simply. “You can live. Go home to your husband and son. Live a long life. Just promise us the girl, and we’ll save you.”

The tears fell in streams down Sansa’s face. This is what they had been waiting for just like Mrs. Ames said – for her to be at her most vulnerable and without hope. How could she do such a thing? Trade her only daughter for life? It was a selfish thing. A mother did not give her child away to save herself.

“What kind of life will I lead? I will regret it for the rest of my days,” Sansa sobbed at the reality she found herself in.

“She will live and be happy with us,” the girl explained. “Do you want her to die? She will be in a place of beauty where nothing will ever hurt her again. You will live and not suffer a terrible death. He will be broken without you, your son... will hate you for leaving him. Your husband will fall into despair... and he will die...”

“You just said he left me here to die,” Sansa countered, throwing the lie back at the spirit.

“He did. He left you and the children for his game. He put everything else before you, after you begged and pleaded with him to take you away. Now, you will die. The girl will die. It will be a most horrible death – the pain so great, so unbearable when you know that he never came back, that only we were willing to help you,” she sighed. “Only then, it will be too late.”

Sansa couldn’t stop crying as she slid down to the dirty floor. Oh God, why was this happening to her? What had she done to deserve this? By man’s decree, she was going to die. If she accepted this help, she might live but her child would be taken as payment. How could she be so selfish to even consider such a thing? How could she be selfish not to consider it?

“It is not selfish,” the girl answered her thoughts. “You are saving her from death.”

“I’ll never see her again, my baby,” Sansa sobbed uncontrollably. Faeries took young children, especially babies because they would easily forget their mortal life, parents. Her daughter would never know her. Sansa had not even considered a name yet for this baby and now she was being asked to give her away. A trade of life. How could she tell Petyr what she did? Would he blame her for it? Would he hate her? What if she saved her life only to have him turn her out in the end? He could take Alex away... She could lose her entire family and be alive only wanting to die.

“But she’ll live and be happy. Don’t you want that? Shouldn’t a good mother do what is right for her child?” it said calmly, and persuasively.

Be a good mother, my lady...

A good mother watches over her children, Duncan said that day. A good mother doesn’t sell them to faeries.

“How do I know you’ll take care of her. That she’ll be happy? How do I know? I’ll never see her again,” Sansa whimpered. “She’ll never know me...”

“It is only a question of life or death,” the girl smiled. “Do you want to live? There is no one else to come to your aid. They are going to kill you very soon. Or you will give birth to the girl and then give her to us. Both of you will live.”

Sansa turned it over in her mind. What if she agreed and they saved her? She could run away, find somewhere to hide. Go somewhere they would never find them again. At least they would be alive. Then she could find a way to get to Alex and Petyr. If he was alive, he would find her. Even if he couldn’t make it here to save them... if he knew she was alive. He would come. Sansa needed to save herself and her baby right now. Let them believe she would agree...

“Once you make the pact, it is sealed. You cannot run away. You cannot hide. If we save you, you will honor your pledge or you both will die as fate has been decided by your mortal enemies,” the girl vowed ominously, reading her mind.

This wasn’t generosity of one being helping another. This was just like any other business deal. A contract. Either accept their help or die. That was the choice. A mother’s choice to save her child’s life only to give her up and pray that she would be safe, treated well. What if it was all a lie? What if that Other World was a terrible place? That the reason they took the innocent and children was for something more nefarious? There were just too many questions and Sansa would never know the answer. Duncan said Harrenhal was built on the gates of hell. What if he was right in the end?

This spirit said many of the same things to Sansa that night in the labyrinth. She promised her a beautiful world where she would always be happy. She wanted Sansa desperately to go with her – trying to convince her Petyr would not come for her. She wasn’t with child then. They wanted her. Maybe children served a better purpose. Whatever it was, if she had left that night, she would have never given birth to Alex. Sansa would have never known that Petyr loved her... it was all lies. They wanted her to go then and now they wanted her to give an oath to hand over her unborn child.

Maybe Petyr was on his way? Just like before, he saved her. That’s why they wanted her to make the pact now. It was an awful risk but Sansa believed in him. He wasn’t dead. He was coming. He wouldn’t let this happen. Mrs. Ames said she would have two children. Sansa wasn’t going to give one up to save herself. If Petyr didn’t come then that would explain the separation of the lines on her hand. Two of them were going forward and two of them were not. Maybe Petyr and Alex were always meant to live. Perhaps it was better that her daughter died with her mother, never

having to know the terrors of this world. Sansa certainly couldn't condemn her to another world she knew nothing about.

Those dreams, visions could be completely false. Nothing but what they wanted her to see. How in the world would they save her? Were Joffrey's men really going to let a little girl walk Sansa out of prison and home to Harrenhal? They certainly wouldn't let Petyr, or a clone of him do it. She could morph into Joffrey right now and it would be suspicious. Myranda would never let it happen. She was determined to see her die. No matter how it happened, Sansa would still lose her child to a mysterious future and the torture would be never knowing the truth. That was worse than dying. Petyr would never forgive her. A mother sacrificing her child... What husband would forgive such a thing. He still did not believe in her ghosts and faeries. Petyr would lock her up in a sanitarium for real. Or believe that she was a real witch that blood sacrificed her own baby. Witches were known for it.

Before she even opened her mouth, the decision was made and the little spirit shook her head in dismay.

"You did this to yourself," it sighed. "We only wanted to help you."

"I don't want your help," she whispered and thought of Mrs. Ames, praying the old woman was right. *Never take their help... ever.*

"Oh, Petyr. Please hurry," Sansa murmured to herself and sealing her fate.

"He will not come," the girl disappeared and her voice hung in the air.

Yes, he will. He will come. I trust him. He said he would die for us. I would die for them. I will die for them.

Maybe that's what her dreams were about... mother and daughter were meant to die and watch over father and son. Alex was never in her dreams. Petyr was always sad. Alex was supposed to live. Either way in her vision, Petyr was either injured, sad, angry or did not know her. Maybe he wasn't looking for Sansa at all in her dreams, but searching for their little girl believing his wife was a madwoman. All in all, she couldn't bear any of these outcomes. Death just might be better. Her neck would snap and it would be all over with. Petyr and Alex would mourn them but live their lives. It was better than them hating Sansa for the rest of her days.

"It will not be a quick," that ghostly voice echoed once more. *"It will be a most terrible and painful death. Worse than your mother before you. They will not hear your cries as they watch... and once again he will come too late."*

Silence engulfed the stone cell for a time and when a commotion started outside, Sansa felt a shred of hope. Standing up on the ledge again, she could see soldiers moving out on orders. There were men coming from the south and Sansa thanked the heavens and the stars.

Petyr was coming, she told herself over and over. He must have gathered men, knowing Joffrey sent soldiers. Brune must have gone to him, told him... saved her son...

It was going to be alright now...

The horses were exhausted and Petyr could see the crest of the hill and knew Harrenhal lay just beyond it. They rode all night, stopping at the Ivy Inn for fresh horses, supplies and men. To Petyr's relief, Brune had kept his word and had passed through doing just as he directed. With any luck, they were at Lord Holloway's Town already. However, Petyr wasn't taking any chances or false hope in their success. He wouldn't stop until he saw her face. If he found her dead, then God help those who took her life. Petyr would make sure the rest of their short lives would be lived out in agony.

The news of Northerners coming down was true. There were enough to make Petyr choose to go across country and off the main road to town. Out here, many of them would not know of the revolution playing out in the houses of the aristocracy. Petyr's many men, paid assassins were taking out any and all that could oppose him. Even the children that could inherit a title great enough in name and stature that might be able to make a claim for the throne were condemned just as much as their parents and family. Petyr had not promised Sansa a bloodless revolution, in fact he had promised that less blood would be spilt and an act that would be far more successful than that of her father – and it was. It was a ruthless plan of attack but in the end would save the lives of many that would be forced to fight a civil war. For the greater good – Petyr convinced himself. They must all die for the greater good.

Cresting the hillside in this cold weather, the horses would keel over if they tried to ride them all the way to the town. Stopping at Harrenhal was the only choice. It was mid-morning judging by the hazy sun in the sky. The clouds were rolling in and Petyr feared a storm. Strange for the midst of December for there to be such a lack of snow. The ground and trees were frosted but winter had come late this year. In a way, it was a good thing not having to trudge through feet of snow. It would have slowed, if not halted his hurried advancement north.

Even if Brune made it before the execution, it didn't not mean Sansa was in safe keeping. Joffrey could have sent enough men to hold Brune back. A company could be easily over taken, but if the boy sent even a small detachment as his friend advised, and depending on how many men Brune was able to coerce, it still could be a serious problem.

Petyr rode to the frost covered stables and saw a few men in wait. His and Sansa's Arabians were

already saddled when a woman yelled from the direction of the lake. The young maid ran towards them as Petyr ordered one of his men to ride and collect her quickly. Turning towards the house, a few chimneys were smoking. Clearly, a few loyal to him had remained.

“Alex!” he bellowed, wondering if the boy was still in hiding. A few servants came from inside the house to see if it really was their lord and master returning. “Alexander Faolan!”

“My Lord!” the girl cried out as the man rode closer. “Thank God, it’s you. Thank God in heaven...”

“Where’s my son?” he demanded as the man lifted Sarah to the frozen ground.

Not hesitating for a moment, the girl started crying, “He’s safe, m’lord. Mrs. Ames and I have watched over him.” She came up close and whispered as she looked fearfully at the men around them, as if they couldn’t be trusted. “In that secret place.”

Bringing a comforting arm around the young maid, Petyr patted her back. “Thank you. The both of you. You will find me eternally grateful. He’s alright?”

“Yes, m’lord. He doesn’t remember much. He has slept mostly – to keep him quiet,” Sarah sniffed. “We didn’t know if the soldiers would return or if we could trust anyone else. And it’s too cold to run away... especially after they took m’lady away...”

“It’s alright. It will be all right now,” he hushed the girl. “Tell Mrs. Ames, I’m going for Lady Sansa. If we do not return by nightfall, these men will escort her and Alex to the Eyrie under the protection of the His Grace, King Robert. Stephens, you and three men will stay and protect my son,” he ordered the one man that had been with him since the beginning and the last he could trust. At least he could trust him slightly better than the hired men on horseback, waiting anxiously.

Petyr retrieved a letter with his seal unbroken from his coat and handed it not to the man but to the young maid. “Give this to Mrs. Ames. It explains everything. It must be put into the hands of His Majesty and no one else, do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord,” Sarah curtsied and cried even harder. “You will save her, won’t you? They dragged her away on foot all the way to town. Michael rode there yesterday. Upon his return, he said they were going to hang Lady Sansa today... She isn’t a witch... she isn’t. It’s all a lie...”

“I know,” Petyr nodded and couldn’t erase the image of a noose around his beloved’s neck. He needed to leave even though he desperately wanted to see his son and tell him everything would be alright. It wasn’t the truth and he didn’t want to lie to his boy. Petyr did not know what was going to happen. He felt as though time had reversed and he was riding towards Winterfell that fateful day.

“Sir Brune said to have your horse ready for you, my lord,” the stablehand interrupted, leading his stallion towards him. “He headed out this morning with twenty men.”

Only twenty? Petyr winced. The pickings were few indeed as the northern refugees had undoubtedly scared many people into hiding or further south. He was only able to gather a handful more along the way, and promised them each a hefty price. Petyr looked to the north and remembered when Sansa raced him home that beautiful autumn afternoon. He kissed her for the first time right behind that oak tree near the terrace.

“No, give me the mare,” Petyr ordered. She was faster. “As many fresh horses as you can muster for the rest of the men. We ride to Lord Holloway’s Town immediately.”

“What should I tell Alexander, m’lord?” the girl simpered.

Petyr glanced her way mournfully, not sure what fate awaited him and Sansa today.

“Tell him, his father loves him. Tell him to do as Mrs. Ames says,” Petyr sighed. “Remember, if I’m not back by nightfall, do not waste any time.”

Sansa could hear that more people had gathered in the town square. It had been a hour since the soldiers moved out and the noise only grew louder. She could hear the chanting of ‘witch’ and other curses. Duncan’s voice could be heard just barely above that of the people. Even on her the tips of her toes, Sansa could barely see through the window. He was riling the crowd up, speaking of God and denouncing Satan in all its forms. There were soldiers just outside meant to keep the peace but it would do her no good. Two were speaking about the men from the south and Sansa stepped back down wringing her hands in hope. It was Petyr, it had to be. He was coming to save her. Sansa had to believe that.

Suddenly the door opened and a stocky woman with two guards walked in and all hope died. Sansa’s stomach lurched as they unlocked her cell and the woman entered with a look of disgust on her face.

“Turn around, my girl,” she said with no emotion.

“Where’s Lord Tully? I demand to see my uncle...” Sansa sputtered.

“Turn around, I don’t want these men to have to hold you,” the woman warned.

Sansa turned around and faced the window. It wasn't noon yet. Joffrey's man said she would be executed in the afternoon... it was too early.

She could feel the woman's rough hands on her back as she unlaced her dirty dress.

"What are you doing?" Sansa demanded in fear.

"Quiet, and let's get this over with," the woman replied thinly.

The dress was shrugged down her body harshly, leaving Sansa to shiver in her chemise. She wrapped her arms around herself in the cold as the woman draped the dress over her thick arm and glanced at Sansa's feet.

"The stockings and shoes too," the woman ordered and Sansa backed against the wall.

"It's freezing outside.." she protested numbly and the woman laughed.

"My daughter could wear these. Such finery shouldn't go to waste on a dead woman," she smirked.

Sansa couldn't stop the tears from welling up if she tried as she sat down and removed her satin shoes and silk stockings. Her bare feet touched the icy stone of her dirty cell and reality came crashing down. Sansa thought surely she would vomit right now if she had anything in her stomach. When the new magistrate walked in, Sansa couldn't move. She was frozen to that stone ledge.

No, it's too soon. He won't be here in time, her mind rambled in fear. Did he know it was today? This afternoon? Did Petyr believe he had enough time to save her? Even if he was here now, was he too busy fighting Joffrey's soldiers?

"Lady Baelish," the man began.

"It's not time yet," she mumbled.

"You will follow me to the town's square..." the man continued but Sansa couldn't hear him. The baby moved inside her and she softly rubbed her stomach through the thin material. She couldn't feel the hands that pulled her to stand and guided her out of her cell or when they shackled her wrists once more. She looked around hoping to see her uncle arguing for her release or that perhaps Petyr had come for her after all but saw not a single friendly face.

When the doors opened to the outside, the roar of the spectators was almost deafening. There were more people here than Sansa would have ever believed. She somehow thought that maybe a handful of the curious might come but there were many of the townsfolk and country locals here... *here to see her die.*

Over the crowd she could hear a familiar voice and turned towards it. A line of guards held back some of the commonfolk and Sansa heard her name. It was Edmure. He wasn't a figment of her imagination after all. Men were holding him back as he screamed for her. In the distance she could see soldiers engaged in some kind of battle but she couldn't make out one face. It was him, he was here. Petyr was here, but still so far away...

"Uncle!" Sansa screamed at the top of her lungs, but a soldier held her tightly. "Help me, please!"

It was biting cold as the darkening clouds threatened above. A guard pulled her roughly and Sansa watched her dirty, bare feet as they stumbled over the icy cobblestone. They dragged her along through the crowd, braced back by soldiers.

"Witch!"

"Northern whore!"

"Devil worshipper!"

All manners of slurs were yelled out and yet there were a few that called out her name in vain. Glancing up briefly as they yanked her along, Sansa caught the horrified faces of Mr. Wiltshire, the tailor and his wife. A few local women had tears in their eyes but what could they do? Sansa remembered the captain's threat to her servants at Harrenhal. Anyone attempting to help her would be counted themselves as a traitor. The mob would see them hang right now and Duncan's preaching was only inflamed such hatred and fear.

She could hear him but the horde was too thick to see anything but shaking fists and angry faces. Whatever had happened to these once loyal people, who praised and loved her over the past few years had dissolved now into pure hate. Duncan, Joffrey's men and probably Myranda had convinced them Sansa was the reason for all their misfortune. Somehow Sansa knew that Duncan, under Myranda's orders were behind all the terrible things happening in the county. Petyr wasn't here to investigate and bring reason, so the priest and duchess took advantage instead. Sansa wouldn't put it past Duncan and Myranda to poison the animals and stir up trouble. It would make the people believe whatever he wanted. He was a godly priest after all, who would suspect such a man of evil doing?

Rounding a corner, she could finally see him preaching upon the place she was meant to die in front of this rabble. Only it wasn't a gallows in which she was being led. There was no noose to break her little neck, only a single post on a scaffolding surrounded by bundles of tinder, wood and branches.

"Hanging does not destroy a servant of the Devil!" Duncan's voice boomed over the crowd. "Send her back to hell by the flames of her master!"

"No!" Sansa yelled in terror and yanked away from the guards' grasp. She pulled and tried to run, but the two men lifted her struggling body up, carrying her the final distance.

Sansa heard a voice that sounded like hers, scream and plead. She saw a few tearful eyes in a multitude of vengeful faces but their voices were all she could feel.

“Burn her!” they chanted.

Tears blurred her vision as the men carried her and so many of those faces were either smiling or filled with rage. Duncan’s words enthralled them, indoctrinating that only his word of God could save them from a witch’s spell – the pestilence she brought upon them. Her nails clawed and she twisted her body in every way to free herself from the grasp of the guards, all in vain.

“Please, I’m not a witch! I am innocent! Don’t do this!” her cries went unheard.

In the distance, soldiers were fighting and for a split second, Sansa thought she saw Brune’s face. He was yelling and pushing hard against the armed men as she was dragged up the steps. Edmure was beat down to the ground as others stood stunned in horror. Scanning the swarm of spectators, soldiers and Brune’s men, Sansa couldn’t see him. Petyr wasn’t here and her heart fell to the pit of her stomach.

It will be a most terrible and painful death. Worse than your mother before you. They will not hear your cries as they watch...and once again he will come too late.

Sansa couldn’t hear Duncan’s spiteful words anymore, just his voice echoing her death to the sky and back. A man hauled her up the rest of the way, pushing her against the post. Fearful eyes darted all over the place and finally found her nemesis. Myranda stood with her fur-lined cloak on a makeshift platform so she would have a better view over the crowd. By her side was one of her twin sons. The gleeful smile on the woman’s face shot fear down Sansa’s spine. She thought she had the last laugh scaring the brunette last night. Sansa’s stomach jolted at the very idea that she might have caused this last minute change of plans. Instead of a hangman’s knot, the madwoman decided Sansa must burn to destroy her spirit in all forms from haunting her.

“Myranda! Don’t do this, please! Not like this,” Sansa cried not caring for her own pride. There couldn’t be a more horrible way to die than by fire.

Instead the duchess stood and smiled with wild eyes. Indeed, Myranda had gone mad and there was so saving herself.

“I damn you! Curse you to hell for all eternity!” Sansa yelled and it wasn’t just for her rival but everyone wishing her death.

“Hear the Devil speak!” Duncan bellowed over her ranting. “This is why she must burn! Our ancestors were right and knew how to rid themselves of such evil...”

A man chained her arms behind her, binding her to the post and all Sansa could see was the laughter on that boy’s face. He was positively incensed at the burning alive of a woman. In crowd, the tailor’s wife had her hand over her mouth with her husband unable to watch, Edmure’s face was painted in rage and grief. He did not defend his sister and children when they were put to death and now he could do nothing to save the last child before him.

Brune’s men, Petyr’s men were trying but couldn’t push through as some of the men in the mob helped push them back and Sansa could no longer think coherently. This was a bad dream, just another one of her nightmares. It wasn’t the little girl burning at the stake, it was Sansa all along.

This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening. Wake up, Sansa... Wake up.

Men were stacking bushels of tinder and wood around the scaffolding and yet that little baby was kicking inside her belly as if trying to get out herself. She knew as well as her mother, both of them were going to die today and it wasn’t death that scared Sansa to her bones. It was the pain.

It there is a merciful God, let it be quick. Please, let it be quick.

Sansa’s mare was indeed fast as he rode towards the town. It was in sight and his mind was filled with fear as a rider came barreling towards them. Not stopping for him, Petyr pushed on and the man came back around, catching him and the other men up.

“My lord,” he shouted breathlessly and Petyr had hoped that Brune was successful but it was not in the cards. “He sent me to warn you. They’re going to burn her. Burn her at the stake.”

It was then Petyr could spy a hint of smoke and everything in his heart died at the sight.

No, not again. Do not do this to me again...

Catelyn’s lifeless eyes and the dead bodies of her children haunted him his entire life. He was supposed to save Sansa from such a terrible fate. He meant to give her a beautiful life. It was for her and their own children that he was doing this and yet it all came back to shred him to pieces.

The crack of thunder rolled over their heads and it was as if Petyr had traveled back in time and it was Winterfell he was riding towards. He never meant for Catelyn to be harmed, the children. Never did Petyr expect Joffrey to kill them all. They should have lived. He had intended to save them, but Petyr was late and they were all dead, lying in the rain except for the lovely red-haired daughter.

Petyr jabbed the mare hard, forcing her to run at breakneck speed. She lunged far ahead of the other riders and Petyr didn’t care. All he could see was her sweet face. He had to get there. He couldn’t let this happen. Petyr wouldn’t let history repeat itself. So many ‘ifs’ plagued his mind as the horse galloped towards the town, inching ever so closer but that smoke was building and it

was now a race against time.

I will make it this time. There is still time. I can stop this.

Petyr prayed to God and any other deity, he would sell his soul if only to save her... he would do anything – give anything.

Take me... let it be me.

Two men with torches lit the bushels and the chanting brood began to quiet down. Sansa couldn't see any flames but when the smoke rose from the wet, winter branches, it was stifling. Maybe they wouldn't catch flame and they would have to kill her another way. Any form of death was better than this slow torture.

How long did it take for a person to burn? Maybe if she inhaled the smoke it would be faster or at least she would faint before the flames had a chance to touch her. When the first of the flames flickered up from the base of the platform it was as though the reality had come over everyone watching for it was silent as the grave just as in her nightmares.

The tears streamed down her face and Sansa sobbed loudly. She begged again, pleaded for her life and innocence – the innocence of the child within her and yet no one said or did a thing. They watched in silence with only the crackle of the flames beginning to build slowly. Too slowly.

Sansa gazed down at her pregnant belly and wished she could touch, console the daughter within. Would she feel the pain?

Glancing around, her eyes watering from the growing smoke and flying embers in the cold breeze, she couldn't see anything. Pistol shots and men fighting could be heard in the distance but all she could see, hear and feel was the heat and smoke coming closer.

Closing her eyes, Sansa tried to numb herself to the fear and the horrendous pain she knew was coming for her. Petyr wasn't coming. He wouldn't make it time even if he knew. He must know. Brune was here with men but it was no use. They couldn't stop it. She was going to burn. She could feel the heat below her bare feet...

It will be over soon, she chanted to herself, the tears falling down silently. *It will all be over soon.*

Seconds passed like hours and Sansa coughed and tasted the smoke. The heat was inching closer and closer and she could feel the scorch of it on her skin. She desperately tried to stay silent and not give Miranda and Duncan the satisfaction that they broke her but once those flames licked her feet, she couldn't contain the scream for mercy that ripped from her lungs.

Nearby a wolf howled and only Sansa could hear her.

Dear God, no...

The smoke was rising high as Petyr flew through the edge of town seeing the bodies of dead soldiers littering the ground. Brune and his men were effective but once he neared, that dread was like a lead weight pulling on his stomach when he heard her scream. Brune was pushing through some of the locals and what remained of Joffrey's gold cloaks. Petyr's men on horseback rode right through them into the mass that stood in shock watching a woman burn.

It was as if he were wading in mud, waist deep and time stood still. Suddenly, the men stopped fighting and froze in horror at the screams of the girl in the bonfire, yet they did nothing – not one person moved. He passed Edmure who was on the ground shaking and sobbing. They pushed through and the smoke was all consuming. Thunder cracked above and the roar of the fire was just ahead. Petyr felt like he couldn't get through fast enough.

Those that opposed them, were shot, sliced through without a thought. Finally, people started to move back from the horrible sight while others began to flee from the Marquess' armed men. It was then he could see her and Petyr rushed forward without a thought in his mind.

Her screams were unbearable as she begged for death and Petyr heard his voice crack as he cried out her name. She was screaming for him, his name ripping through those flames as he lunged forward with a rifle to knock away the burning wood. The heat was so great that it burned his eyes, but hearing her cries of agony was worse than any physical pain as he tried in vain to save her.

"Water! Come on men, put it out!" he yelled as his hands burned. "For God's sake! WATER!"

"Cabhair liom le do thoil. Beidh mé aon rud a dhéanamh. Sábhail mé! – Please help me. I'll do anything. Save me! –" she bawled in her northern tongue.

“Sansa!” Petyr bellowed in anguish as hands yanked him back from the flames, holding him down. “Let go of me, damnit!” he railed at the two men with vice grips on him. “She’s still alive! Let me go!”

Brune’s strong hold didn’t budge as he tried to drag Petyr back from the fire, “Let her burn, for God’s sake, she’s dead already!”

Petyr wailed but no one was listening. His sweetling’s tortured voice could still be heard inside the roar of the flames.

“She’s not dead! Do you hear her? I can save her!” he sobbed, the tears blinding him. “I have to save her...”

“Do you want her to suffer more? Pull her from that fire...she could linger for hours, *days* with a burnt body... let her die, Petyr,” Brune pleaded, holding him down on the frozen cobblestone. Her cries were all Petyr could hear when he pulled his dagger and drove it deep into Brune’s chest, kicking the shocked and dying man away. Petyr was on his hands and knees when he heard her wail for the last time...

“Tóg dí! Tá sí mise! – Take her! She is yours! – ”

Before he could even comprehend what it meant, the sky cracked with lightning. A bolt hit the bonfire and the flames turned a deep blue before the clouds opened with a downpour dousing the fire completely as if by magic or God, Himself.

Everyone, including Petyr stood stunned at the sight before them in the pouring rain. Steam rose from the dying embers and remains of the scaffolding, and there, still chained to the burnt post was the girl they tried to murder.

Whispers echoed back and forth as Petyr scrambled on top of rubble to his wife’s side. It was freezing as the rain turned to snow. Sansa’s clothes had burned away leaving her completely bare as the chain around her waist and arms were the only thing holding her to the post as her legs had collapsed under her.

At first, it looked as though she was dead, her skin burnt to a crisp and covered in soot, but as the rain and snow fell, it began to wash it all away, leaving her unmarred by the fire that consumed her only moments before.

Petyr dared not touch her, not knowing what to do. His eyes couldn’t believe what he was seeing. That porcelain skin was being washed and almost as white as the snow that fluttered down around them.

“Give me a sword, hatchet, anything,” Petyr demanded but the people that remained only stared at the scene before them.

It was Edmure’s hand that gave him a sword and Petyr broke through the chain holding her to the funeral pyre. She fell down upon the burned wooden planks in a heap as Petyr gently brushed the wet hair from her face. It was as if the flames had never touched her and Petyr was at a loss for words. He didn’t believe in magic, or even God. He couldn’t even begin to explain what had just happened, that when she took a breath, his mind forgot everything else.

She’s alive!

His mind seized. She shouldn’t be alive, but Sansa was breathing and Petyr thanked heaven and earth, whoever was responsible for this act of mercy. He gathered her shivering, wet body to him and the sobs racked him so hard, that even she shook slightly in his arms.

“Logh dom. – forgive me – ” Sansa’s voice uttered so softly, that Petyr almost didn’t hear her. Why would she ask for his forgiveness? It was hers that he would beg for the rest of his days.

He quickly removed his cloak to cover her when Sansa’s eyes opened and the pain there was his undoing. She stared at him for a long moment before blinking at the snow falling on her face. Without a word, she moved from his embrace to stand on wobbling legs when whispers could be heard across the town square.

“God in heaven... witch... faerie magic... Mary, Mother of God...”

All manner of terrified words were uttered and rushed explanations for what their eyes could not believe. The tailor kissed his crucifix as his wife crossed herself. Dumbfounded, others backed away, while some ran from the square. From the corner of his eye, Petyr saw Duncan slowly back away, trying to hide himself amongst the people. The little twin was pulling his mother as Petyr and Miranda locked eyes onto one another for only a moment, before Sansa stumbled and his attention went back to his other worldly wife.

Draping his cloak around her, she brushed Petyr’s hands off her and that action spoke volumes. It knifed him to the core. He did not save her. She would have died because of him. She did die because of him. The look in her eyes was far and away as if she did not even see him. Sansa glanced at the scared people running away, the same ones that tried to kill her and said nothing. Those ice blue eyes held no hate, no vengeance – only the deepest sorrow.

She made her way down the burnt remains, refusing help from Petyr and then again from Edmure, without a word. Her bare feet made ashy prints in the layered snow. Petyr had no idea what to say as he followed her in awe and confusion. People moved away from her as if she were the Virgin Mary, some kneeled, and others ran as if she were the Devil instead. None of it phased her in the slightest, as though she were walking in a garden by herself.

Out of nowhere, Lady had found her mother. The white wolf bounded around a corner and Petyr thought she must have followed him here. Her horse gently walked up to its mistress and Petyr was rooted to the spot. Misty grunted at first, but once Sansa touched, the horse seemed to understand everything. Both animals were completely in tuned to the girl.

“Dear God, Petyr...” he heard Edmure mumble behind him. God, could come down to earth right

at this moment and Petyr would not have been shocked. His logical mind simply could not process what was happening.

His logical mind is what he needed if only for a moment, when he saw a glimpse of Myranda's boy nearby trying not to be seen. Quickly Petyr climbed down and grabbed two of his men.

"Find me the priest. Tall, grey, thin and around seventy years," he commanded quietly, keeping his eye on Sansa. "Lady Myranda, Duchess of Winterfell and her son. Bring them to me. One hundred gold pieces to each of you."

The men nodded and left with Edmure on their heels. Petyr didn't ask and did not care. His only concern now was the girl petting her loyal horse as if the world did not exist around her. Slowly, he moved closer but dared not touch her, fearing her rejection again.

"Take me home," she whispered on a breeze and Petyr wasn't sure if she was talking to him or Misty.

Mounting the horse, he hauled her up to sit in front of him, wrapped in his cloak, her bare feet dangling along the side. She did not hold on to him or talk to him at all. Petyr simply brought his arm around her waist to secure her before guiding to horse back to Harrenhal as Lady followed.

The journey was silent and frankly Petyr couldn't form a single coherent word. How did one apologize for such a thing? How could he even begin to ask for her forgiveness after what she had been through. Because of him, she was burned at the stake like some medieval witch and only a higher power managed to save her. She was alive, that was a blessing but the thought of her hating him for the rest of their lives was something he couldn't even conceive yet. He promised he wouldn't let anything terrible happen to her again. This wasn't just a trivial thing, she was tortured in the worst way possible... all because of his stupid game.

Any punishment he received would be nothing compared to what she just went through and it tore his heart out. They rode home and not a single word was spoken. Entering Harrenhal, every servant gasped at the sight of their mistress as she silently walked in. She might as well have been a ghost. She refused help, especially from her husband who trailed behind.

Struggling with the first couple of steps, Petyr finally intervened and picked her up, carrying her the rest of the way to her bedroom when Mrs. Ames and Alex rushed in.

"Mummy!" the boy wailed but the old woman held him back.

"Wait, my love. Your mother needs some rest. She's alright, you see? Let your father take care of her, then you can come see her. Lady needs someone to take care of her. Go to her my little wolf," Mrs. Ames smiled sadly, guiding the boy to Sarah and closing the door.

Petyr and the old woman stared at one another as he held his wife in his arms. Without a thought, Mrs. Ames opened the bathroom door and started filling the tub with hot water. Sansa refused to speak as he set her down in the tub like he did so many years ago after she fell in the labyrinth. She did not object when he began to gently wash the soot and grime away as when Mrs. Ames brought in one of her teas. Sansa simply stared at nothing and did not drink from the teacup placed to her lips.

The woman gazed in wonder at the young girl, unharmed by the flames as Petyr tried to explain what he witnessed, which he felt only made him sound like a complete madman. Mrs. Ames inspected the girl, making sure there was no other injury. She attempted to get Sansa to talk but to no avail. She lay in the tub and acted as if they were not even in the room.

Petyr helped her into her nightdress and that's when she took note of him and gently pushed him away. The sting of that rejection was too much as Petyr decided to check on their son. The boy was blissfully asleep with Lady curled around him on the bed and Petyr felt like they were both ignoring him. They had right to be angry – to hate him.

Returning to Sansa's room, she was either asleep or pretending to be. Kneeling at her bedside, it all came crashing down as Petyr finally broke and sobbed uncontrollably into the duvet. He held her hand and whispered for forgiveness that he knew he did not deserve. Sansa did not deserve what happened to her. It was all his fault. All her pain and suffering was because of him. He couldn't save Catelyn and in hindsight, he couldn't save Sansa either. Petyr failed both women. One was dead and the other might as well be given her state. How did one even come back from being burned alive? Come to terms with it?

"It should have been me," he cried softly. "I couldn't save you."

Petyr couldn't bring himself to leave her side, even if she did not want him there. Just like before, he would stay until she told him to leave. However, this wasn't like before. This wasn't misunderstanding about love. This was betrayal even if Petyr never meant it. He also needed an explanation that Petyr knew only Sansa could give. What saved her? It couldn't have been a freak of nature – a coincidence.

His troubled mind fell to sleep as he lay against the side of the bed on the floor. Petyr did not hear the old woman enter the room and sit on the other side of the bed examining the girl. Lifting her arm, the northern housekeeper noticed an intricate mark on the inside of Sansa's wrist – a burn, the only burn on her entire body.

Mrs. Ames covered her mouth in horror and dismay, "Oh God, child... what have you done?"

Monster

Chapter Notes

Well, here it is...finally a new chapter. It's an ugly one, I should probably warn you now. I know it's been a few months since I updated and I'm really sorry about that. I've been through a lot recently and trying to get my life back in order. Comments are always appreciated, I'll be super happy if I still have readers after a long hiatus. Thanks to everyone.

"Petyr!" a blood curdling scream woke him from the next room. He hauled out of bed and rushed into her bedroom seeing his beloved wailing in pain and fear from another nightmare. She had them every night now and sometimes she'd wake from an afternoon rest screaming in that northern tongue.

Petyr grabbed her tightly and held her drenched body to him. These were the only times she allowed him to hold her and it broke his heart. He was fearful for many reasons. The harm that could befall the child that grew inside her, Sansa's mental state and foremost that she would hate him for the rest of her days... because of what he couldn't prevent. No, what he allowed to happen to her.

How could a man apologize for such a thing, he asked himself constantly? He did not order her execution. He did not chain her to that pyre, but Petyr had condemned her all the same. He told her to stay. It would be safer for them, he comforted her so many times. *Safe*, Petyr frowned. He knew Myranda was a spiteful woman. However, Petyr underestimated the duchess greatly and Sansa paid the price. She paid for all of them.

"Hush, my love," he cooed as he held her firmly, keeping her arms from flailing. She cried as these vivid dreams were nothing but reliving that awful moment when he saw her burn before his eyes. "You're safe now. You're here with me."

Petyr knew enough of that old northern language but he was far from fluent. She cried out for him to stop it. Stop the pain. End her misery. All of that he understood and it ripped him to shreds. She was praying for him to save her. In those terrible moments of pain, he could still hear the agony in her voice as the flames roared. Many times he dreamed it. Brune holding him back, the crowd silent. Petyr could still smell the smoke, burning hair and skin.

"*Tóg di. Tá sí mise....*" she whimpered, unable to wake, like so many nights past. "*Tóg di....*"

Take her? Take whom? Petyr couldn't make sense of any of it. Had someone told him what he saw that day, Petyr would have laughed and called them mad. There was no magic in the world. This world was ugly and hateful. God, a loving God, would not have let a madwoman burn an innocent angel, only to wait until the ultimate suffering before saving her.

"Another one?" a tired, old voice echoed quietly from the doorway. Mrs. Ames stood with a single candle and the woman looked like she hadn't slept in days either.

Petyr nodded sadly and rocked his pregnant wife until she calmed down. If she woke, Sansa would push him away. She had not spoken a word to him, not directly, since that terrible day. How could he blame her? He did not save her from harm. Something else did and that frightening knowledge possessed his mind like nothing else.

Sansa had been afraid of something since arriving at Harrenhal all those years ago. Ghosts, spirits... Petyr didn't believe in such things. The music box and those strange unexplainable things that happened that first year and then like a puff of smoke, it disappeared and Sansa never spoke of it again.

Glancing at the housekeeper as she entered the room, Petyr wondered what she wasn't telling him. What happened here while he was away? Mrs. Ames explained the odd happenings around the county and Petyr felt for certain that Duncan and Myranda were behind it all. He left Sansa alone and they preyed upon it, using it to their best advantage. They would both die for what they had done. It wouldn't take long to find them. Petyr would pay every hired man if that's what it took.

"Thankfully, she didn't wake your son this time. He shouldn't see her in this state," Mrs. Ames lamented touching Sansa's bandaged wrist.

Odd it was, that the only evidence of Sansa's horrific torture was a strange burn on the inside of her left wrist. She was covered in soot and looked charred from head to toe. After that strike of lightning, the finger of God, Petyr wasn't sure, the rains washed it away leaving her white as snow.

"He's usually here asleep next to her when the maid comes in the morning," she sighed wringing out a cool cloth from the water basin and dabbing Sansa's forehead. "Poor lad. He doesn't understand. I don't think he ever will."

Petyr eyed her carefully, "I don't understand it. My own eyes don't believe what they saw."

"Then trust your heart, my lord," the old woman smiled sadly. "Trust in that... in her. She will tell you in time."

Sansa mumbled and he felt that slight push on his arm. Whether awake or in sleep, she knew he was there and did not want him touching her. Swallowing a lump in his throat, Petyr moved off

the bed and sat in the chair by the window.

"I fear I will be dead and buried before that time comes," he whispered more to himself, gazing out at the black lake.

"No," she breathed. "I believe it will be sooner than you think. She will need your love. Be patient. Love, such as this, is a rare thing indeed."

"She'll never forgive me, how could she ever love me again," Petyr grumbled under his voice. The old woman meant well, but it wasn't the truth. He deserved to die. It should have been him, not her.

"She never stopped loving you," the woman's voice smiled. "You need to watch over the children. Be a good father."

Petyr glanced over his shoulder with a question on his lips but the housekeeper was gone and the door shut. Sansa fidgeted in her sleep and Petyr wondered for a moment in madness if Mrs. Ames had entered the room at all. Did he imagine it? His reflection from the moonlight in the dark glass showed he had not slept. His whiskers were grayer than before and he hadn't bothered shaving in days. Maybe he was the one going mad after all.

Sansa barely ate and sat in silence in bed or in her chair by the window. She only wore her nightclothes and never left her bedroom. She wasn't ignoring him but seemed to be somewhere else all together when he attempted to talk with her. Sansa's eyes were far off in another place and Petyr wondered if she even knew he was there. No anger, no accusations on why he left her alone to suffer at the hands of Myranda's wrath. Nothing.

Petyr desperately wanted her to hit him, yell, anything but this silence. It was strange thing, as if it never happened yet everything pulsed with the horrors of the past few days. Some of the servants left when the lady of the house was arrested, others ran upon her return. Perhaps they did not believe the accusations of witchcraft in the beginning, but the news spread quickly of her burning... and walking away unscathed. Sansa was either an angel, a saint... or a witch depending on which story was told...and it spread like wildfire.

The Red Witch of Harrenhal. That's what the townsfolk called her. *Witch...*

Within days, ravens arrived informing Petyr that his carefully laid plans had been a success. Robert was safe under guard at the Eyrie. It was still too chaotic to move him to the capital just yet. Sansa was in no condition to travel and Petyr could not leave her behind even though all their enemies were dead. The land was red with the blood of the titled and those that would inherit. Petyr wasn't proud of murdering children, but if there was one thing he understood well; the young grew up and sometimes became very powerful to seek retribution. He couldn't allow it. With Lord Bolton dead however, Petyr felt no pity for his sons. Those beasts could never be permitted to live.

The boy king couldn't stay in the Eyrie alone for long, but couldn't be crowned in the capital either. Young Robert would have to be brought here. Harrenhal was the ancient home of great kings. It would be fitting to have the boy's coronation in the ballroom. From Harrenhal, without leaving his family, Petyr could make all the transitions necessary for the new king. Robert would heed all his advice and in time, when everything was in place... the boy would die. With his death, the country would finally return to the people.

It was difficult to continue on as he expected when he saw his wife. She was supposed to remain unharmed. Now, as he watched her every move, Petyr practically did not care for anything else. An unworldly energy hummed in this house. Everyone felt it. They were in awe and felt such pity for the young mother. At the same time, everyone, including Petyr had an underlining fear of her in some fashion. Even Mrs. Ames strangely kept her distance.

Sansa just sat in her cushioned chair and stared off into snow covered gardens. That night he brought her home, it snowed as if nature had decided to cleanse the land in its winter blanket, only to renew life in spring. It was bitterly cold and Petyr felt as if something had been frozen in time.

Kneeling before her, Petyr chanced a hand on her knee, just to let her know he was there.... waiting. His sweetling didn't flinch or move his hand. She stared out the window and caressed her belly. A single tear trailed down her cheek, but still she did not move or speak. Petyr did know what to say to her even if she acknowledged his presence. He wept many times, telling her he was truly sorry...that he never meant for it to happen... that it should have been him. Nothing phased her. Petyr wanted so much for her to berate him, tell him she hated him. Something, anything was better than this. Petyr didn't know how much more he could take. If she refused to ever speak to him again... it would be the death of him.

"Please..." he sighed. "I deserve your hate, but don't leave me in this silence. It's been days...I'm not asking your forgiveness...just... talk to me. I need to understand...."

It was still for a time and he thought it was useless, for she had decided to ignore his very existence. He was about to stand when Petyr wasn't quite sure he heard her.

"You won't believe..." she breathed.

He clasped her hands in desperation, "I will. I promise you, I will. Please, tell me..."

"You were there," she whispered without a glance in his direction.

Yes, he was there, but that did not explain a damn thing. Returning to Harrenhal, he virtually interrogated everyone in the household and his men brought in Joffrey's emissary of death, barely clinging to life himself. Joffrey ordered her arrest and death. Myranda, along with the help of Duncan, demanded Sansa be burned.

Edmure had not returned since that day Petyr sent his men to hunt down Duncan and Myranda. Both would pay dearly for this outrage. Bring them back alive he ordered, including the boy if

possible.

Petryr was torn between vengeance and begging the forgiveness of his love. He couldn't leave them to search for those two monsters just as he couldn't leave to tend to the new and vulnerable king. The aristocracy was dead and gone. There was nowhere to run and hide. The north hated Myranda as much as her husband. Young Robert would not aid her. She would be easier to find. Duncan might be more difficult. No matter, he would not rest until both were in his hands.

Those bandaged hands held hers, burned deeply when he reached into the flames of that bonfire. The ointments Mrs. Ames used helped a bit but to be honest, Petyr wanted to endure that pain. It was not even a tenth of what Sansa suffered as he held her now pristine skin. Other than one small burn on her wrist, there was no evidence that flames had ever touched her. Sansa's screams however, reminded everyone in the house what she felt and remembered vividly.

Did he want to ask her what she meant when she cried out, 'take her, she's yours'? He had so many questions and yet Petyr had no idea how or even what to ask her.

"I don't understand what I saw," he finally breathed. "What... how?"

The words stuck in his throat. Petyr was a man of logic and reason. Nothing he witnessed made a bit of sense. He did not believe in religion or spirits, but nothing on this earth could have saved her life as everyone witnessed. Petyr did not know what to believe anymore if he couldn't trust his own eyes.

"I'll believe anything you tell me," he kissed her hands.

Sansa's breath hitched and Petyr glanced up at her. Finally, she was looking at him with tears in her eyes. Her lips quivered as if trying to find the words but they wouldn't come. He waited patiently, holding her hands. He wasn't lying. He would believe what she had to tell him. He needed an explanation, anything.

She drew her hands away and returned them to her stomach, making small circles, avoiding his gaze once again.

"I was selfish," she finally whimpered. "I should have chosen death."

Selfish? What in God's name was she talking about?

"I should have died..." Sansa cried to herself, pulling away from him again. "I hate myself... I hate you..."

Petryr was about to haul her into his arms when the door opened suddenly.

"My lord?" a young footman asked warily.

"Go away," he growled, but the man persisted to Petyr's irritation, for this was ill timed.

"You ordered me to tell you when they were found," the footman coughed a bit from the doorway.

Petryr's spine stiffened and he stood abruptly still watching Sansa intently. Wringing her hands, she returned to staring out the window muttering to herself.

"I can't do it," she sniffed.

Petryr hated himself for it. Kissing her on the top of her head, he left her for his heart had instantly turned to stone. He was one of the reasons why she now hated him and was practically tortured to death and back. Those that sentenced her to the most horrific death, were now here, to receive his judgment... and punishment.

All of Petyr's frustrations, disgust with himself and that festering hatred for those that dared harm his love flared up quickly. It was a welcome distraction from his failure to connect with his poor wife. For days, Petyr wondered what he would say to them. Words were cheap. Actions spoke louder and he guessed that neither of them had any clue what kind of man he really was.

Making his way down into the foyer, Petyr could already hear the commotion from the remaining servants. Edmure's voice rang out, asking for him. Petyr turned the corner and just outside was a wagon holding Duncan, Myranda and her son. Bound and covered in snow, Petyr didn't know how to feel. The rage was there, deep inside but it was something else, something dead and frozen that encompassed him. Another man might rush over and beat his wife's murderers to death or simply aim a musket and pull the trigger, but that wasn't Petyr. A calmness took over as he walked outside to the surprise of everyone.

"Your Grace," Petyr smiled with a bow. "I've been expecting you."

Gagged, the brunette's voice was muffled as she struggled against her bonds. Duncan was quiet and only stared at his former employer. The man probably had enough sense to know what awaited them.

"I'm afraid you'll find my hospitality rather lacking considering what you and Joffrey's men did to my household. However, I have made special accommodations for you during your stay. In fact," he painted a pleasant grin as if hosting a trivial dinner party. "I think it would be appropriate if we used another entrance. I don't normally escort murderers through my front door."

Edmure stepped forward in caution.

"Petryr, I brought them here, but should the magistrate not be involved..."

Petryr walked up to the wagon and eyed the young boy. Ronan or Ivan? It didn't seem to matter now.

"You'll find I'm the highest authority other than His Majesty. Considering that the men Joffrey sent are already dead and I haven't the faintest clue where Magistrate Williams has disappeared to,

I doubt he would begrudge me this pleantry,” Petyr patted the boy on his head.

“You may be Lord Paramount in the county, but Joffrey wouldn’t allow the execution of a duchess without…” Edmure muttered in confusion.

Petyr chuckled darkly, “The king, will not question my actions, especially on those who mean harm to his beloved cousin.”

The look on Edmure’s face made Petyr want to burst out laughing. He was never that bright.

“Oh, I see I forgot to inform you,” he began, glancing at Myranda’s shocked face. “His Grace, Lord Robert is now king. Anyone with a title higher than that of a knighthood is dead… except for you my dear Edmure. However, my darling duchess, I’m afraid your loving husband and son met a rather grisly end. I hear that they tore his body a part and fed him to wolves. I suspect it was kindness compared to what he bestowed upon so many unfortunate commonfolk.”

Edmure’s knees buckled and he sat down on the snow covered steps. “Dear God in heaven…dear God, what have you done?” he mumbled in shock.

“What needed to be done and no one else had the stones or the brains to accomplish,” Petyr spat at his one-time brother. “Be grateful, Edmure. If it hadn’t been for Sansa… well, you should thank your niece later when she is feeling better.”

“I never thought you could…” Edmure rattled on.

“No one thought at all did they? That’s what was so beautiful. All of you with your titles, wealth, heritage and useless duty and honor,” Petyr mocked darkly. “Your snobbery has afforded you nothing. You really should have begun to fear when the people brought down the French king. Never educate the masses, Edmure. That has been the motto of the aristocracy for ages and for good reason. You trample on people long enough, and then they realize they outnumber the likes of you. Fear and poverty only keeps them in line for so long.”

“You have done this for no one but yourself. Do you plan on playing king from the shadows or will Robert meet a mysterious and deadly end?” Edmure shook his head in dismay.

“King Robert will give the people the power they desperately need,” Petyr chided knowing full well an audience was listening in. “A seat at the table you might say to have a voice in their lives. The world is changing old friend. Noble birth and titles are now meaningless. A man can be whatever he chooses. I told you once that your kind was dying out. Now, they’re dead and a new era is beginning.”

Edmure stood and couldn’t look Petyr in the eyes. “I’m going to see Sansa.”

“Ah, I don’t think that is wise,” Petyr objected and a footman blocked Edmure’s path. “She needs her rest. After all she’s been through… you saw what they did to her. Don’t count yourself with the enemy my friend. You’ll find yourself alone.”

Gazing up to the upper stories, Edmure had nothing more to say. Petyr held his ground and gestured to the horse.

“Forgive my rudeness, I would invite you in, but you see,” Petyr felt his voice ice over, looking at his prisoners. “I’ll be rather busy with my honored guests. Perhaps, it would be best if you return home to Riverrun. I’ll let Sansa know you called upon her this afternoon.”

Edmure looked around at the different faces. Some were angry, nodding in agreement with Petyr and others unreadable. He wasn’t going to win any favors with the people here by arguing for the lives of Duncan and Myranda. Everyone at Harrenhal despised them both and were in support of the young and kindly mistress of the house that took care of them. Sansa had won their loyalty and Petyr was proud. They may not agree with the method used, but all would see the advantage of a level playing field with a reviled king and aristocracy gone.

Mounting the horse, Edmure held Petyr’s stare for a moment before turning and riding west. The man had no one else to turn to and he knew it. It mattered not if Edmure hated him. Robert wouldn’t listen to him and he would have a terrible time turning the locals against Petyr when the news spread of the revolution. There would be chaos at first, but with all the supplies and prosperity from the Vale and Riverlands, under Petyr’s guidance… they would all come back together and behind a new, benevolent ruler that would take care of the needy. Petyr was banking on it and everything he invested in, that other lords thought was ridiculous, would come to fruition.

“Stephens,” Petyr commanded as he ascended the wagon. “Come with me.”

The snow was getting deep and Petyr worried they might get stuck but luckily they reached the edge of the lake where the secret door lay hidden behind the brush. Grabbing a musket, he pulled the boy down first followed by his mother. The man yanked Duncan down as Petyr ushered them inside the cave. The priest limped terribly, barely able to hold himself upright. All Petyr would have to do is threaten the boy to keep his mother in line.

“Leave us,” he ordered his man. “Do not mention this place. My wife need not know. If you speak of it, I shall know.”

The man didn’t question it. Petyr knew him well enough. His men knew what happened to those that disappointed him. It wasn’t worth it, not the lives of these three. Petyr paid them well, and this would be no exception.

“Walk,” he commanded as he heard the wagon pull away. Duncan started slowly but Myranda’s eyes widened in defiance just as her son refused to move as well. Aiming at the boy, Petyr half smiled. “As you wish, I’ll kill him right here and leave him for animals. Your choice, my lady.”

Surprisingly, they all walked down the cave until the heavy oak door stopped them. Petyr lit a torch by the door before unlocking it. He could feel the heat from the spring and was grateful. It was biting cold out today as he did not wear his top coat or cloak. Locking the door behind them, he moved to set torch aside.

“Stand there and don’t move. There’s nowhere you can run,” he warned holding the musket. “I’m a fair shot, but I’m sure I can still slow you down.”

Grabbing the boy, Petyr shoved him inside a cage on the floor, bracing a heavy object against the door.

“I wonder if your father squealed like a stuck pig when he was put to death, what do you think my boy?” he said pushing Duncan to a long table and shackling one arm. “I can’t imagine your brother died well either. You reap what you sow. A lesson I’m sure your mother never taught you.”

Pulling Miranda along, she stumbled and fell until reaching a small wooden chair.

“Sit and behave yourself for once,” he scoffed, shoving her down. “We’re going to have a little conversation. First, let’s put some light on the subject.”

Smiling, he lit a few more torches and they illuminated all the horrors of the torture chamber. Miranda screamed with the gag in her mouth and yet, oddly, the boy looked around without fear and instead full of interest. Duncan’s eyes were closed and sat in silence Petyr could smell the piss and grinned. The flip side of the coin wasn’t as thrilling apparently. He enjoyed torturing Sansa, burning her, and now the priest knew what awaited him.

“Anything wrong, Duncan?” he joked. “Praying isn’t going to help you. Did you, any of you really believe I’d let you go...be merciful?”

Petyr turned his attention to Miranda and bent over her, untying the rag from her mouth. Dragging over a rotting bench, he sat and eyed her curiously.

“Frightened? I’m rather surprised. I thought you would have felt right at home here?” he chuckled, watching her eyes dart all over the room. “I quite imagined your bedroom with Ramsay looking something like this. My mistake.”

The boy moved around in the iron cage and was fearless. Unnerving for a child of his age as he observed everything in the room with fascination.

“Or rather it seems more like a nursery,” he uttered with morbid amusement.

“You’re a madman,” Miranda squeaked at last.

“Madness, my dear,” he answered thoughtfully, “would imply that I have no concept of reality. As you are about to learn, I’m fully aware of what I’m doing. Shall we begin?”

After tying Miranda to the chair, he stood before Duncan watching as the man readied himself to finally fight back. He was stronger than he looked but Petyr was quick and landed a few punches, knocking the man onto the table. Yanking the other arm up, Petyr shackled it to the other side.

“Pull the trigger and kill me,” the priest challenged. “Be done with it.”

Petyr shackled a foot with difficulty as the man resisted feebly with a kick and trying to grab the musket.

“Tell me what I want to know and I will make it quick. I swear to God,” Petyr replied evenly.

Miranda sat stunned, unable to process what was happening but it didn’t phase him in the slightest as he finished with Duncan’s feet.

“Who started this?” Petyr asked simply and cranked the wheel one full turn, tightening the ropes and pulling on Duncan’s limbs. “This plot against my wife? Did Miranda order you to falsely claim she was a witch or was that your doing?”

“You’ll burn in hell,” the former butler spat and Petyr cranked the wheel a few more times, feeling the tension in the ropes. “You and that damned witch...Argh!”

“You first,” Petyr replied coldly and turned it again, hearing a pop and knew the older man’s shoulder had dislodged from its socket. The priest cried out in pain and his voice resonated loudly and Petyr worried for a moment on how much sound traveled into the house. Looking at the man with such revulsion, Petyr sighed. There was no going back now. “I’m a patient man, Duncan. I have all the time in the world. However, the short time you have remaining will certainly be in agony.”

“It was him,” she offered quickly and Petyr knew in that moment it was a lie. “It was him, he told them everything. He said I’d burn in hell if I didn’t agree.”

“All women are begat of evil,” Duncan howled in pain. “God will punish...”

“There is no God,” Petyr scoffed. “If there is, He’s forsaken you. I wonder... when you meet Him for judgement, will He tell you He saved a witch over a man of the cloth...such as yourself? That must be disappointing to know you’ve wasted your life.”

Miranda was shaking and whimpering in fear. *Good*, he thought to himself, she should be scared. Petyr walked over to her and clucked his tongue in disappointment as she continued to sell out her fellow accomplice to save herself.

“Really, Miranda?” he sighed. “I read what Joffrey’s emissary wrote. You were most persuasive in condemning her. In fact, your testimony is what sealed her fate more than any of the other lies the two of you concocted.”

“We’ll leave the country, my son and I,” she countered fearfully. “You’ll never see us again. I promise...”

At that, Petyr couldn’t help himself and he laughed heartily. What kind of fool did take him for? Removing his jacket, Petyr loosened his cravat and rolled up his sleeves.

"Oh Miranda, do you have any idea who I am? *What I am?* I poisoned Joffrey and watched as he died very slowly. Your lovely little blonde cousin... oh what was his name?" he chuckled walking to the cage that held the boy. "Oh yes, Harrold, wasn't it? I slit his throat in an alley. Lysa? I can still hear the way her neck cracked when I broke it... before I threw her over the balcony, of course. I wanted to kill you and Duncan the last time you were both here. You've been living on borrowed time. Time you neither deserved and sadly has caused terrible harm to what I love most in the world."

Yanking the boy out, Petyr held him close and put a knife to the delicate skin of his throat in front of his mother.

"Tell me Miranda," he inquired pressing the blade under the boy's jaw. "What were you going to do to my son if you found him? The gold coats were told he was at home with his mother. They searched ardently for him. Only you would have known such a thing if you followed them home from the Vale."

"He's just a child," she growled and Petyr pressed a little harder. "Let him go."

"Technically, yes. A child," he smirked. "So is my son. You would not have let him go. What were going to do to him after you murdered his mother? How were you going to kill him?"

"Petyr," she simpered. "You wouldn't kill a child... an innocent."

He laughed again, "You haven't been paying attention, Your Grace. Did I not say that everyone with a title is dead? I can't let your son live. I do, however, plan on making it as painless as possible. That is my only gift to you. I shouldn't, for you would not have given my child the same mercy."

A sharp pain sheared through Petyr's leg as the boy stabbed him in the thigh with a piece of metal he must have found in the cage.

"Run, Ivan, run!" his mother shrieked as the boy tugged and squirmed in Petyr's vice grip.

"You little shit," he muttered in pain as he held the boy with one arm and pulled out the metal spike from his leg.

Myranda was struggling against the ropes and attempted to stand, only to fall into him as the boy bit his forearm making Petyr drop him to the ground. Ivan scurried behind him trying to hide as Myranda kept pushing hard and cursing Petyr to hell and back. The chair was digging into that open wound as he tried to push her off him. Glancing over his shoulder, Petyr saw the boy's eyes flash from the torch light and suddenly panicked at his dark hiding spot.

Pushing Myranda off him, she tried to go after him again collapsing a few times.

"Myranda, stop," he warned earnestly holding his bloody hand out. "Don't move."

"I'll kill you if you hurt my child..." she screamed trying to get up again. "I'll tear your pansy boy to pieces and feed them to your whore!"

"Myranda! Stop where you are!" he practically begged. She couldn't see past her rage and Petyr couldn't prevent it as she fell into a large object and the hinge snapped shut trapping her son inside.

"Oh my God," he covered his mouth in shock as they could hear the boy struggle inside. Blood began to ooze from bottom of the metal sarcophagus and suddenly it became very quiet.

"Ivan!" she cried as Petyr moved as quickly as he could, setting the mother upright. Trembling hands pulled the Iron Maiden open a crack and Petyr could hear Duncan praying again for the boy whom they all knew was dead.

It was supposed to be quick, he convinced himself. The Bolton twins were monstrous and Petyr could only imagine what they would be like as grown men, but it was still a child. Petyr wasn't even sure he could do it as he pressed the blade against the boy's throat. Looking at what lay inside that spiked contraption had Petyr stunned, sickened at the sight. All he could see was Alex's pierced and bloody body. All of the children that died on his command raced through his mind and he couldn't stop wondering what gruesome end they met with. One could disassociate with it, justify it on paper, a logical and necessary move for the greater good if not forced to witness it first hand.

Staring at that dead little boy was the horrific reality and Petyr quietly closed the lid as Myranda cried and screamed obscenities at him. Still in shock, he dragged the chair to the post where Duncan was once chained and made sure she was secured before walking past the priest.

Locking the door behind him, Petyr slowly limped to the door connecting to the music room. Tying it off so that no one could open the panel in the wall. With each painful step, Petyr made his way up the stairs until reaching the panel in his dressing room.

He couldn't think or feel. Was it shock or that numb coldness he was used to his entire life? What if that had been his son? No child deserved to die like that. What had he done? Edmure's words of disgust rang in his ears. Is this what blind revenge had brought him to?

Bleeding, he grabbed a pair of trousers and fresh dress shirt before heading into their shared bathroom to clean up. Petyr couldn't even process what had just happened when he heard Sansa gasp from the doorway to her bedroom.

His bloody hands were tearing away a piece of his shirt as a makeshift bandage when he locked eyes with his wife. Just then, a muted wail echoed up through the bowels of the house like some terrible ghost come to haunt them.

Never, for the rest of his life, would Petyr ever be able to erase the look of complete horror on Sansa's face.

"Petyr," she breathed echoing her uncle's question, "What have you done?"

It wasn't the wound she stared at but his blood-soaked hands. She was shaking as she held onto the frame of the door. Sansa didn't see or didn't care he was wounded. Petyr wouldn't know how to answer her if she asked how he came by it.

What have you done?

What was he supposed to say? I murdered a child. I murdered a child the same age as our son. I murdered a child in the most despicable way. You will hate me more than you do now. You will never speak to me ever again.

Petyr couldn't tear his eyes away from her shocked face. Did she know what she married? Should he tell her and make it final? The last truth between them he kept hidden? Their last night in the spring, she asked in jest, or perhaps part of her meant it... could he, would he ever use that torture chamber? Appalled that she could think it of him or worse suspected it, Petyr railed at her. He made her feel shameful for pondering such a thing. In the back of his mind, it scared him more than anything if she ever found out what he really was.

Ice surrounded his heart once more and the man he used to be, the man he tried to forget, pretended didn't exist finally returned to protect that vulnerable boy inside... the one that just wanted to be loved. That boy who found love, even if for a short while with this angel that stood in fear before him now.

Washing his hands, Petyr felt that cool composure come over him when he knew what had to be done. If she was going to truly hate him, it might as well be for everything.

"You were wrong, sweetling," he answered but not to her question.

Sansa's chest heaved with each breath and her glassy eyes were wide, making them a stormy blue. Tears were welling up and he couldn't bear to look at her. She didn't want to know what she knew in her heart.

"Wrong?" she muttered in dread of his reply.

"Yes, you were wrong about me," he sighed and wiped his hands before tying off the bandage and grabbing his clean shirt. "I *am* a monster."

"It's true then?" she sniffed back the tears and it almost broke him. "You had all those people murdered?"

Petyr looked in the mirror and decided against changing his clothes for the moment.

"Sweetling, when has there ever been a bloodless revolution?" he countered without emotion. "You can't kill a king and put another on the throne without resistance, without blood on your hands. I just took care of them before they could resist. I was truthful in one respect. Lives were spared. Think of the thousands that would have died if a war had been waged? Those that needed to die, are dead."

"And the innocent?" he heard a flicker of disgust and raised his gaze to meet hers.

There it was. The hate and loathing he was waiting for... *expecting*.

"I know you can never forgive me for that," he weighed cautiously. "I don't expect you to understand why I did it, but I did it for us. If they had survived, they would have sought revenge...put our children in danger. Don't you see?"

"I saved our son, not you," she whispered bitterly. "I sacrificed...*not you*."

"What do you think Myranda would have done to our son?" Petyr felt his heart drop to his stomach. How could he justify any of it? It was still his doing. She was right, he sacrificed nothing. They did.

"You put us in danger," Sansa countered him.

"I would turn back time and change it all if it meant sparing you from harm," he felt his insides churn.

Sansa slowly shook her head. She did not believe him. He did not purposefully put them in danger. He underestimated a foe... he...

No, she was right. Petyr gambled and lost. Winning the game meant losing her. He did this to her. The guilt was unbearable. He had never felt such a thing until her. It was too much. Petyr couldn't look at her anymore. Her disgust and loathing. Fear and horror. He needed to rid himself of this cancer but she could not be witness to it.

Denial set in and Petyr couldn't accept it. No, this was Myranda and Duncan's fault. They ruined everything. Sansa did not need know. He could have lied, distracted her with affection, words of love and two children. He could have taken her and the children away. She would have forgotten....

Unceremoniously, Petyr walked over to her and instantly, feeling his heart break, she backed away from him.

"No matter what else you believe," he began solemnly. "I do love you. More than anything in this world. You are right...about so many things. One day, I hope you can forgive me for what I've done...and what I have to do now."

Petyr closed to connecting door and locked it. He could hear her yelling at him and banging on the door even when he crossed his bedroom into the hallway and locked her own door from the outside. He couldn't let her see what he was going to do. It had to be done. They had to pay.

Pocketing the key, he returned to the panel in his dressing room. Gathering the clothing, he stepped inside. Like the one leading to the music room, Petyr locked it knowing Sansa might try to use it if freed from her room. She was a wonder in grace and benevolence. Even after what they

did to her, Petyr couldn't imagine Sansa lowering herself to seek retribution in the worst way possible. Unfortunately for Duncan and Myranda, they would not benefit from Sansa's clemency.

Closing the door to the torture chamber, Petyr examined his prisoners. Duncan couldn't move at all but Myranda's screaming and crying struck every nerve. Everyone could hear her, he suspected. It was bad enough he just racked a priest but torturing a woman... no, Petyr couldn't do that no matter how much he hated Myranda.

Setting his bundle of clothing down, Petyr removed a coin from his pocket and glanced between the man and woman waiting in terror of him.

"Eye for an eye, I say," he growled. "Which of you would like to know what it's like to burn? Feel what you did to her?"

Myranda's eyes widened as Petyr flipped the coin silently, deciding on 'tails' for the brunette. If there was a devil, it was this woman. Uncovering the coin in his palm, Petyr glanced at Myranda and raised a single eyebrow.

"Such a shame," he smirked.

With Duncan's bonds secure, Petyr untied Myranda from the chair taking her back the long way they came... to the lake. She kicked and screamed, but Petyr couldn't hear her anymore. He knew how she needed to die, this bitter and hateful woman.

"My father will hear of this... the king," she lashed out and her madness taking over. "My husband will cut you down. My sons will kill yours..."

Petyr dragged her further out and cold hit them both. His breath billowed as he cursed himself. Maybe this wasn't the best idea, he thought shaking his head in morbid amusement. The icy waters lapped the snow encrusted shoreline when he started picking up stones, one by one.

"There were many so-called tests to tell if a woman was a witch," Petyr spoke casually. "Men would tie a woman's arms with one leg and put her in the water. If she floated, she was a witch and therefore burned to death. If she sank and drowned, she was innocent. Not exactly scientific considering the woman died either way. One could argue that drowning would be preferable to burning."

Dropping the stones in the pockets of Myranda's dress Petyr continued, "I'm not bothering testing you though. I know what you are and what you have done. Remember when you tried to convince Sansa to drown herself? The stones would drag her down into the depths of the lake?"

The woman's breathing hitched as she tried to pull away only for Petyr to pick her up by the waist and wade into the freezing cold water.

"I want you to feel that despair as the water and stones take you down into the depths," Petyr sneered as he struggled with her in the deeper water. "The way you made her feel. You didn't just burn her, you took away all hope. You tried to convince her she was worthless and not loved..."

Petyr's body screamed in protest at the freezing water. He would die himself if he didn't hurry. Taking a few tentative steps, Petyr could feel where the shore dropped away. Myranda screamed and squirmed but the heavy skirts of her dress made it more difficult.

"Did you tell her it would be painless?" Petyr frowned. "That it would be quick?"

He pushed the woman out into the deep waters of the lake and watched her begin to sink, her bound arms flailing helplessly.

"It won't be quick or painless. It's going to hurt. The pain, the cold and suffocation..." Petyr breathed harshly, "all while you slowly sink deeper and deeper. The light disappearing and you fading into nothing... where you belong."

She splashed for a moment and Petyr did not wait to see her head go under. The cold was too much and he needed to get back inside. He still had Duncan to deal with. Petyr passed through the chamber, ignoring Duncan, grabbing his clean clothes and walked straight to the connecting oak door to the hot spring. He was shaking and practically freezing to death. Not bothering to disrobe, he stepped down into the steaming hot water and tried to control his thoughts.

The dead boy, what would he do with him? Bury him? Burn the body? Sansa couldn't know. She already thought the worst of him but somehow, he couldn't let her know about that damned boy, no matter how evil he was.

Somehow, Petyr knew Duncan ordered the burning. Hanging her wasn't enough. He wanted a spectacle to show the people. Myranda's madness gave it to him. He always hated Sansa.

Petyr washed his face with the scalding water. If only Sansa had let Petyr kill him years ago. Myranda would not have had anything to work with. Duncan handed her everything she needed to go to Joffrey... to kill Sansa. Her tale of Sansa's evil powers, sending her spirit to attack her... Petyr wondered if the woman actually began to believe it? Whatever sanity she had left, Ramsay Bolton and his sons shredded the remains.

Warmed and dressed, Petyr knew he needed to dispatch Duncan quickly. Somehow, he worried that Sansa might try to stop him. He chuckled to himself a bit. Stop him, as if he were the madman, the person that put an entire county in fear of an innocent young girl. The person that burned an innocent alive... A man such as that, did not deserve to live.

Tucking the musket in his waistcoat, Petyr unshackled the old priest without a single word. The man could barely move or walk and let Petyr push him out the tunnel. Petyr picked up a small barrel and rope along the way. Careful of the barrel's contents, Petyr held the torch cautiously as they made their way outside. It was late afternoon and the sun was low on the horizon, and Petyr cursed himself. Everyone in the house would probably be able to see it from here.

Instead of the lake, Petyr directed the man further south and away from the house. There were some left over crates, chains and such from all the ammunitions he stored inside the labyrinth that

once stood tall and menacing. All of the oubliettes had been filled in with earth and stones in fear that his children might accidentally discover them like their mother. How Petyr wanted to throw Duncan in one of those pits. However, it wasn't meant to be. Duncan would not be allowed such a merciful death.

The tree was bare and there was enough of the empty crates to use as they neared. The man looked at Petyr in confusion. What was Duncan expecting?

"Where is she?" the old man asked surveying his surroundings.

"In the lake," Petyr replied nonchalantly, setting down the barrel. "Didn't you know you're supposed to test a witch before you burn her? I supposed Miranda was mortal since she drowned. Besides a woman drenched in water is harder to burn."

Petyr almost smiled at the shock on Duncan's face. The man thought Petyr had burned the duchess and now realized his own fate.

"She got better than she deserved," Petyr frowned as he shoved Duncan up against the tree. "Considering she accidentally killed her own son... and that she was madwoman in the end. One might take pity on such creature. You, however..."

"I am ready to meet God," the man mumbled but his voice was laced with fear.

"Are you?" Petyr smirked. "I'm afraid you'll have to wait a little longer. Cleansed by fire, is that what they used to call it? How long do you think it will take? You heard her screams in pain. Will you scream for it to end?"

The man tried feebly to fight back, but Petyr was quick after belting him good and wrapping the chain around the dead tree.

"There's no audience for your death, I'm afraid," he huffed in pain, gathering and stacking the broken wood crates. "Just me."

The old man chuckled, "You'll never get that to burn in this winter, you might as well let the cold take me."

Breaking open the barrel, Petyr doused the wood and pious priest with paraffin in reply, "You're stuck in the past, old man. New scientific discoveries are happening every day... such as paraffin. I'm a man always looking for new ventures. Care to demonstrate for me and see if this is a sound investment?"

"You're the devil Himself," the priest barked, spitting out the oil running down his face. "With your witch bride and production of the unholy beast... the false messiah... I should have let him die that day... this place is cursed, damned..."

"For once we are in agreement," Petyr sighed, holding the torch. "This is place is cursed. However, if your God does exist, will He stop me?"

Petyr waited a moment longer and looked up into the grey sky. Nothing, not even a breath of wind returned as an answer and he smiled sadly.

"Without a God, there can be no Devil," he remarked slowly. "There is enough evil in the world without bringing them into it. We are both guilty of that, Duncan. I will serve my own penance in time."

The old man sputtered a rush of words meant to be a prayer when Petyr tossed the torch onto the crates. The flames spread quickly over the clear fluid engulfing the kindling and priest in seconds.

The fire took its time getting to Sansa, by the time Petyr made his way through to the town square. Duncan, however, did not have to wait to feel that horrendous pain. The man shrieked and wailed while Petyr stood still, the fire's warmth bathing him and the surrounding winter snow in a bright orange glow. He almost choked on the putrid smell as the man burned, the flames shooting up the dead tree.

It was so bright that Petyr knew the household would be able to see their former butler's demise in this dreary, winter sunset. All Sansa had to do was look out her bedroom window. His chest heaved in guilt but not for the man dying slowly before him. There was no pity in Petyr's heart for him or Miranda... or even her son. He would bury the boy later while everyone was asleep. Ivan would be Petyr's last kept secret from his wife and son.

Watching the man finally perish in the flames after crying out to God and then to Petyr himself to put him out of his misery that Petyr had decided he was indeed the terrible monster Sansa had feared him to be.

Unbeknownst to the father, his own son, had disobeyed and came out looking for him in that place he was hidden with servants. The young boy watched in silence and horror as his beloved father murdered the dark-haired woman in the lake and the old priest that saved him months ago. Too young to understand, Alex hid from his father's view before running back to the house where his mother had collapsed from the sight from her own window.

The Changeling

Chapter Notes

I really loved this chapter. I hope you do too.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The music echoed throughout the house making the walls hum from the madness of his fingertips on the piano downstairs. It had been weeks since she had seen him but Petyr's raw emotion erupted on those ivory keys almost every day.

Sansa remembered him picking her up from the floor of her bedroom where she had fainted at the fiery glow of death outside her window. She didn't have to ask, she knew. Duncan and Myranda were dead. The servants confirmed it later. Many witnessed what happened when Edmure brought the prisoners to face Petyr. After that, only rumors and fearful gossip trickled in and out about the lord of the house.

The image of Petyr in the bathroom, his hands covered in blood not his own burned in her mind. Those terrible visions she had, always with his hands red with blood, but until that moment, Sansa assumed it was Petyr's blood... that *he* was hurt or dying. Everything made her feel as though he was dying. His cold skin, the way he spoke. The rings...

Petyr picked her up so gently, afraid she might break, laying her on the bed. His voice broke calling out for Mrs. Ames. Sansa heard and felt everything. She could smell the smoke and cold on him. The kisses he rained on her palm but she couldn't pull away in the disgust she felt toward him now. Dear God, the things he had done. How could she not have known?

Those tortured voices floated up into the recesses of the house as if they were old spirits from the past. Alex had come to her in fear before deciding to go look for his absent father against his mother's wishes. Petyr had been gone for hours it seemed. When he was bloodied in the bathroom, Sansa couldn't even think if Petyr might be hurt. He did not seem pained... not until she backed away from him.

Monster

Who was this man she married? Sansa knew he was more than the foolish fop he pretended to be in public. She knew he had revenge in his heart and that the terrible game he forced her to play was already in motion before they met. She thought she knew and understood his past. How could she know how dangerous he was? Sansa had never expected to love him. He adored her and their child. He was a wonderful father and Sansa knew he loved her. At the time, it was enough. At the time, Sansa could pretend that the rest didn't matter. Ignore it, more likely. Petyr said he would do anything to protect them. *Anything*, however, was a broad term. Anything allowed for too many variables. Anything meant just that... *anything*, including murder.

Why didn't they just run away when they had the chance? The knowledge that he put his own gains before them, his family, hurt more than burning at that stake. That betrayal cut deep to the bone. Sansa thought for sure he would come. Petyr always came for her. When the pain became unbearable, her mind frantic... this time it was too late and she had to save herself.

She pushed Petyr back when she woke and from that day, Sansa had not seen him since... but she could hear him. The look of devastation on his face when he walked away tore at her insides. He killed them because of her. Sansa hated Duncan and Myranda but even she couldn't have done that, could she? What if it had been Alex? What would she have done to protect him? Sought revenge for her children? Would she have killed for Petyr? Those constant questions made Sansa ill. She knew the answer but couldn't admit it to him. She gave up her own child to save herself. She was no better a parent or wife. How was she supposed to tell him now? Maybe it was better this way. By the time she bore this child, perhaps those emotions wouldn't hurt so much anymore.

Would the faeries take her the moment she was freed from her mother's womb? Would they allow any time between mother and daughter? What would Petyr do? Would he kill his wife once he found out? Leave her and take his son far away? Sansa couldn't stop thinking about it. It consumed her to the point of hysteria and sickness.

Worried about the child, Mrs. Ames advised that Sansa start her lie in immediately. She was still due in the spring but they agreed the strain was too much to risk. Sansa hardly saw the old woman. Was she avoiding her as well? Every time she asked, the housekeeper was too busy with the household. The only thing that brought her up those many stairs was if Sansa was feeling ill. It was always Sarah bringing her food, changing the linens and helping her bathe. The young girl told her mistress everything she knew.

The master of the house was acting strangely and spent most of his time in his study alone, she told Sansa. He was drinking heavily, they said. Working and drinking until the candles burned out. Everyone could hear him playing out his frustrations on that damned piano. Sansa tried to cover her ears to block it out, that sorrow, hate... remorse. It was everything he couldn't or what Sansa wouldn't allow him to say. He stayed away because she did not want him near her. She didn't have to say it. He knew and left her alone as she wished.

Even Alex had taken to sleeping in her room lately. Normally, when Petyr was home, no one

couldn't tear him away from his father's side. Now, he wanted to spend most of his time with his mother. Often he slept in her bed with Lady near the fire. Sansa wanted to ask him if he saw the executions or maybe it was the voices from that day that had the boy so quiet. If one didn't know about what lay below this house, they might come to the conclusion it must be ghosts. Alex was a strong lad and Sansa couldn't remember him being afraid. He was so much like his father but something had changed in the boy and he, like his father, refused to tell her. If any trait ran through this family's blood, it was stubbornness and pride.

When Petyr wasn't playing, the house was eerily quiet. Too quiet. Occasionally, she would hear him in his room or the adjoining bathroom. Sansa needn't lock the doors, she knew he wouldn't disrespect her unspoken but clear wishes. Some nights, she dreamt of him sitting in her chair by the window. Whenever Sansa opened her eyes, he was never there. There was a strange comfort in believing he watched over her. Was he still protecting her in some way?

The spirit girl didn't come again since the burning. Left no instruction, no idea of what Sansa was supposed to do once the child was born. She had no one to confide in. The servants, except for Sarah and Mrs. Ames were scared of her and the only other person she could tell her fears to, she had pushed away. For his benefit or hers, Sansa still wasn't sure. She couldn't even comprehend how to begin such a conversation with her husband.

She cried every day. Every time wishing she had the strength to die. Sansa racked her mind on what to do. She couldn't give her baby away. She just couldn't. If it hadn't been for the pain and slow death of the flame, she probably would have been dead. Petyr and Alex would have had to move on without her. The madness that came from pain made her cry out and give her child up for mercy. She cried out in her sleep, reliving it over and over.

Whether it was Petyr or Mrs. Ames, someone always seemed to be watching her, never leaving Sansa alone for too long on her own. Maybe they knew she was on the edge. How could anyone know what to expect from a woman that walked from being burned alive.

She had become this pitiful creature hidden in the tallest tower in a madman's castle pining away for her ghostly baby. Would the villagers think she sacrificed it to the Devil for saving her life? Even if she ended her life right now, the aftermath for her son... Sansa couldn't imagine it. They would probably accuse Petyr of murdering her. Maybe no one would care if she was a witch in their eyes. Looking down at her bandaged wrist, a wistful smile crept over her face. She did have a *witch's mark* now, didn't she?

Almost half the servants had now left Harrenhal with probably enough gossip to keep the rest of the country in suspense for years about the crazed lord and his witch living deep in the Riverlands. They had become their own twisted faerie tale that future children might read about one day and wonder if it was ever true or just another fable.

Sarah came for her breakfast tray the next morning and told Sansa William was getting better, thanks to Mrs. Ames. The way Sarah spoke about him made Sansa's heart a whisper lighter. At least there was some kind of love left in this house. She was so grateful the young man survived. She thought he was dead the day they dragged her away. William would live and Sansa wondered, when he was able, would he leave too? If he was smart, he would take Sarah and make a new life somewhere for this place was cursed.

It was cursed the moment the first stone was laid. Something had always been here. How many people died on this land? This place had been surrounded with mystery and intrigue for ages. Madness, magic, murder, evil... Petyr's money could not change that. For a time, he managed to make this house feel normal. They were happy. Now, it seemed they would only be another casualty of the legend of haunted Harrenhal.

"Have you see Lord Baelish yet this morning?" Sansa inquired before she could stop herself. She didn't know why she asked as the baby girl kicked relentlessly making her tummy queasy once more.

Sarah avoided her eyes as she cleaned up the tray. She was a sweet girl and tried her best to act as if nothing happened but Sansa knew better. They all looked at her as if she were not of this world.

"He – he's still asleep, m'lady," Sarah stuttered and Sansa glanced to their adjoining door. It was late, Petyr never slept so late unless he was...

"He's going to kill himself..." Sansa mumbled under her breath, but Sarah heard her. Petyr needed to be here for Alex and he was drinking himself to death instead.

"Mrs. Ames has been making him a tonic, m'lady. Don't worry," the servant's rushed words still met the mistress of the house with dismay. "I'm sure it will pass... my mum says men handle things in their own way..."

Sansa's wrist started burning again, when she reached for the salve the jar was empty. The one area on her entire body marked and that small patch of flesh hurt as if her body was on fire from that fateful day. The only thing that helped was this salve Mrs. Ames made. The girl kicked again threatening to upend Sansa's breakfast.

"Sarah, send Mrs. Ames to me. I need more of this," Sansa winced, holding her wrist. It was more than the salve, she needed to talk to her old confidant. She needed to find a way to sort this out. Petyr needed to take care of their son.

"I'll bring it to you, m'lady," the girl replied picking up the little jar.

"No." Sansa clamped her hand around the girl's wrist, making her yelp. "I want to see Mrs. Ames. Send her to me."

"Are you ill again? Shall I send for his lordship?" Sarah fretted suddenly.

"No, I just need Mrs. Ames to come to me," Sansa felt a twinge of anger rising.

"She's been very busy... I'll tend to you... I'll go get Lord..."

“Who is the lady of this house? Do as I tell you,” Sansa barked making the loyal girl shrink back.

“Right away,” Sarah muttered with a clumsy curtsy, practically running out the door, leaving the tray behind.

Immediately, Sansa regretted her tone. Her emotions changed on the turn of a coin. Sarah had always been so loyal and dear. Sansa would need to apologize later. They had no idea what she was going through. They wouldn’t believe her even if she told them. The young Stark girl finally gone mad after all these years.

It was some time later when the old woman knocked and entered her room quietly. Sansa wasn’t the kind of person to be angry at being made to wait. That was how her aunt acted and she swore she would never be that way. It was the feeling of being purposefully avoided that gnawed at Sansa’s nerves. She was grateful that Petyr stayed away because she had no idea what to say to him, but she missed him terribly regardless of what he had done. She missed how they used to be.

Watching Mrs. Ames set the tray of medicines down, all that those ugly feelings disappeared as quickly as they came. Despite being old and thin, Mrs. Ames had always proved sturdy and strong. Now, she looked as though age had finally caught up with her. The dear woman looked exhausted and Sansa held her tongue. When Petyr brought her home, Sansa wanted nothing more than to die, to be left alone in her grief and more or less she got what she asked for. How could she berate anyone in this house to doing as they were told?

“I’m sorry, my dear,” the old woman smiled sadly. “Those stairs are going to be the death of me one day.”

At once, Sansa felt terrible. Mrs. Ames was old and with half the servants gone, the work must have tripled in this cold winter. She was ashamed of herself. Sansa was lost in her own misery not thinking of anyone else. Her problems were her own. Sansa was bed ridden, her husband turned to drinking... someone had to run the house. Apart from watching over their son, to the house duties and... it probably all fell on this trusted friend. Mrs. Ames had stayed through so much and never asked for anything.

“I’m sorry... I—“

“Don’t think on it, child. Sooner or later you were going to ask for me,” she smiled and brought over the little jar of relief. “Did you sleep well last night? You need to rest. That little one is a delicate thing.”

Mrs. Ames sat next to the bed and began unwrapping the bandage.

“She kicks all the time now,” Sansa felt her large belly. The child was growing fast in these last few months, but Sansa wasn’t as big as she was with Alex. “That must be a blessing, though? Considering what she’s been through.”

“Good, she’s strong. Like her mother.”

“No, I’m not. I’m weak,” Sansa sighed. “A coward.”

“You?” the woman looked up with genuine surprise. “You haven’t a cowardly bone in your body.”

Sansa chewed on her thoughts. Should she tell her? Everyone was wondering what happened to her that day but not a single person asked except for Petyr. Sansa wagered Mrs. Ames kept all those curious eyes and questions from this room for a reason.

“You are ashamed of me,” Sansa finally muttered.

Those bony fingers paused as they were applying the magical salve to the burn on her left wrist, the pain instantly beginning to fade. The woman kept silent.

“Is that why you are avoiding me? Everyone is frightened of me aren’t they?”

“Yes and no,” she answered, returning to her task. “I suspect your husband is in the dark as well as the rest of us. And I’m not ashamed of you, child. Just worried.”

Mrs. Ames leaned over to grab a clean bandage when she unconsciously rubbed her left arm, the sleeve riding up a bit. The mark on the inside of old woman’s wrist visible, Sansa gasped and her own burn twitched in pain.

“Sorry, my dear, did I hurt you?” Mrs. Ames asked in concern.

Sansa stared at her burn, the same place just inside her left wrist. The dead skin had come off because of the salve and yet the burn was still red. It wasn’t the idea that the wound wasn’t healing, it was the intricate design that marred her creamy skin. This wasn’t just a burn.

Sansa was branded.

She had wondered years ago about the scar on the old housekeeper’s arm. Her skin heavily wrinkled and spotted with age, but that mark had Sansa looking at her own wrist in shock.

“Who are you?” Sansa finally whispered.

Her heart was in her throat as she gazed at the old woman who was her friend for so many years. She believed her about the spirits, warned her, told her about Petyr’s true feelings and gave her courage. There wasn’t a major moment since coming here, that Sansa couldn’t remember this woman giving advice. If it hadn’t been for her, she and Petyr might have never confessed their feelings for each other. Sansa probably would have died without her. Mrs. Ames was her protector of sorts, her true confidante... she asked so many times about the spirits. Now, after everything, named a witch, burnt alive, this mentor never asked once how she survived, the burn on her arm, the child promised...

Mrs. Ames calmly cut a bandage and set it aside all without glancing at the young mother.

"You're smarter than that, Sansa," the woman replied with ease as if it were any normal conversation.

The air in the room had become suddenly heavy as Sansa's mind ran wild.

"What are you?" she asked, the first time ever in fear of the woman sitting next to her.

"I was hoping to spare you, my child. The day he brought you back, I knew that fate would have its way," Mrs. Ames sighed. "Maybe I should have said more, but my years have taught me to be wary of people...of trusting. After what they did to you, it seems the world hasn't changed at all these years. I have failed you."

"You're one of them," Sansa gasped and glanced to Petyr's door in a panic. Should she scream for him? Would he hear her? He was probably passed out. Oh, what did she get herself into?

"Them. Oh my dear, I told you never to speak to Them. Never accept their help no matter how dire the circumstance... but in your case, I can't really blame you," the woman said in sorrow. "Thankfully, I was never burned at the stake. I can only imagine how painful that was. I probably would have done the same. How I avoided execution for so many years, I'll never know..."

"You're a witch?" she breathed in horror. A real witch? Maybe Duncan was right after all this time. This house sat on the gates of Hell itself.

The housekeeper chuckled softly, "I wish I was. It would have made my life much easier. I would have cursed most men off this earth. A witch is what evil and frightened men call all free-thinking and intelligent women that don't bend to their will."

Finally, Mrs. Ames turned facing Sansa directly and the look on her face was filled with pain and despair.

"I am a Changeling, my sweet girl. We are not Them but not quite human anymore either," she sighed heavily. "Our stories are not the same. Some are taken, others choose to go. We are human when we leave, but when we come back, *if* we come back... we're never quite the same again. One thing we all have, is the mark."

Mrs. Ames held out her arm and the scar was exactly the same as Sansa's albeit weathered and old. It was an intricate design of never-ending little loops. Something similar she had seen in northern books of ancient legends. Her wedding ring, Petyr had it made especially for her, and the delicate scrollwork along the gold band was eerily similar. He chose it because he thought it was beautiful and would be meaningful to Sansa. They had no idea what it really stood for.

Sansa was going to be sick. She knew she sold her unborn daughter to save herself. What in God's name did she condemn her to? The old woman was quick with a bowl as everything from this morning came back up. A soothing hand pushed back her auburn locks and fear came over Sansa.

"You're going to take her aren't you?" she gasped. "When she's born..."

Mrs. Ames pulled away with a deep sigh.

"So that's what you promised Them." The woman closed her eyes and the silence in the room was deafening. "When I saw the mark on your wrist, I thought you had promised yourself, once the child was born. They've been after you for some time. You needn't lie. I know you didn't want to tell me. I know what it is like to be called a madwoman. A witch. I know what it is like to be reviled, feared... unloved."

Sansa stared at the old woman with a mixture of fear and a strange bewilderment. Without a word, Mrs. Ames started softly binding her wrist with the clean bandage and continued on.

"I have feared for many years, never revealing what I am. As much as I would have wished, or even likened you, I too, have trouble with trust. Duncan certainly would have been happy to see me ordered from this house. Thankfully, I found sanctuary with Lord Baelish... a non-believer. Sadly, a trait I thought would be a good thing has turned into what just might break him. He is not ready to see the truth, but see it he will. I gather he's still in denial over watching you burn and live."

"See what?" Sansa's voice trembled. Both knew the child was promised, but how would it happen? "Where will she go?"

"You don't need me to tell you that, you know where she's going," Mrs. Ames replied quietly without accusation.

"You – you, said they come back? That maybe..."

"Some come back, not many do. It depends," the woman interrupted.

"On what? You did. If you can come back, so can she. Maybe I can go find her... bring her home," Sansa rambled with a ray of hope.

"I chose to go, my child. There is a great distinction when it comes to Them," Mrs. Ames held the young woman's hand firmly. "I hated my life. I wanted to run away to the land of *Tir Na n'Og*. I wanted to be happy. I sought them out. There are a few ways to get there if you know where to look, or guided. I chose to go and I chose to leave."

"If it was so beautiful," the tears started rolling down her cheeks. "Why did you leave?"

The little spirit tried to convince Sansa it was beautiful and that she would be happy there. If humans chose to leave, maybe it wasn't that lovely heaven it was made out to be in story books. How could she send her daughter there not ever knowing?

"I missed my family, my old life," the housekeeper answered simply staring blankly. "It is beautiful but it's not home. Maybe I was too old when I left. That's why they like to take children. They don't have those bonds, experiences. When you run away from your life, it doesn't quite

matter where you go. You can't run away from who you are. We were never meant for that world no matter how heaven-like it may seem. I chose to come back, but I paid a price."

Sansa's stomach lurched as she waited with baited breath. Now she was in complete terror of what life she condemned her unborn baby.

"We are called Changelings because we do not come back as when we left," the woman lamented. "Some have a knowledge not known to our time, they become healers, teachers... because of this we have been named pagan, witches, evil..."

Mrs. Ames turned to Sansa with a face filled with sorrow.

"I am two-hundred and sixty-eight years old," she said with tears in her eyes. "I was born long before the Mad King, when Druids still lived in the North. Not many, but they weren't all killed off or converted. I was younger than you are now when I left this world behind. When I returned... well, everything had changed but didn't. As if time stood still. *I had changed*. I had to make my own way in a world I knew nothing about. I had to keep secret what I was. They were murdering women all across the country for witchcraft and so-called Devil worship. I understood how you felt when you thought everyone believed you to be mad. I understand. But what could I really tell you at the time? Would you have believed me? Cast me out? Even afterwards, I thought, maybe I was doing you a kindness. That if you didn't believe... and when you married his lordship, everything seemed to be going right – and now..."

"And now I've sold my daughter to save myself," Sansa sobbed, feeling the girl move inside her. "When she comes back, she won't know her family, the love in which she was created... nothing."

"She won't come back, my dear," Mrs. Ames lamented. "She didn't choose. She belongs to Them. Any bargain made with them is sealed. You can't take it back. You can't run away. You can't hide her. They will take her and keep her. That is the price you paid."

"Then I will die," Sansa turned into the pillows. "We should have died. I can't bear giving her away. She will never know me. How can I send her to that place? She doesn't belong there."

The old woman pulled the younger into her worn and tired arms. "Oh child, don't. She will be only a newborn. She won't remember, but she will be happy there. You will have given her life. That's why they like to take the young for they won't remember their mortal life, families. Faerie children tend to be weak. That's why they want human babies so badly. To keep their lines strong. When they can't take the young, they take the believers, the willing... and those that are tricked into sealing a pact for whatever reason. They couldn't get you, so they waited until you had no other choice."

"Why not take me? Just let me live to give birth first, then they could have had me. I would have gone if it meant saving her," she whimpered in the woman's embrace.

"The child, so young, is more valuable. Nothing more," Mrs. Ames rocked her like her own child. "Make no mistake. They will hold you to it. You will need to tell the father at some point. Unless, you would prefer to lie and say the girl died in childbirth. Most men would not want to see a stillborn. It might work. You will live for your son and the love of your husband and know that your daughter is alive and happy. She may not know her real mother, but at least she will live. Is that not better than death? Or I could give you something now... it will certainly kill the child but it may kill you as well. That boy needs you. Your husband needs you. If you die, I fear the worst. It's a terrible decision, but one you must make and soon."

"She'll be a prisoner," Sansa wailed.

"She'll never know it. She'll be one of them. After a certain time, that's what happens. That's why they want the young mostly. You may even sense her one day. They are in everything. The birds, animals, even a bee in your garden," she stroked Sansa's hair. "She'll see this world as we think of that other world. She'll see it through their eyes and never consider it home. I could sense my mother but I was older. It's what finally drew me home. Being so young... maybe it is a blessing. You are meant to be here with the family that loves and needs you desperately."

Sansa rolled away and didn't want to believe this was happening to her. They would have been dead and buried by now. Petyr, would he be worse off than he is? What about Alex? A mother burnt as a witch and his father... Who would take care of him? Would Petyr go mad even now if she didn't turn things around? He killed for them. For her.

There has never been a bloodless revolution

What would Joffrey or any of the Lannister have done to those against them? Ramsey Bolton would have torn the North apart just because he enjoyed it. How many died at his hands? Oh, how could any decent person justify so many deaths. Petyr meant well. Those under the Lannister's thumb, her own family included had enough of that boy's tyranny. Her father fought it and lost. Petyr managed to win. Only the manner of battle was different.

It didn't matter now, for time could not turn back. Right here, this moment, that's where Sansa found herself. If Mrs. Ames was correct, They would take her daughter or they would both die. The spirit said they would burn just as they should have. Sansa couldn't make Petyr go through that again. She couldn't bear the thought of their son witnessing it. She couldn't run. Hell, she couldn't even get out of this bed without help. This was the decision she made as the flames consumed her. Sansa wanted to live. She wanted to go home to Petyr and their son.

"What if he finds out? What then?" she mumbled and felt the old woman's fingers run through her hair.

"Considering what he himself has done, witnessed, are you so sure he will not understand?" Mrs. Ames consoled half-heartedly. Sansa could hear the doubt in her voice. "He saw you burn, child. He must understand that other forces of nature were at work."

"He doesn't understand. I'll never be able to make him understand. He'll blame me. I know it," she sniffed and the girl kicked her ribs with force. "What man forgives a woman that gives up his

child. No man I know. Not even my father. Petyr will take Alex away. They'll leave me. I might as well be dead."

"Then lie to him. If you love him, you will be able to make him believe. He's desperate enough even now," Mrs. Ames glanced to the adjoining door. "Everyone knows it. Even you. It would not be hard to believe that the child died in birth after all that has happened to you. Refuse a doctor and let me handle it. When it's all over, he will rain love and affection on you if you let him. I believe that man would die for you, my dear. You can still find some happiness. Think of it as a second chance to make things right. You'll still have your son."

"I've never been able to lie to him. He'll see right through me. He'll know. Besides, how could I possibly keep a secret like that for the rest of my life? I'll always wonder about her, if she's happy, safe," she choked softly. "I will blame myself till my dying day. He'll know. Then he'll hate and leave me... I'll wish I was dead."

Mrs. Ames held her tightly, "Oh child, it won't be easy. Life never is. You'd be surprised what we are capable of. Never, at such a young age would I have ever believed everything I have experienced in all these years. You can't know what age feels like, to know things. You have gone through so much in your young life, I must believe that it will be better for you now. A new age is beginning. It has to be an improvement than what I've lived through. Think of all the good you could do. You'll be a powerful woman now. Don't forget your daughter, my sweet girl, honor her. Be there for her brother."

She didn't say anything about 'you can always try for another child', for they both knew that to be untrue. What else could she do? Sansa knew she held Petyr and Alex's lives in her hand just as her daughters. He was already on a downward spiral. Alex would more or less, be on his own. The old woman's argument, as much as it was killing Sansa, was sound. It really came down between life and death. Sansa's death would kill Petyr. Deep in her soul, she knew it. Her daughter would live. Her son would be better off – both her children could be better off. How many women gave their children up every day? Watched them die. Took their lives before they were born? Was Sansa really so different than thousands of women around the world? Her daughter could live.

Make him believe. Sansa couldn't have both ways. She had to choose. *Lie to him*. That was the only way. Petyr said it himself, he would believe anything she told him. Sansa still loved him. Maybe she always knew what he was. She always wanted to be happily married with children – a storybook life. For a time, they had a short lived faerie tale. Now, the last few chapters needed to be written and it was all up to her.

The worst was done, wasn't it? They lived through hell and came out the other side. Petyr had to have put provisions in place for the aftermath. Alex would have a better life. Sansa thought of all her son could accomplish in the new world of Petyr's making. It would be Petyr's world if he snapped out of this drunken melancholy. Robert was under his control. The boy would be foolish to think that the people wouldn't pull down another king if he didn't do right by them. He would rely heavily on Petyr. Exactly what he had probably planned on. Despite his mother, Robert could be good. Couldn't he?

"The trick, my child, is not to think so much about it. Detach yourself. Easier said than done, I know, but you don't have a better choice. She will give you life and love. You deserve happiness after all this time," Mrs. Ames cooed.

The woman was convincing. Too convincing. Sansa wiped her eyes and turned to look at the old housekeeper. Was Mrs. Ames really on her side or just trying to get the child? The woman's weathered face was filled with grief. Those heavy lidden eyes were so tired and spoke the truth. What had this woman seen during her life?

"She is paying the price for my happiness, you mean," Sansa sniffed.

"No. You are. That's why the pain is so terrible. She will be fine. She will live in a world where there is no hate, violence or pain. She won't know this world. She won't miss her real mother and father. You will be only a sweet dream of love and she will live a very long time. You'll be together one day. I may not believe in God, but I still think there is a place after this life is over. Their kind eventually dies too, in time, I've seen it. You will meet your daughter again. It is then she will know her mother and understand."

The tears streamed down Sansa's face and both women knew she already made the decision. A choice no mother should ever have to make. It wasn't a choice between children. Which one to save or to lose. It was either lose everything or take what was being given. Sansa wasn't ready to die that day in the fire and for some reason she wasn't ready now. She couldn't kill her little girl when there was a chance.

Mrs. Ames was wrong. Sansa would not let her go. She would find her daughter until her last breath. If there was a way to get there. There would be a way to come home. Her child would remember, Sansa knew it in every fiber of her being. There was a connection here that she did not have with her son. The moment they were saved in the flames, Sansa could feel it. Not just in her body, but the child as well. A oneness. No, she would not be separated. She loved her children too much to let them go.

She loved Petyr too much. It was love that ultimately saved her. Sansa wasn't ready to die yet. There was still a reason for her to be here. It wasn't just her maternal instincts. Sansa wasn't ready to leave him either. There was a good man in him. He revealed it so many times. If she left him now, it would be his end. In her soul, she believed it. He loved Alex, but Petyr loved her more. He would never admit it as any father wouldn't.

The utter hopelessness in his eyes as he begged on his knees in front of that window, the way he held her when she woke from nightmares, the defeat when she pushed him away every time. Petyr acted like a man whose wife was already dead. The drinking, refusal to eat, abandonment of his son... the horrible music that echoed in the house.

Petyr was a strong man, logic and reason always governing his senses. The idea of losing her was what broke him. The man that wandered now through this house was not the one that swept her

off her feet, not the one that orchestrated the fall of a king. Before, Sansa thought Petyr would grieve and then move on with their lives when she accepted her fate in that jail cell. Now, she wasn't so sure. There was something inside Petyr that he kept hidden most of his life. He had protected himself from pain, rejection... and love.

Her mother's rejection practically killed him and those consequences made him into the detached, cruel man she met so many years ago. Little by little, Sansa chipped away at that cold exterior whether she knew it or not. That thick ice melted away revealing not the bitter man she expected but the hopeful, young boy that just wanted to be loved. Petyr spent his life becoming something he wasn't. The real man underneath was the one that loved her, adored their child and would do anything to protect them.

In his mind, Petyr thought he was doing the right thing, doing what needed to be done. He was afraid of Sansa more than anything. Letting her in, seeing him as he truly was. That day in the hot spring, he couldn't bear the idea of her believing him a monster. He knew she would be disgusted and even possibly hate him. He lied, but it was kindly meant. He didn't want to do it, didn't take pleasure like Ramsay or Joffrey did. He did it because he had to... the next logical move on his chess board.

Sansa was hypocrite if she thought she wouldn't consider the same if her family were in danger. How many times did she want Joffrey and the Lannisters dead? She would have killed Myranda herself if she laid one finger on Alex's head. Sansa swallowed the lump in her throat. She would have killed for Petyr too. Monsters killed her family before her eyes. Cowards like her aunt and uncle let it happen. Sansa knew if Petyr let Myranda live, she would have found a way to hurt them eventually. Even now, Sansa would kill to save her unborn daughter. How could she condemn Petyr for the rest of his life?

Waiting until Mrs. Ames left, Sansa slowly swung her legs to the side of the bed. She asked for a hearty dinner and the old woman smiled. She needed to make sure this baby lived. Sansa had something to live for. Wobbling on weak legs, she tiredly made her way to his door. Not bothering to knock, she let herself in the dark room.

She could smell the whiskey as she approached the bed. A stream of light from the drapes highlighted his rumpled clothes. The room was musty and Sansa gathered it probably hadn't been cleaned in days. Reaching him, Sansa couldn't believe the man lying on the bed was her husband. He hadn't shaved in weeks and probably not bathed in days either.

His shirt was open and his chest rose and fell heavily from intoxication. Sitting on the side of the bed, barely grazing his side, Sansa stifled a sob. She couldn't leave him. She loved her children, but at the same time Sansa was ashamed to acknowledge that she might love Petyr even more. Running her fingers through his greasy and messy hair, she leaned over and kissed his forehead. It was overly warm and he mumbled her name softly but did not wake.

"I need you. If you leave me, I'll die. I'm not strong enough to go on alone," she whispered lowly and could feel his hot breath on her face. "Stay with me."

Even in the darkness, Sansa could see the frown on his face. His eyes moved rapidly under closed lids and she realized he was dreaming. Suddenly, his breathing became erratic and his hand pushed outwards as if warding something off in his dream.

"It's a lie, no..." he murmured and Sansa could barely make out coherent words. Was Petyr having a nightmare? She'd never witnessed him like this. It was most likely the whiskey working his poor mind. "I'm not mad..."

Sansa took his hand and kissed it. His pulse raced under her fingertips and he held onto her as if afraid to let go. She hushed and held his hand close, muttering sweet nothings like a mother would. How many times did she comfort Alex when he woke from night terrors and sung him to sleep?

Petyr panted in mindless mumbblings and then gripped her hand so hard she almost cried out in pain. Trying to peel his iron grip, the words that fell from his mouth took her breath away.

"I didn't murder your mother."

Chapter End Notes

I think some of you might have some things figured out. I think I have an idea where some of my readers are at and where some are super close and others are WAY off the mark. I love the speculation though. Thank you very much for not only to keep reading but sending me your theories and discussions. It's all sooooo humbling to me. I'm flattered beyond belief that people are trying to figure this one out. Thank you, thank you, thank you for reading!

I apologize for any and all grammatical errors. I don't have a beta and at this point in the story, I don't think I should bother or I'll never get chapters posted.

From Here

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Guilt, Sansa discovered, was more powerful than the effects of alcohol and it weighed heavily on Petyr's mind. He had no idea she heard his fearful mutterings from a terrible dream several nights ago. Petyr said he was too late to save mother and Sansa's siblings. How could he think that she would believe he murdered her? If the Fate's had willed it, Petyr would have been there. He would have done everything in his power to stop it. Sansa knew that truth in her soul. There was no controlling Joffrey. His black and shriveled heart would have cut Petyr or anyone down in his path to get what he wanted. So many nights Sansa wished she died with them rather than live a lonely and shamed existence.

How could she have known what was in store for her? Petyr, whether he knew it or not, was right about so many things. Sansa looked down at her palm, her hands swollen from pregnancy, and fate had meant for this to happen to them. She never would have met Petyr, never bore their first child, never fallen in love. She examined the lines. The two entwined must be her and her daughter. They were bonded in that fire. The other two faded after time and surely it meant that Sansa and her child would meet again, didn't it? Sansa would outlive her husband and son or maybe she was meant to go to that Other World and reunite with her lost daughter. Or the worst, Petyr left with Alex and all Sansa had left was to find her sweet daughter she sold.

Just then, her unborn girl moved, and Sansa closed her eyes to the emotion of what fate would deliver next. This baby would give her mother and father a second chance at life. No, she couldn't tell Petyr as Mrs. Ames suggested. It would kill him. Petyr was killing himself even now. Sansa had to save him, from himself, for their son's sake at least.

Sansa couldn't tell him the truth now, not in this state he was in. She could never lie to him, but this time she had to make him believe. The babe was stillborn, that's what she and Mrs. Ames would tell him. No one would question it considering what she had been through. Sansa would be tender and love him. She would lie again and say they could try for another baby. For him, she would do it. They will watch Alex grow into a fine man, have a family of his own. Her baby girl would live forever and one day, they would all be together again. Sansa had to believe in it.

She had to make Petyr believe. What else was there? His eternal hate? Leaving her alone as he took their son far away? Sansa couldn't imagine Petyr would never do such a thing if he found out. Sansa would explain why she deceived him. He would understand, wouldn't he? However, that shred of doubt was stronger and more than enough to choose the lie. At least she could have him for a while longer. Time was all Sansa had to look forward to. If Petyr hated her, left her, she would want to die. Sansa couldn't imagine living the rest of her days separated from the ones she loved.

The piano echoed up again and Petyr's pain was heartbreaking. He woke early this morning, for she didn't even have the chance to try and talk to him. Was he afraid to see her? Did he believe she was a witch or something evil? Maybe Petyr didn't want her to see him in such shambles. The last time they spoke, saw each other as they actually were... she could see it in his eyes. Her disgust for him reflected in those green orbs. That guilt and shame radiated off him in waves no matter how hard he tried to hide it.

The hazy afternoon sun painted her room in a soft glow as Alex played with Lady near the fire. She couldn't understand what had happened between father and son. Alex avoided Petyr like the black plague. For the first time in his life, the boy was frightened of his father.

"Alex," she smiled, sipping her tea in bed. "Come sit by me for a minute."

The boy climbed up without question and lay his head in her lap as Sansa ran her fingers through his raven locks.

"Why don't you take Lady outside? It's a nice day. Not too cold. Spring is just around the corner. Don't you feel cooped up in my room all the time?"

"Papa's downstairs," Alex hummed and touched his mother's belly.

"Why don't you ask your father to take you riding? I'm sure he would like that very much. He missed you while he was away, don't you know? Your father loves you more than anything in the whole world," Sansa purred.

Alex didn't answer and lay there silently.

"What's wrong my love?" she asked softly.

"Papa's not the same," he answered after a long pause.

Sansa lovingly stroked her son's silken hair, it was so much his father's. Alex was holding something back. Even at his young age, he inherited Petyr's way of dodging and maneuvering around the issue. If Sansa probed, she would get no further she suspected.

"He's been through so much, darling. You're so young, you can't possibly comprehend what adults have to do sometimes to protect the ones we love. When you're older, I know that seems like a lifetime away, but you'll understand. Everything your father has done, was for you and your sister. He loves you more than you could possibly imagine. There are true evils in the world,

maybe in people or places we might not suspect. Your father has been doing everything in his power to protect us. I know it's been horrible for you. I wish I could make all of those fears and bad memories disappear, turn back time... but we can't, my love."

"We can only take what life gives us and move forward. All those terrible people are gone. I'm not hurt, I came back to you as I promised. Your father came back as he promised. He would never leave you, let anyone hurt you, my darling. Do you know how hurt he must feel right now? He needs you so much," she crooned.

"Papa scares me," he whispered, "I don't like that piano."

Sansa held her breath for a moment and wondered if she should ask why. What did he see, know? Petyr would never hurt him, not in a million years.

"Papa is sad. That's why he plays like that. It's my fault, Alex."

"Are you scared of him too?"

The question did not surprise her in some strange way. Alex had no comprehension of what his father was going through. He only knew the loving and doting father who smiled and laughed all the time. The broken and drunken man downstairs was all but a stranger to him.

"No, my love. I trust your father with my life. I love him very much and everything is going to get better. I promise," she smiled as the boy looked up with a glimmer of hope in his eyes. "You believe me, don't you?"

He nodded and finally a real smile formed on his rosy lips.

"How do you know it's a girl, Mummy?" Alex asked, his mind quickly turning to something else.

"I know. I knew you would be a boy just as I know this will be a girl. Will you like having a little sister?"

The happy words spilled out of her mouth before the reality dawned on her. Alex would never know his sister. No, she would not dwell on that. Right now was a good moment. She would deal with that when the time came. Alex would not understand why his sister died, by then hopefully, Petyr would be himself. Alex was young enough, that he might not remember much in time. She and Petyr would rain down love and affection on him. Somehow it would be alright.

Just then the girl kicked and Alex laughed because her little foot connected with the back of his head. That sweet sound filled the room drowning out Petyr's heartache downstairs and Sansa felt her heart lighten if for only a moment. Before she knew it, this baby would come and then the sadness would consume her. Sansa needed this time desperately to try and make things right. No matter how carefully she planned, something could always go wrong. Life taught her that. If everything was going to fall apart in a couple of months, Sansa at least wanted this time with her husband and son to be somewhat happy.

She sent Sarah to tell Petyr she wanted see him. Supper came and went and yet he stayed away. The loyal servant said she told the master of the house of his wife's request but that he instead shut the door to his study, locking it.

Tonight, Alex took Lady and slept in his own room. The first in many days. The fire crackled and Sansa's room was frankly too quiet without her son. The girl twisted and moved making her mother's stomach lurch from the heavy supper. Sansa was ravenous the last few days and felt badly about Sarah constantly bringing up a tray for her mistress at odd hours of the day. Sansa felt the need to be strong and a hunger hit her that she never felt while pregnant with her first born.

A push on her stomach was all that was needed to send up a terrible acidic bile to the back of her throat and Sansa moved quickly to the bathroom, barely making it before retching into the wash basin. She could have used the porcelain one in her room closer to the bed but her room would reek of vomit the remainder of the night and so many smells turned her stomach as it was.

She had to beg the servants to ask Petyr to put out his cigar many times. That sickly sweet smoke would waft into her room from his making her green with illness. She didn't have the courage to face him after that day Myranda died. The servants looked scared to death to approach the master of the house that appeared to be hanging on by a thin thread as it was. They had lost so many servants over the last few months with only the very loyal and true remaining.

Petyr, never once coming to her room, clearly did her bidding for the smell dissipated in a short time. Two things were the only clue that he was even in the house – the piano and the sounds of him tinkering in his bedroom. Sansa could not venture downstairs and Mrs. Ames forbade her to leave her room and restrict her movements for the sake of the child. Only on occasion did Sarah help her bathe.

Sansa wiped her mouth and the sound of a glass breaking jerked her head to Petyr's connecting door. Without another thought, she waddled over and opened it scared of what she might find. The candles were low and it took a moment for Sansa's eyes to adjust to the dim light. The firelight danced on his rumpled bed, but the rest of the room was draped in darkness.

She wrinkled her nose for the stench in his room was going to make her sick again. If she had to lock him in his study, the servants would clean this room first thing tomorrow. The scent of whiskey was the strongest – that spicy, sour scent she normally detested on his breath when he was drunk. It was better than his tobacco but not much.

A glass clinked as she turned the corner and Sansa could barely make out the shadowy figure sitting in the over-stuffed chair by the window.

"What are you doing here?" the voice demanded making Sansa yelp. "Get out."

Surely, Petyr must have mistaken her for a servant. He would never speak to Sansa that way. Ignoring the command, she quietly stepped further into the room.

"It's just me – "

"I said *get out!*" he roared and a crystal glass shattered just past her head on the chest of drawers behind her. She never saw it, but smelled the whiskey. Petyr was drunk. "No one is allowed in here."

Normally, one of his foul tempers would have Sansa spinning on her heel back to her own room but not tonight. She had left him to his own anguish for too long. Stuck out here in the middle of winter, there was nowhere else to go and much less to do. Sansa couldn't imagine what Petyr did to occupy his time. Even though she thoroughly rejected him, Petyr didn't abandon them. He was still here. He would never leave her. Sansa was going mad shut away in her own room on bed rest but at least she had Alex. Petyr was all alone in a huge house with a family and servants that feared him. They were wallowing in their own grief and self-hatred when they could have been comforting each other.

Knowing he would never hurt her, Sansa continued forward until standing before Petyr's chair. He looked terrible. The firelight did nothing to soften the lines and dark circles under his eyes. The beard was scraggly as Petyr hadn't bothered shaving in some time. Everything about his appearance was the polar opposite of the immaculately dressed man she once knew.

Sansa remembered how he was when she fell in the labyrinth. He was so lost at the idea of losing her. He saved her, even if it was at the last minute. Petyr didn't save her this time and Sansa didn't think of what he must be going through. What it must have been like for him to watch her burn, walk away and have not a single answer. He punished her executioners but what else could he have done? What would a man do under such circumstances?

The figure that slumped in the chair was a shell of the man that was so confident the last time they were together in the Vale. If she didn't stop this, Petyr would drink himself to death. Alex needed his father back. She couldn't let her son remember his father this way.

"Are you deaf?" his voice slurred, clenching her wrist so hard it might break. When did he stand so close before her? She was so lost in her thoughts only a moment ago.

"Petyr," she whimpered. "You're hurting me."

He stared at her a long time through glazed eyes, but his grip hadn't lessened. Didn't he recognize her? Was he really that intoxicated? Her wrist ached as Sansa tried to pull away when she finally cried out in pain.

As if singed by fire, Petyr let her go and stumbled back, clarity coming over him.

"I'm sorry," he muttered sitting back down in shame with his head in his hands.

Rubbing her wrist, Sansa stood before him and laid her hand upon his head. That simple gesture was all he needed. Petyr wrapped his arms around her full middle, careful not to squeeze too tightly.

"I promised to protect you," he mumbled into her round tummy. "I failed miserably."

She ran her fingers through his greasy hair hoping it was soothing to him.

"You didn't fail. We're still here," she whispered and felt him sigh deeply. He wasn't completely to blame for all of this. Sansa made choices too. This is where it brought them. If there wasn't love, she would have taken Alex and left. Despite what Petyr had done, she still loved him. She couldn't do this without him. She was despondent for those months they were separated. Sansa couldn't imagine a lifetime without him. If they could live through this, there was still a chance. She just had to reach out and take it.

"You don't need to pretend for my sake or for Alex. Whatever you wish, I'll do," Petyr looked up at her through dark eyes. "I made you that promise once before, remember? If you wanted me to leave..."

"Shhh, don't say such things," she cooed softly. It was the alcohol talking. Petyr believed she despised and feared him. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere and neither are you."

"I was such a fool," Petyr breathed and held her tighter. "I never should have left you. We should have taken Alex and run away. I should have known... I was arrogant, over-confident, selfish... I should have listened to you."

"We didn't know," Sansa sniffed back a tear. "How could we have known?"

"I should have known better. I should have sent you away. All the things I could have done, I didn't because I thought I knew best. I did this to you and I can't undo it. I was never worthy of you. I manipulated. I schemed. I forced you into this with me. You never would have chosen me if you had a real choice. You should have left me years ago."

"Oh, my love," Sansa sighed and kissed the top of his head. "I have only one regret in life and it isn't you. You have given me such happiness."

And heartache. But I mustn't tell him that. I can't lose him now.

"We can't change the past. You told me that. If life hadn't worked out this way, where would we be now? I'd rather be here with you than anywhere else in the world. No matter what has happened because I know you love me."

"Why?" The wonder was in his eyes. "Why do you love me? I've brought you nothing but pain."

"The whiskey has addled your mind if you believe that..."

"God, sweetling, the things I've done – I deceived you. You shouldn't love a man like me. You should take the children and leave me for good."

Sansa lifted his head to gaze into his eyes.

"And die of a broken heart when all that I love is right here?" Sansa kissed his forehead. "We're

still here for a reason. I didn't go through hell fire to live all alone without you. I fought it, for you. I'm here because of you. You did what you had to – for us. What kind of life would our children had otherwise? I don't agree with your methods and I don't know if I'll ever come to terms with it, but I understand why. Most importantly, you came back for us. That's all I care about."

Petyr gently pushed her aside and rose to pour himself another drink. Damn it, she would drain every last bottle of spirits in the house tomorrow if that's what it took.

"Couldn't save you though, could I? If it were left up to me and my incompetence, Alex would be mourning his mother," he grumbled as clumsy hands sloshed brandy into a glass.

Before he could toss it back, Sansa grabbed it from his hand and chucked it at the wall behind him not caring in the least at breaking everything in this damn room.

"You think whiskey is going to change anything? Sitting here alone in self-loathing when your son needs you? The rest doesn't matter. I'm here. I'm alive. Everything will be alright now," she growled.

"Now everything is alright? When did you decide that? We haven't spoken, seen each other in weeks. As far as I understood, you hated my very existence and the only thing keeping you here was your condition," Petyr snapped back and Sansa wasn't prepared for this anger coming from him. She thought the sorrowful man just needed reassurance of love and he would be satisfied with that.

"I begged you, pleaded to understand. All I wanted was to take away the pain, to hold you... and you couldn't even stand my touch. I sought revenge on Myranda and Duncan for what they did to you. I won't deny it and they deserved worse. Judge me if you will, but I did not enjoy it. But I'll be damned if I was going to let someone else do it. Their deaths belonged to me and no one else."

"If they had hurt you or Alex, I would have done the same," Sansa replied.

"I find that hard to believe, sweetling. You don't have it in you," he chuckled darkly.

"What?"

"Cruelty," Petyr stated plainly. "You wouldn't allow me to kill him years ago, or Myranda for that matter..."

Shocked, Sansa cut him off. "Are you blaming me for what happened?"

Petyr pulled her to him suddenly in a panic, "No, my love. *No*. I'm only stating it takes a certain kind of person to do what I did to them. You are too pure and lovely. You couldn't conceive such a thing – even in revenge. A person like me does that... and worse. The look on your face in the bathroom that day..."

Petyr paused and his eyes were forlorn as if replaying that moment again in his mind for the millionth time.

"I never wanted you to look at me like that," he sighed, pulling away from her slightly. "Now, I can't erase it from my mind. I don't want my children to know what kind of man their father is – what he's done. Alex knows. I don't know how but he does. I thought I took precautions... but my rage consumed me that day. I've lost you both. I put my ambitions first and it ruined everything I love the most."

Petyr sat back down wearily, a man defeated. Never, since she had met Petyr that night in Riverrun would she have ever imagined the man before her now. He was completely beaten, and worse, it was all due to his own actions.

"I wish I could take it all back. Sometimes I wish – I left you with Edmure. I wonder if you would have found some nice, young lad to marry. You would have never known such horrors. My selfishness, my need to have you, possess you... I wanted to spoil you like you deserved. I wanted to give you anything you desired, gowns, jewels – the sun and moon if you wished it of me. In the end, what did I succeed in? Watching you burn as you begged me to help you and I was useless." Petyr glanced at her briefly in the darkness but couldn't hold her gaze. "I hear your screams in my dreams when I'm asleep and I drink to silence them when I'm awake. When I finally feel numb, *that's* when I can barely stand myself."

The tears were streaming down her face as she tentatively sat on his lap. She was heavy now, but Petyr did not seem to mind. Leaning against his shoulder, she finally felt his arm wrap around her. They were battling different demons from the same hell. Petyr desperately wanted to be the man she needed but he didn't believe it for a second that it was true. She wanted him, loved him. He had made her happy. Petyr was a wonderful father, but he had convinced himself it was a lie. He did not believe he was a good man or good enough for her.

This game of cat and mouse, toppling kings and bringing down dynasties did more damage than Petyr could have ever expected. He had nothing to lose, she gathered, when this all began years ago. Petyr was the smartest man Sansa ever knew in her life and yet, here he sat unable to piece anything together that went so terribly wrong.

Nuzzling into his neck, hating the scratchiness of his new beard, Sansa sighed for she didn't know what to tell him. In a matter of weeks, he would feel loss again when their beautiful baby was taken away. How could she ever tell him what weighed on her heart and tormented her mind every day? She couldn't trouble him with what was coming. Petyr couldn't stop the inevitable. Even if he had believed her mystical explanation, he would try to find a way to stop it. Then Petyr would blame himself for failing once again. Sansa couldn't bear to see him broken like this. He had always been the stronger one, in control, ready to take on whatever needed to be done. Sansa needed him to be that strong man again.

"You can't blame yourself for everything. I had a hand in it too. I taunted Myranda with ghostly threats, I refused to let you take care of Duncan when Alex was just a baby. Every time I wonder if I had chosen differently, if I had gone back and changed anything... would I have missed something wonderful in the process?" Sansa leaned into him and caressed his jaw, turning his

head ever so slightly to face her. "I couldn't have given up so many beautiful moments. For better or for worse, isn't that what we vowed to each other? I would still choose you. If it meant never having you or our children, I might as well have been dead. When we die, we are going to be old and still sitting in front of that fireplace in the library."

For strange reason, an image from one of Sansa's old nightmares popped into her head. She was walking with the little red-haired girl in the cemetery where the old labyrinth used to stand. All the names on the tombstones were that of many Baelish's. If it was a glimpse of the future, then their name carried on. Alex would have a family and his children would have children...

I belong here.

Maybe when that day finally came, she would see her daughter again. She would still be so young and childlike even if Sansa was as old as Mrs. Ames. Perhaps that's what her dreams were telling her. The little girl was her daughter, waiting, ageless to meet her mother once more.

"Are you ever going to tell me?" Petyr's soft voice wandered into her mind.

"You said," she hesitated and wondered how to proceed without making matters worse. Petyr wasn't going to let it go. He needed some kind of explanation. The doubt in his voice told her that might not want to know either. "You said, you would believe me. Do you remember?"

He nodded gently, lost in her eyes and waiting expectantly.

"Do you believe in anything outside this world, Petyr?" she asked delaying a bit and gauging where to go from here.

"Do I believe in God, you mean?" he replied tentatively. He had to know that what saved her wasn't earthly in any way. The look on his face told her he had been trying to figure it out since that fateful day. "I don't know what I believe in, except you."

"In the North, I was taught the old ways as well as the new. We both know there is something in this house. There always has been. Whether it's God, the Devil or something else, it's here. I knew it my first night. I had always feared you would send me to a mad house... do you recall the music box?"

His brows furrowed in concentration, the effects of the whiskey still upon him.

"I tried to tell you then," Sansa sighed wondering if this was the right course of action. "That there was something in the house. It warned me about Myranda... it warned me about so many things... and I didn't listen."

"It?" his voice faltered a bit. She could hear it in his tone. He wasn't ready to believe. He watched it happen, yet he still wasn't ready to accept that something he deemed to be nothing but religious lies and children's fables could possibly be true. If she convinced him the baby died in childbirth, how would he and Alex react to being chained to a living contradiction?

"Are you prepared to have a witch for a wife? That's what they're calling me in all the villages," Sansa changed tactics carefully.

"You're nothing of the sort," he retorted hotly, just as she knew he would. "Vicious gossip that will stop if I have anything to say about it."

"What are you going to do? Kill them all, throw them in prison for slander? What about Alex when he goes to school? They will taunt him," she tried to explain in her own way.

"He will know it's a lie..."

"Are you so sure? You can't even believe it, can you? You watched me burn, Petyr. How do you think I survived?" she continued on at her own peril. If he did not stand by her, there was no point in sacrificing her child for anything. Petyr wouldn't understand about Changelings and Sansa feared for Mrs. Ames if he knew the truth. Ultimately, Sansa was too scared to tell him she sold their child for a second chance at life. He couldn't know that.

Petyr slowly shook his head, "No, I don't believe it. There is no such thing as..."

"I walked away without a mark on me. I cursed everyone to the Devil in that square. Most of our servants have run off because of what they believe. Did you read what they wrote about me? A Morrigan is nothing short of a spirit wolf, a faerie bent on revenge. How many women do you know of that have raised a wolf? This place has the most horrid history and yet here we live. You burned a priest to death. Somewhere in the lake, a duchess lurks in a watery grave. So much blood is on our hands, Petyr. Robert may rule, but the people will remember. They hold grudges. A simple truth or lie will be distorted from mouth to mouth. What are you going to do?"

"Lies and ridiculousness. It will fade in time, be forgotten. They'll remember the innocent woman you are," he implored not seeing reason.

"No, they will remember a witch burned that cursed them and now lives here. That's what they'll remember."

The Red Witch of Harrenhal

They were both thinking it. Sooner or later Alex would be confronted with it.

Petyr gently pushed her off his lap and began pacing.

"No," his denial setting in hard as a rock. "No, it was the weather, nothing more. It was luck that such a storm doused the fire. The lighting barely missed you, that's all. The clouds were already dark and heavy that morning."

Petyr was trying so hard to reason it out.

"People and their superstitions, that's why this happened in the first place. Duncan and Myranda

concocted those stories and strange happenings to suit their agenda, just to harm us. Joffrey was dumb or evil enough to believe them. He just wanted a reason to hurt you.”

“Petyr, he could have killed me at any time for no reason at all,” Sansa sighed and sat down in his chair.

“Yes, but he didn’t. There was no reason for it. I had everything under control...”

“Not everything,” she whispered.

“Damn that woman. If there is a Hell, both of them are there for an eternity,” he growled.

“There is a Hell and I’ve sold my soul to avoid it,” Sansa sighed deeply.

Petyr turned to face her, his expression unreadable in the darkness.

“What do you mean?” his tone was ever so cautious.

“It’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” she sniffed slightly, feeling the tears well up in her eyes.

“Think, Petyr. Reason. Why am I still here? You think the skies just spontaneously burst with enough rain at the right moment? You’ve never been a dense man, don’t prove me wrong now. I cursed myself. I sold myself to live. Don’t you see?”

Putting his hands on his slim hips, Petyr could only hang his head down. No, he didn’t believe it. Not a word. He had already decided on a more rational explanation and refused to budge from it. He was taking all the guilt and blame for himself.

“I haven’t a single burn but this,” she held her arm out with the branded mark. “If this isn’t a witches’ mark, then what is it?”

“*Tóg dī. Tá sí mise...*” he muttered and it made Sansa’s eyes wide with fear.

“What did you say?”

“Take her,” he breathed. “She’s or ‘I’m yours’... You screamed it right before...”

Sansa’s mind raced. How much of that language did Petyr really know and understand? He heard her give up their child? Why didn’t he say anything before? Thinking quickly, and taking a risk at being called out a liar, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“*It*,” she cried softly, unable to look at him. “Take *it*, not ‘her’. My soul is yours. Take it.”

She waited for Petyr to scoff, to tell her he knew what she really said. She felt him at her feet, his hands took hers. It wasn’t exactly a lie. She did sell her soul to Them. She would pay the price her entire life. If Petyr was going to leave her eventually, maybe he should do it now instead. Who would want a cursed woman?

She leaned forward and cried into his stomach, wrapping her arms around his middle.

He believes me now. He must .

“I did it for you,” she wept uncontrollably. “I couldn’t leave you.”

For a moment, Sansa thought he would push her away, but when he knelt and held her fiercely in his arms, she sobbed, soaking his shirt. If he believed she was mad, Sansa didn’t care. It was the truth. She did it for him, for their love. With shame, Sansa couldn’t admit to doing it for her son or her daughter she sold just so she could stay with her love a little longer in this life. She was a terrible and hateful mother. She didn’t deserve her children.

“I love you so much,” the tears choking her words. “You believe me, don’t you?”

She felt him kiss the top of her head and smooth her hair back in soft caresses.

“Yes, I believe you,” he murmured but his tone didn’t sound convinced. Did he believe her mad after all he had seen?

She needed to see his eyes. Those green eyes would tell her the truth. Pulling back, she gazed at him for the longest time. Sorrow, guilt, shame...they were all present, but he was hiding something. No, he didn’t believe her and Sansa’s stomach dropped. If he didn’t believe her now, how would she be able to deceive him about the baby later? Oh, it was all so hopeless. Sansa pulled away from him in despair. She was a fool. This was never going to end well for either of them.

Suddenly, Petyr gathered her face in his palms. “Look at me,” he pulled her so close to him. “I believe you. You are my little witch, are you not? Nothing will make me stop loving you.”

We’ll see, she told herself. *When you discover my treachery, and can still say that. I’ll believe you.*

His arms tightened and she felt him smile. “Shh, it’s all right. Everything is going to be all right now. I’m not that man anymore. I almost lost you once and I swore to you then only to fail you. I will not waste the chance fate has given me a second time.”

His voice lowered and Sansa felt a hitch in his breath. “When I couldn’t save you... I wanted to die right there. Crawl into that bonfire with you. The idea of living without you is unbearable to me. Whatever mystery surrounds that saving grace? It matters not. You’re here with me where you belong. I will pray to the Devil himself and barter my own worthless soul just to keep you here. So, perhaps it isn’t you at all my love. I offered myself to save you that day. If a higher power exists, they’ll leave you forever alone after all you sacrificed.”

That was enough. The dam broke and she couldn’t stop the tears if she tried. God in Heaven, she loved this man. He could be placating her, but Sansa didn’t care. He was going to stand by her. Stay with her.

“Don’t cry anymore, sweetling,” he rocked her gently like he used to when she was upset. “I won’t let you go. I’m going to be there for you, I promise. I’ll never leave you ever again. Whatever you wish, I’ll do. Don’t worry any longer. I’ll take care of everything. If one man breathes a word against you...”

She didn’t want him to hurt anyone on her account. She had been called terrible names and ostracized in the past, this wouldn’t be any different. Maybe they could move far away and start over. As long as he was with her, Sansa could weather any storm. Sansa did notice Petyr omitted what he had promised her before.

I’ll never let anyone hurt you again .

That was a pledge neither of them could make to each other anymore, for you could never know what the future held and what others would do. All you could do is hope for the best and love each in the meantime.

For the longest time, they held each other in silence. It was strange how easily she accepted his apology and gave forgiveness. Petyr would die for her, sell his soul for her. If she demanded it of him right now, he would do it. No other man would have been able to handle what Petyr has since they met. Another man would have tossed her in the street, a mad house or just let her die. Even now, only Petyr would sit here and accept any answer she gave, if in doubt, and not say a word. Her husband loved her and everything he did proved it. Petyr joked called her by her pet name, for heaven’s sake. He didn’t care what anyone else thought. He just wanted her with him.

All of a sudden, old Petyr resurfaced with all the kindness and that reassurance she loved about him, whether it was true or not. It seemed like he was trying to not only convince her but himself as well. He ran his fingers through her long hair and kept holding her. She had missed his touch so much. Sansa needed him so desperately. They didn’t work without each other, that much was certain.

No matter what the locals thought, eventually the rumors would get to other places. To Robert. He was now king, if not coronated yet. Would he believe what they said about her? Old Petyr, would have laughed it off and that would have been the end of it. The man holding her now was filled with so much doubt. Sansa didn’t think Robert would care about Myranda. He never liked her but would people try to sway him, the new and naïve king, against Petyr? He would need to see her cousin and very soon if peace was to flourish after such turmoil. Sansa would be foolish to think she and Petyr could ignore the rest of the world right now.

“What about Robert?” she finally had to ask. Petyr promised not to leave. Was it really true?

He stiffened in her embrace and Sansa held her breath. Why did she ask? She didn’t want to know. Sansa was an idiot if she believed it never entered Petyr’s mind.

“As I said, I’m not leaving you. But Robert has to be crowned and soon,” he grumbled. The mere mention of her cousin’s name appeared to have quite the sobering effect on Petyr. “I received a few letters, he wants to come here for the coronation. I don’t think it’s wise considering circumstances, but I can’t leave you here either and I refuse to. Things will get worse if I don’t get him into power as quickly as possible.”

“Then bring him here and get it over with, if that’s what must be done,” she offered. The idea of Robert here was the last thing Sansa wanted. She wanted Petyr and Alex all to herself. She didn’t want to answer any questions or be bothered. How were they supposed to host such a thing anyhow? Most of their servants had gone. Sansa just wanted to be left alone.

“I thought about delaying it until after you give birth,” he paused and traced the tears on her cheeks. “I thought you might want me to leave. So many things plagued my mind, then I didn’t care anymore. Without you, I’m nothing. If you hated me – frankly, I wasn’t sure what I was going to do. I can’t leave you in a country on the verge of collapsing. I can sober up and finish this with you by my side. Then we can go anywhere, do anything we please.”

“What about other people? I can’t face them. I don’t want to see anyone,” she pleaded with fear over taking her.

“Robert might insist, but I can use your condition to make it brief,” he began carefully. “As far as the ‘others’? Only a few witnesses, people loyal to me will be present. I will spend a couple of days to get him prepared and send him back to the Eyrie – the safest place for him. King’s Landing is far too dangerous right now. I’ll send my most trusted associates to help him. My place is here with you. You and the children are my priority now. I can advise him from here.”

Immediately, Petyr winced at his own words but Sansa didn’t begrudge him. She knew what he meant. His mind was truly fascinating. Petyr, even drunk, could switch gears and think coherently about multiple things that needed attention. He wasn’t drowning himself in drink at all hours of the day. Sarah said he spent a lot of time in his study. How he managed to function in such chaos was bewildering. That was Petyr and she couldn’t love him any other way. That strong man was still there. He hadn’t disappeared fully.

Reluctantly, Sansa agreed. If it had to be done, let it be over with now. She had more important things to take care of. Let Petyr feel as though things could be normal again. Distract him for a short time. By the time Robert was on his way, she would be having a baby and then who knows what would happen?

The faeries had remained silent, giving her no instruction. Again that thought of Mrs. Ames role in all of this. What she really telling the truth? Did she know more than she let on? She was ready with answers to deliver the child, tell Petyr it was dead and then take it to Them. Where? How? Why was that little red-headed spirit quiet now? Sansa promised them hadn’t she?

After bathing at her insistence, Petyr joined Sansa in her bed that night. It was as if he never left. This was right. Together they were strong. Together they could face anything.

If there is a God, just get me through these last weeks. Give me a healthy girl. If I can have that, then it would still be worth it.

Petyr was wrapped around her round body, holding her from behind. Any movement she made, his hold became firm. His body told her she was protected. Sansa wasn't sure he was asleep. It seemed more like he was watching over her instead. Afraid that if he fell asleep, he would wake to find that the love and forgiveness from tonight had been a nothing but a dream. Finally, his breathing evened out and Sansa inwardly smiled. Everything was going to be alright. Petyr loved her. They would find a way to be happy.

Right when her eyes began to close in a contentment she hadn't felt in months, a chill came over the room despite the fire still glowing in the hearth. Sansa's wrist burned and a sickly sweet voice echoed in her ear.

He will never understand until the hand bleeds and the bark heeds the burn. He will never leave. The old man grows young. The two are one.

Forget not your covenant, or you both will burn. Where the mother is buried, you must bring her before the rise of the sun.

Chapter End Notes

I really struggled with this chapter and frankly, I'm still not happy with it. I really needed them to try and make it right before all the shit hits the fan, which you guys KNOW I'm going to do you. I don't think that's much of a spoiler. I didn't want to drag this out too long because she's going to give birth soon and I needed to tie up the Robert part before the end of the next chapter. I don't want to focus on that considering what's in store.

Okay, the next chapter is going to be a big one. Sorry/not sorry for the direction it's going to go.

The Sacrifice

Chapter Notes

I know it's been a LOOOOOONG wait since the last chapter and I apologize sincerely. This year has been really tough on me. I promised I'd post this before Sunday (sorry to my beta, I was going to send this to you...but I'd never post in time and I've made these guys wait long enough...so I'll just live with my mistakes this chapter)

Since you've waited so long, I'm giving you a HUGE chapter to hopefully make up for it. It's been in my brain since I started writing this fic. And we're not done yet. I hope this was worth the wait. I guess I'll find out soon enough :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sobriety did not come easy. Sansa watched Petyr struggling every day. He would have continued that downward spiral if she hadn't gone to him that night. What mattered was that he was making the effort. Whether Petyr believed her or not, at least he was going to try and salvage what they had left. Technically, he lost nothing. Petyr had his beloved wife, son and soon to be born daughter. He won his political game of intrigue and Robert would be here tomorrow. Could the rest be so easily dismissed as luck or chance in his eyes? They hadn't spoken of it since that night. What her husband could not explain seemed to have been willfully ignored.

What lay on the horizon, Petyr had no way of controlling. There was no point in telling him. He would only worry himself sick or worse lock her away – and the child would still be taken. There was no way out of this dreadful bargain. She couldn't run or hide. The best plan was the one Mrs. Ames posed to her. Tell Petyr the baby was stillborn and Sansa would keep him at her side while the loyal old woman delivered the payment of her mother's fateful decision. It was a terrible thing to do to her loving husband, but Sansa needed to use his grief to control him if only for a short time.

Mrs. Ames warmed her hands before feeling around the young mother's pregnant belly. The child had grown but she would not be as big as her brother.

"It won't be long now," the housekeeper smiled. "I'm glad to hear your appetite has returned. Are you sleeping well?"

"Well enough most nights," she replied. "I just sense this will not work. Petyr is unpredictable. He's been so... protective. Normally, I would love that about him but I wish... I wish he would stay preoccupied. After the king leaves, I will be his sole focus. I fear something will go wrong. I know he stays up late many nights. As if he's keeping guard."

"What have you told him?" Mrs. Ames propped up her pillows so Sansa could sit up.

"I tried to make him understand that there was something wrong with me," she began. "He doesn't want to talk about it. He doesn't believe what he saw. It was all a coincidence in his eyes. A happy turn of chance that I was spared."

"There's nothing wrong with you, child. Sooner or later he will accept the truth of what happened. Men are rarely believers. So overly analytical, rational... its ingrained in their psyche from birth it seems. They see what they want to see. Duncan used the Devil and God as explanations and excuses. His lordship is very scientific minded and I wager never a spiritual man to begin with. It doesn't surprise me he's come to his own conclusions. Perhaps, that will be a good thing when all of this is over with. You don't want him questioning you."

Sansa wrung her hands nervously. Why did she try to convince him? *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* Mrs. Ames was right. Let Petyr believe what he wanted. When their child "dies", she did not need him being suspicious about his wife who declared herself a witch.

"What is it?" the woman eyed her cautiously.

"I told him," she sighed. "That I sold my soul to save myself. He blamed himself for what happened to me. I was scared his drinking would become worse. I said that I could be witch after all. That's what the people were calling me. What would happen to Alex if he heard such things... discovered that his mother was burned as a witch..."

"What did he say to that?"

"He refused to believe me."

"He loves you. You are perfect and innocent in his eyes. It was good of you to pull him out of that stupor. It won't do either of you any good... especially when this child comes," Mrs. Ames handed her a cup of tea.

"Maybe I should have let it be until she was born. Now, he's afraid of leaving me alone. If he's not with me, Petyr makes sure you, Sarah and even Alex are watching me. Don't bother denying it."

Mrs. Ames smiled sadly. Sansa wasn't wrong at all. Petyr had instructed them to look after her

constantly. After all this time, perhaps he was afraid she *was* mad. Perhaps what Myranda did to her was the final straw to crack her sanity.

“You’re with child, my dear. He is scared to believe what he knows in his heart is true. He is in denial. That denial does things to a man. I have no doubts he would die for you or your children. He’s consumed with guilt. Use that... *for now*. He’s desperate to find some control in all of this. I suspect he’s never been without it in his life before.”

“He acts as though it never happened,” Sansa huffed. She wanted things to go back to the way there were but she wanted him to believe her... and he didn’t. Sansa felt like when she first told him about the music box. The look on his face.

“No, dear. Believe me, he knows. It’s in everything he does now. He hasn’t forgotten, as much as he would probably wish to. *That*, will be with him forever. You might want to count your blessings and let it go. He wants to be what you need. Let him. He is trying despite all that’s happened.”

“I’m so scared,” Sansa whimpered. “I don’t think I can do this.”

Mrs. Ames drank from her cup and appeared deep in thought.

“It will be the most difficult thing you’ve ever had to do. You’ve been through so much. Watching your family die before you, being alone and afraid. Even in just the short years I’ve known you,” the old woman reminisced. “Most men could not have taken on such a burden. I truly believe this child is giving you a second chance. Happiness, you deserve. Besides, the consequences of changing your mind...”

The thought of burning all over again made Sansa ill. She went through it once and she would be lying if the idea of going through it again didn’t fill her with insane fear. Mrs. Ames said Petyr would die for them. Yes, he would. What did that say about her as a mother? She was giving up her child to save herself. No, she couldn’t think of it that way. Giving her up would save both of their lives.

“What about Petyr? How do I look him in the eyes and lie?” Sansa stared into the fireplace.

“You’ve been lying to him since you came to this house. He has lied to you. For whatever it’s worth, you both lied with good intentions.”

“Mother used to say that the road to Hell was paved with good intentions...”

“All due respect, your mother hasn’t faced what has been thrown at you. You don’t know what she would have done in your place.” Mrs. Ames frowned as she finished her tea. “This is no one’s decision but yours. Anyone that questions your love and devotion in this, doesn’t have a shred of compassion. No one should have to make this choice, but anyone lashed to a post and burned... let them experience *that* and see how quickly they change their tune.”

Sansa’s mind was working furiously and not quite listening to the woman.

“How do we convince him... that day? Will he want to see her even if we tell him the child is stillborn? What then? This is doomed to fail. He’ll know. He always knows when I’m lying to him. He’ll be in the next room. If the baby cries...”

Mrs. Ames came over and sat on the bed, taking Sansa’s hand.

“I had hoped to keep this to myself until that day, but I have a plan. You probably won’t like it, but it could solve a problem. Whether you believe in God, fate, chance... whatever you may call it, an unexpected opportunity came to me the other day while I was away in town. There was no time to consult you and frankly, I didn’t want to burden you with such a gruesome thing.”

Sansa swallowed a lump and her stomach clenched. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

“Bethany, if you remember, ran away around the time before you were taken. She and Amy, the other upstairs maid had said they were worried about their families when they disappeared at the market. At Lord Holloway’s, a young girl took me to a small mud house near the river. The girl Bethany was giving birth. She found a young man... but as it usually goes, he left her once he was satisfied. What was left of her family shunned the girl for her sin.”

Mrs. Ames scowled as she spoke, “Duncan and his pious creed...”

Sansa closed her eyes. It seemed families of wealth and title weren’t the only ones to cast out a woman because a man compromised her. Somehow from Mrs. Ames generation to Sansa’s, women were still to be used and persecuted just because they were women.

“I was midwife to her that day, hence why I was so late in returning back to Harrenhal,” Sansa heard her say before her heart started to pound. “It was a girl. A dark-haired girl. The poor thing had succumbed before ever leaving the womb.”

Sansa knew what the old woman was planning. She didn’t even need to say it.

“Probably for the best. That girl wasn’t ready to be a mother. All alone with nothing. I’ve sent her to Riverrun to work for your uncle. In case he ever mentions it to you,” Mrs. Ames added thoughtfully. “She has given you a savior.”

The very idea made Sansa’s skin crawl. No, that child should be buried. It wasn’t some doll to be passed off as her own. Gruesome wasn’t the word for it at all. It was downright horrific.

“I’m not hearing this,” she muttered more to herself. “Please tell me you buried that girl. How could you even... it could be weeks before...”

Images of a rotting newborn, made Sansa’s stomach turn. What in the world was Mrs. Ames thinking? No one would believe... now if the child had come just days before Sansa gave birth...

Dear God, what was she thinking? Good people did not do things like this. Mother’s would not

contemplate such a heinous act.

“Brine has many uses. He’ll never know the difference. It’s very small, but stillborn’s usually are. It all depends on you. I’ll leave with your child before she makes a sound and the...” Mrs. Ames pause, choosing her words carefully. “The *Changeling*, will stay with you. That will be your lie. You won’t even have to speak to him. His eyes will believe. With all you’ve been through. He won’t doubt it. You’ll grieve. Bury the child with the respect of what she’s given you in her death and the memory of real daughter and move on with this second chance.”

The northern woman was clinical in the way she spoke. It was a means to an end and nothing more. She pitied the maid and the dead baby. It would eventually be buried. Petyr and Alex would believe her to be their own. Sansa’s real daughter would go on to live forever.

God, it was so macabre. Somewhere in this house a dead baby was in a jar of brine waiting to be used as a scapegoat for her deception. Sansa might as well be a witch. Evil women offered up children for sacrifice. And that’s what this was... a sacrifice.

“Have They told you where to take the child?” she asked and all Sansa could do was shake her head with tears in her eyes. She didn’t tell Mrs. Ames the riddle because she was still unsure of what to do. Sansa was slightly scared the housekeeper would know the answer and it would all be set into stone. It was pointless in hoping for a different outcome. There was no way out of this.

Those images haunted Sansa all night. Mrs. Ames meant well. She was trying to help but the whole ordeal was taxing Sansa to the limits. The exhaustion was getting worse. She barely left her bed as it was.

What would Petyr do if he ever discovered her deception, Sansa asked herself as she watched him setting up her easel in her bedroom. She told him she was dying of boredom and since she could not attempt the stairs, Petyr brought her something to fill her time. It gave her a reason to stay busy, keep her mind off things... and not to talk to her husband as much as she could avoid it.

His gesture was sweet as in every little thing he did to try and make amends but he couldn’t be hers wholly. Thankfully, he had been preoccupied with Robert’s coming arrival over the past week and she had not seen as much of him. He didn’t ask any more questions about what happened. It seemed, after all, he preferred not to know or accept the truth. Petyr was still grounded in the reality that made him comfortable – one that had nothing to do with the supernatural. He went about his daily routine as if trying to convince himself everything was back to normal.

What did she expect? He couldn’t be locked to her side every waking moment, for which she was grateful and sad. Sansa was being silly. He was trying so hard to go back to what they used to be. He was attentive as ever even when he felt horrible from the headaches. The alcohol had taken its toll. Petyr had many sleepless nights where she would find him in her chair staring out the window for hours. She would watch him until falling asleep only to be woken by one of his nightmares.

Never in all the years they shared a bed, did Sansa remember him once having a nightmare. Petyr had them all the time now. He would mumble in his sleep but she couldn’t make out what he was saying. She would hold him and after a time, Petyr would relax into silence once more. This is what he must have done with her on so many nights.

Strangely, it was Sansa who couldn’t remember her dreams lately. After the spirit left that cryptic message, Sansa expected the nightmares to continue. Instead, it was Petyr that was restless. Her head would rest on his chest and Sansa would try too hard to dream. She wanted to figure out the riddle. Maybe in her dreams the spirit would give the answer.

Where the mother is buried... before the rise of the sun...

Sansa’s mother was buried in Winterfell’s crypts. Was she really expected to travel all the way up there? Petyr would never allow it. She would give birth in the carriage before ever getting past the marshes. The maid’s child would be useless. Unless, she was supposed to take her newborn up there. She could never convince Petyr to do it. Never in a million years. No, it wasn’t her mother they spoke of.

It couldn’t mean Petyr’s mother, could it? The Fingers were a rocky spit of land on the east coast – not even a place for a child of Alex’s age. Petyr never spoke of his family. Embarrassingly enough she never really expressed an interest in asking him before. What did she really know about him other than being raised with her own mother in Riverrun? He seemed not ashamed of his lowly beginnings but he never talked about it either. It was highly unlikely the spirit meant Petyr’s mother. What had his family been like? She knew his father sent him to foster at Riverrun but not much more than that.

Wondering about his parents, Sansa felt a twinge of shame. Had she judged Petyr so harshly all this time? Sansa hoped to find a man as good as her own father. She had put both her parents on pedestals. Petyr’s father wanted better for his son and sent him away to be educated with an earl and his family. Sansa’s parents, whether led only by duty and honor, pledged their daughter to a beastly boy from a tyrannical family. The king was his friend and the betrothal made when she was too young to understand what it meant.

Father was a good man, he loved his family, adored his wife but he couldn’t protect them either. He fought a rebellion, like Petyr, that also put his family at risk. He underestimated the Lannisters just as Petyr did with Myranda. If father, being the northerner, told mother that he had promised one of their children just to avoid death... what would mother had done? Or vice versa? If faced with the decision of executing one of their children to save the rest from Joffrey’s fury, would her parents have done it?

Sansa tried to imagine father if he were forced to watch the executions of her mother and siblings. It practically killed Petyr that day in the town square and Sansa wondered how father would have reacted. He too, would have been consumed by guilt. He would have taken vengeance on Joffrey and the Lannisters – and Sansa would have praised him for it. Her father’s rebellion or revolution, would have cost more lives than the path Petyr chose. There was no way to justify the deaths of so many but she would be a hypocrite to hold her father higher than that of her husband who both

knew a battle needed to be waged, but different ways of fighting an enemy – a silent war that Petyr won...and lost.

In the end, Sansa had no right to criticize either man. She chose to save herself by selling her child...

“What are you thinking about?” his soft voice drifted in her ear.

Caught off guard, Sansa forced a little smile as he sat next to her on the bed.

“Oh, I was just daydreaming. That’s all,” she lied caressing his face which was smooth again.

“I’m sorry about Robert,” he said. “I’ll make it as quick as possible. I’m in no mood to entertain or play father to him right now. Two days at the most and I’ll send him back to the Eyrie. When the chaos settles down, and everything here is alright, perhaps we’ll go to Kings Landing together as a family. Before we know it, Alex will be preoccupied with schooling and this little one,” he grinned, caressing her belly, “will bleed my bank account dry.”

Her eyes widened at the mention of Alex. Would they send him away? Sansa wasn’t so sure she was ready for that no matter how old her son was. Young ladies were taught at home. Of course titled heirs would attend school. She rarely saw her brothers once they came of age and that thought made her stomach lurch.

“Of course, I will employ a governess until that time?” Petyr asked, reading her mind.

“I know it’s off in the distance, but I worry about his safety being so far away. What if...”

So many awful thoughts entered her mind. Alex would be off in some distant school, away from their protection. Instead of being taught alongside his aristocratic peers, what kind of young boys would he be associating with? Rich merchant’s sons, men Petyr paid off, those that profited from the rebellion. Men like Petyr...

Sansa was appalled at herself and the girl was pushing into her ribs again making her wince.

Petyr took her in his arms and she could detect just a hint of brandy. The mint he chewed often didn’t quite disguise it. Sansa refused to say a word to him. She was well informed that he barely touched a glass. Mrs. Ames said it was better than he consumed less over time rather than stopping cold. Petyr had much to deal with, and Sansa would be lying to herself if she wasn’t scared of what was coming.

“Given any thought to a name?” his voice was gentle as he caressed her back.

Yes and no. What did it matter if she wasn’t here to be called by it? She wouldn’t know them.

“Some. You? After your mother perhaps?” Sansa deflected but when she felt him stiffen a bit, she immediately regretted bringing up what was clearly a bad memory.

“If she’s to be named after anyone, at least let it be a woman worth remembering.”

Sansa pulled back and studied his face. There was no animosity there just remorse.

“I never knew her. My father never spoke of her. Oddly, I have many memories of Lord and Lady Tully and barely a vague picture in my head of my father,” Petyr smiled sadly. “Practically all of my childhood memories were of Riverrun. Most of the good ones, at least.”

Her eyes welled up. Petyr did not remember his parents, just as their own daughter would not remember them.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you cry,” he whispered and held her tight. “God knows I never want to see you cry ever again.”

“I’m alright, really. Don’t all expectant mothers cry constantly?” she smiled. “I’m happy. We’re together. What else matters?”

At that, he raised an eyebrow. She knew what he was thinking. How could anyone be happy after what she had been through? Sansa snuggled back into his arms, letting his warmth be her comfort.

“Truly,” she insisted. “Everything that matters to me, that I love most in all the world, is in this house. The past is the past. I want what is before me. I want the man who used to sit in the library and read poetry to me by the fire. The one that walked in from the rain in Riverrun and changed my life forever. Remember what we told each other? That we would not be here, right now, if it weren’t for the path we had chosen. We’re here. Everything is going to be alright now.”

“God in heaven, I do love you,” he breathed. “I’ll spend the rest of my life proving it.”

The commotion downstairs could be heard from her room. Petyr had hired some northerners desperate for work. The winter had been harsh and with the death of Lord Bolton, many were squabbling over the unclaimed lands or found themselves destitute. Technically, through Petyr, Sansa could recoup it all and Robert would support her. It was her family’s land, her history, but Winterfell was her past. Everything up there was dead. One day, she could return and pay respects to her family but now she needed to live for the future – for her own family.

The locals feared Harrenhal, but the refugees only knew that a Stark was the lady of this county. Stories of witchcraft wouldn’t bother them. The Church had persecuted them for ages and Bolton was the last straw. Only the Stark name held any level of trust and respect and the man that married her was worth at least a chance in their eyes. Her husband quickly took advantage of that opportunity.

Petyr paid well and offered those families lands to own and farm for themselves. That generosity would go far and he knew it. Perhaps Petyr had always known and expected it. Any abandoned homes of the local villagers would soon be given to those Northern heathens everyone detested.

Mrs. Ames was grateful for the help. Spring had come and there was much to do not only in the house but the grounds. Sarah, a healed William and the last of the loyal servants were thrilled to have extra hands. A new king was arriving today and Petyr wasn't about to have only a handful of servants and a house that looked like it had been rummaged by every gold coat and opportunist in the Riverlands.

Sansa hoped Robert would be crowned quickly and thus be on his way home. She didn't feel like talking to him at all. She was sure Petyr would make her apologies due to her delicate condition but the young man had none of it when he entered her bedroom. At least he gave her every courtesy before receiving him, but Robert had no intention of not seeing his cousin after traveling all this way.

He was still the skinny boy she remembered from months ago. Robert hadn't grown or changed since she last saw him at the Eyrie. Not physically at least. The change was one of awareness. He knew he was king, but somehow, he didn't seem to understand the gravity of it all. He was simply a naive boy with a gold crown. Thankfully, Robert did not have the monstrous streak of Joffrey, but he was still a spoiled boy due to his mother's coddling.

Robert's only saving grace would be the teachings and advice of his trusted and beloved uncle and cousin. There was sweet boy in him. He defended her in Kings Landing. She knew he would have executed Miranda for her crimes had Petyr not already assigned himself the role of judge and executioner. Sansa and Petyr needed to make sure his head did not overgrow the crown upon it.

"Cousin Sansa," Robert smiled as he greeted her with a soft kiss on the forehead before settling himself in the chair next to her bed. "I'm glad to see you unharmed. I heard the worst. Uncle Petyr told me what Lady Miranda did to you. I would have..."

Sansa mustered a smile and took his hand, "I know you would have. You're a good man. I couldn't have asked for better men than you and Petyr to depend on. You will make a great king. I know it in my heart. Just and wise. With Petyr by your side, I know he will make sure you go down in history for all your good deeds. They people will love you."

That brought a huge smile to his face. Sansa knew her role at this moment. She didn't have to play to his vanity, but making sure Petyr remained his most trusted, if not sole counsel was vitally important. She would play the damsel that had been through hell and he the storybook prince who would save them all. Robert was such a sickly and awkward boy, not faring well with young ladies, that he would be thrilled at becoming someone admired.

Petyr leaned against her bedpost and his face was unreadable. He knew what to say and when to say it. Right now, Sansa was stroking Robert's fragile ego. They both knew the boy cared greatly for her. She could not be his duchess or queen. Sansa was not only a married woman but a mother too. Maybe it was better for her to take on a more maternal role to her cousin now.

"Uncle Petyr, after the coronation tomorrow, you will become Duke of the Vale or is it Grand Duke? No matter, you will be my right hand in all matters of state. Alexander will be Marquess of Harrenhal and Lord Paramount. What about the North and Westlands?" the boy king pondered.

"Don't worry too much about it now. I have people in the right places to ensure fealty to you," Petyr explained. The old Petyr was back and handling everything with precision. "We can repay that loyalty later. The common folk are the key. Give them lands, food and protection and you will win them over. Joffrey has created such hardship that generosity from you is very crucial."

Their voices wandered in and out of her mind as the conversation grew tiresome. Sansa did not want to listen to this political blather all day and pretended to be exhausted and ill so the men would leave her in peace. Let Petyr handle the details. She didn't care to know. She had her own problems and they were far more important.

The next day, Robert was crowned and he made sure Sansa was regaled with the historic moment she missed. Alex was ecstatic with the whole affair. He had taken to the new king and Robert loved the idea of being his godfather. It was as if Alex gained an older brother in a strange way. Robert loved Petyr like a father and wouldn't allow harm to come to his children. Sansa felt certain of that. Alex could become a great lord, second only to the king in time.

Alex would take his father's title as she would take Aunt Lysa's. She didn't want to leave here to become a duchess and live in the Eyrie. The only good memory Sansa had of the Vale was the night Petyr danced with her before the ton. She did not want to live there. Harrenhal was her home. Certainly Robert wouldn't begrudge her leaving her home. She would play up the new mother to keep her rooted here. Petyr could handle the Vale's needs from Harrenhal. He had been doing so for years.

She stilled at those last thoughts. *New mother*. No, she would be a grieving mother. How easy it was to forget what was to come. Everyone, except Mrs. Ames, had no idea of the terrible deal that had been sealed between mother and spirit world. Maybe going to the Eyrie would be best and get away from this place.

Weeks later it felt as though Robert had never stepped foot this house. The rains had come and Sansa knew it would be soon. She had swelled a bit more in the last month but still was small compared to Alex. How quickly the time flew by.

Looking through all her sketches and paintings, Sansa sighed at the portrait she painted of Petyr. It

wasn't terrible, but it was a reminder of what Petyr would never be again. Content in the moment of something as simple as reading. He wasn't that man any longer. The one who relaxed in his favourite chair by the fire after dinner each night. Petyr was never relaxed anymore. Not even in sleep. He worried constantly even though he tried not to show it but Sansa knew better.

Gathering up all of her work, she stashed them away in a trunk in her dressing room. Sansa had no desire at all to draw or paint and felt terrible at making Petyr bring everything upstairs. The day the gold coats came, all she could think of was taking Alex and running away, but not without Petyr's likeness. Going to her dresser, she pulled out the numerous letters she wrote to him in that lonely time but had nowhere to send them. Tied neatly with a pale blue ribbon, Sansa stood before the fire. There was no need to keep them. Petyr was home.

Her hand trembled. For some reason, she couldn't do it. Like the artwork, the sad ramblings of a haunted woman were locked away in a trunk where the broken pieces of a music box lay at the bottom, wrapped in her mother's shawl. The song Petyr wrote for her was tied with ribbon and placed inside. Things Sansa couldn't destroy but were best forgotten. Everything before the burning was like a dream, someone else's life – a woman she didn't know anymore.

A melodic sound woke Sansa from a dreamless slumber. *What time was it?* The moon was full and high in the black sky as its light streamed through the windows.

"Petyr?"

Her voice echoed in the darkness as she ran down the stairs at the sound of the piano. He was here. She wasn't mad.

"I'm home."

Entering the music room, Sansa's stomach churned. The ivory keys, laced with dust, moved freely as the tune she knew so well filled the air.

You must make him remember...

Glancing down at her hand, his ring, too big for her slender finger, gleamed in the low light.

"Yours for mine," his voice said behind her.

It waits in its dusty tomb, hidden from time. Only then will the truth you find.

The blue was covered in grey all around her. The scent stale of old cedar and rot. The music box played but it was a different song. Opening the beautifully carved lid, a faded envelope waited with only one word scrawled out from an elegant hand – *Mother*.

Where the mother is buried...

Lady nudged Sansa's hand with her snow-white head, silently asking her to follow. The ground was cold and moist from the early morning dew as the wolf disappeared into the woods. Sansa glanced back at the house and a lone figure stood from her bedroom window.

"Forgive me," she mouthed and hid the little bundle inside her cloak. She had very little time.

You don't belong here.

The little red-haired girl smiled as she planted a winter rose at the base of the old oak tree in the woods. The tree was blackened and dead as if it had been burned while Lady sat obediently on top of the grave of her own mother, buried years ago. The rose grew up and around the tree and the girl looked at Sansa with wonder.

The two are one.

"What do you mean?" Sansa whispered.

You must make him understand.

A cold, wet hand clasped hers and Sansa turned with fear filling her belly. Petyr's face was pale and gaunt. Those once brilliant green eyes were now glassy and grey.

"Yours for mine," his voice cracked.

Glancing down, his bloody hand held hers in a vice grip that cut the emerald ring into her skin. The blood dripped but Sansa wasn't sure if it was hers or his. Somewhere off in the distance a baby cried and she felt her hand crunch under the pressure of his. At first it was her fingers as they withered and died. Sansa watched in horror as death traveled up her hand and arm as if burnt to a crisp. Petyr was screaming and the little girl smiled.

She shot up, covered in sweat. Lady was at the foot of the bed and growled ominously. Sansa's hand was searing with pain and she realized Petyr was grasping it so tightly, she thought it might break. Unaware, he was mumbling in his sleep, his head tossing and turning.

"Petyr, let go," she winced and shook him roughly. Her whole body seemed to ache. The mark on her wrist burned furiously. "Wake up. You're hurting me."

"Mine for yours," he muttered and Sansa stilled in such terror that her heart almost stopped.

What did he just say?

Sansa didn't have a moment to process those words and what they meant as he was dreaming.

The pain hit deep in her belly making her cry out. He yanked her across him, those once brilliant green eyes now grey and wide with anger.

“Who are you?” he demanded in a strange tone. It was his voice, only different.

She scurried back, breaking his hold and fell off the bed. Her wrist burned hotly but it was the pain in her abdomen that had her crying. Her nightdress was wet with blood.

No, not like this.

Lady howled so loud that it could be heard to the heavens and back. Sansa clutched her belly in desperation as Petyr sat up calmly and walked over to the window as if he didn't even see her. The wolf growled, her hackles up, standing between her human mother and the man across the room. It was as if she didn't know him, as if Petyr were a perfect stranger.

What was wrong with him? She sat whimpering on the floor for the longest time as Lady stood her ground as a protector.

“Sparrow...” his voice muttered in the dim light of the moon streaming through the window.

“Petyr, please. Wake up,” Sansa cried, too focused on her own pain to wonder what he was talking about. He was sleepwalking, something he'd never done since she'd known him.

“Here, I'll stay...”

Sansa glanced up as he sat down in the chair by the window. Petyr's head slowly drifted down and suddenly a change came over Lady. Tentatively, the wolf padded closer to him until reaching his hand resting on the arm of the chair.

Another pain hit and Sansa cried out, hoping someone would hear and come to her aid. Lady grabbed at Petyr's hand while growling and tugging him but he wouldn't wake.

“Mummy?”

Alex stood in the doorway, rubbing his eyes when the scene playing out hit the boy like lightning. All Sansa could hear was the high pitched screams of her son when Sarah rushed in. The girl's eyes said everything. Horror at her mistress bleeding on the floor, the boy in tears and the master of house unconscious... *until Lady bit him hard.*

“What in the hell?” he bellowed, ripping his hand from the wolf's mouth.

“Papa! Mummy's dying,” the boy cried.

Petyr shot out of the chair with a jolt of adrenaline to his wife's side. He was her Petyr once again. Whatever, *whoever* he was a moment ago had completely vanished. Carefully, he picked Sansa up and gently laid her on their bed.

“Sarah, take Alex away. Call for Mrs. Ames. The child is coming,” he said calmly even though his hands shook terribly.

Alex would have none of it. He rushed to his mother's side, clutching to her hand wailing in fear.

“Alex,” Petyr shushed and pulled the boy to his chest. “It's all right. Your sister is coming. Mummy is going to be fine. You'll see.” He kissed their son's head and nodded for the maid to take him away. “I promise.”

Sansa huffed at the pain but held Alex's hand.

“Go with Sarah, darling. Mind your father,” she wheezed. Sansa needed Mrs. Ames for there wasn't much time. Their little girl wasn't going to wait.

In no time, the old woman came in followed by two other maids and set the women to work immediately. Sansa felt transported back to the night Alex was born. Everyone had their job but this time it was twice as fast. The loyal housekeeper smiled and nodded and Sansa knew the woman was prepared none the less.

Everything seemed to be working according to plan until Mrs. Ames attempted to usher Petyr from the room. To her horror, he refused to go and sat by Sansa's side on the bed.

“No, I will not let you lock me out this time,” he rumbled. “My place is here.”

A fear like no other washed over Sansa as she glanced at Mrs. Ames in alarm. No, he had to leave. Petyr couldn't be here when she gave birth. Their ruse would be ruined.

Petyr caught the terrified look between the two women and suddenly frowned.

“What is going between you?” his voiced lowered with suspicion.

“Why nothing, my lord. She is having a baby. It's not a husband's place to be here. If you'd only wait patiently in your room and let us tend to her...” Mrs. Ames treaded carefully.

“No, I will not leave her side. I don't care if it's not proper,” Petyr retorted hotly. He was angry last time at being made to leave. He wanted to be there for Alex's birth.

Sansa had hoped that he would be like any other man and wait until he was summoned. Of course, Petyr wasn't like other men and she wanted to die.

“Petyr,” she breathed harshly. “I'm in good hands. It will be fast, you won't have to wait long...”

He clutched her hand and the look on his face was wounded.

“You don't want me here?”

“I didn't say that,” Sansa felt her heart breaking. If this had been under any other circumstances,

she would have been overjoyed that he wanted to stay with her through it all and watch their child being born. But he couldn't be here. He wasn't supposed to be here. Their plan was quickly falling apart. "Go and comfort Alex. He needs his father. He's so scared."

Sansa thought that would surely change his mind when another pain hit hard making her cry out again.

"No, he'll be just fine. Sarah and Lady are with him. My place is here," he kissed her forehead and then looked directly at the other women in the room before driving his point home. "And I'll be damned if I'll be forced out this time."

The tears came at his stubbornness and Sansa knew her plan was dead. There was no way out of Petyr not discovering the truth.

Everything left her mind when wave after wave of pain hit her. The girl was coming fast and there was no time to formulate another strategy. Petyr helped prop Sansa up and supported her with his body as Mrs. Ames told her to bear down. She couldn't believe how quickly this birth was happening. Alex took hours of pained labor. However, their daughter was most impatient to come into this world.

Sansa wished that Petyr was somewhere else even as he whispered words of love and encouragement. He was being so loving and her heart broke at what he did not know. How could she be mad at him right now? He was doing everything Sansa had ever wished from a husband and father.

The bleeding had lessened and Sansa almost longed for the opposite. She should die from child birth. It happened to women all the time. Then she wouldn't have to face Petyr afterward. Sobbing more from the pain in her heart than the child in her belly, Sansa knew she was a true coward.

Voices overlapped between Petyr's support and Mrs. Ames directions. Her body was hot with perspiration, and she felt the child's head finally crown between her legs. Unlike her brother, the girl came with two pushes and it was all over. Sansa collapsed into Petyr and waited for that first cry of a newborn but it didn't come.

The silence was deafening and Sansa looked at Petyr whose face was filled with fear, to the old woman holding the small infant covered in blood. For half a heart-beat, Sansa closed her eyes thinking the child was indeed dead. They had been planning on telling Petyr a lie that the child was stillborn and perhaps it was God or the spirits making that lie a reality for her treachery.

With a slap to the back, the child coughed then cried out loud, full of life. Sansa couldn't even look at her and started bawling. Whether it was from elation or a desperate sadness, she didn't know. She felt Petyr's arms around her, his lips on her tear streaked face as his joy radiated off him. Only none of it made her feel happy.

Petyr took her tears as exhaustion and delight and couldn't know or understand the gravity of what just happened. His being here ruined everything. The girl was alive. There would be no exchange, no lie, no way to take his daughter away without him knowing it all.

Sansa couldn't stop sobbing into her soaked pillow as the women cleaned the small baby as it cried relentlessly.

Just like her brother, her mother thought sadly.

Her husband was the opposite. He was entranced. He kissed her forehead again before leaving her side as Mrs. Ames gently laid the bundle in his arms. It took only a moment and the child stilled into silence. Sansa didn't know what it was that both children took to him in a way that was unusual with fathers.

She was jealous of the connection he had with Alex and now their daughter would be the same. Sansa watched them with tears in her eyes and knew he would hate his wife in the end. The look on his face was pure adoration towards the babe in his arms. He was already in love with his newborn daughter. How could she take her away from him now?

The sight before her was terrible and beautiful at the same time. This is how it should be – their daughter growing up and loving and being loved by her father. Did she know her father held her with such love? Would she ever remember him? Sansa's decision would rob them both of that.

But she will live... the voice reminded her.

The smile on Petyr's face broke her heart when he glanced her way.

I might as well be dead. He will never look at me this way ever again. I am a witch. A monster.

A comforting hand took hers and Sansa knew it was Mrs. Ames. She squeezed back and the silent question was between them.

What do we do now?

It wasn't as though the spirit would just appear and take her. Sansa was supposed to take her to them. How in God's name was she going to do that now? She could see it in her husband's face. This child wasn't leaving his sight. Petyr would kill her or anyone that tried to take his daughter away.

The maids cleaned Sansa up while Petyr cooed over his new child. It was all a haze and when she finally realized they were alone together, Sansa was at a loss for words. He sat down next to her with the baby in his protective embrace and Sansa couldn't even look at them.

"Are you in much pain, sweetling?" his voice asked.

Staring at nothing, she replied with a soft shake of her head.

"She's beautiful. She has your hair," Sansa heard the smile in his tone.

Finally, gazing upon the little thing wrapped securely in soft linen, Sansa felt her heart sink. Yes, she was beautiful. Strands of fine red hair just as Petyr said. Her eyes welled up and swallowed the lump in her throat as he placed the child in her arms.

At first, Sansa didn't want to touch her. If she held her daughter, how would she ever be able to let her go? It would have been so much easier if Mrs. Ames had just taken her away the moment she was born.

To where? You haven't solved the riddle yet, you little fool.

The dream. Somewhere in her dream was the answer but Sansa couldn't think clearly. Petyr was speaking and yet she hadn't heard a single word as she looked at the beautiful little girl. Sansa's heart was heavy when a tiny hand found her mother's finger. Unexpectedly, the girl's eyes opened and Sansa's gasped. No newborn child could possibly have such a brilliant shade of green in their eyes. The girl looked directly at her and Sansa held her breath.

This child knew. Sansa didn't know how to explain it. She could feel it.

And then the girl smiled, filling her mother with wonder. Babies so young as this don't smile. She glanced at Petyr and he couldn't take his eyes off her.

"She has your eyes," Sansa sniffed, and she could feel her heart breaking into a thousand pieces.

"What shall we name her?" he smiled softly.

I don't know. I hadn't planned for this.

Sansa's mind raced and she couldn't think of any name but one.

"Catelyn," she uttered so low that she was afraid he might hear and disapprove. Her mother was his first love but there wasn't a single name that came to mind.

Sansa was afraid to look at him. Maybe he had names in mind. She never bothered asking him. The girl made little gurgling sounds and in Petyr's disquiet, Sansa made the decision.

Name her after a woman worth remembering...

"Catelyn... *Aibhilin.*"

Alex's middle name was chosen carefully and her daughters would have meaning as well.

"You've longed for a girl, and her name is perfect," Petyr said with such love in his voice. He knew, understood and didn't question her at all.

Yes, she had wished for this child for as long as she could remember. Sansa wasn't necessarily disappointed that her first was a boy, but when Mrs. Ames read on her palm that only two children would come... Sansa desperately wanted a girl. A daughter she could fuss over, make pretty dresses, teach her music and art – all the things a lady should be...

The girl closed her eyes and was content in her mother's arms and Sansa had never hated herself more than in this moment. She couldn't rationalize this. Yes, she would live but the torture of knowing she would forever be in another place oblivious to those that loved her was too much.

Her husband kissed her gently and Sansa couldn't stop the hot tears streaming down her face. What was she going to do? If she didn't give her up, they both would burn just as the spirit threatened. How was she supposed to explain this to Petyr? Whether the spirits took her or they burned, he would hate Sansa for eternity for her selfishness.

"Please take her," she rambled. "I can't... please... it hurts too much..."

Mistaking her words for physical pain from childbirth, Petyr nodded sweetly and took the baby without a word and rocked her for a while until the girl was fast asleep. The bassinet was covered in satin and delicate lace as Petyr placed it next to the bed. The baby didn't make a sound and it was too quiet. It was eerie how she didn't cry or make a fuss.

Petyr undressed and laid beside her, ever so careful of her tired and tender body.

"Do you need anything? Is the pain too much?" he asked.

He didn't know how right he was. Sansa thought sadly. It was too much to bear. More than he could ever know or understand. She tried with difficulty to not think of what happened just before the child came. It was as if Petyr shared her dreams.

Mine for yours

He didn't remember any of it. Dear God, he didn't know who she was for a moment. It wasn't until Lady bit him that he came to his senses. It was as if... he was someone else. *Something else.* The thought was terrifying as he lay behind her, fast asleep.

The more Sansa tried to puzzle it out as she did will all her strange, prophetic dreams, the quicker she felt herself drift off. She was so very tired. Turning into Petyr for a more comfortable position, his arms automatically wrapped around her and Sansa released a long, exhausted breath. Safe. She always felt safe in his embrace. His steady breathing was lulling her to sleep but one eye kept careful watch on the cradle next to the bed. Sansa wanted to stay awake in fear to find her gone if she let sleep take her. No, she was supposed to take her to them... but when? Tomorrow? The next day?

A gentle breeze drifted across the room and the whispers of trees buzzed in her ears.

You have until the solstice sun...

When the sun rose, Sansa had not slept a wink. She hadn't slept well since before giving birth. The dark circles were telling as each night passed with long and weary hours. Worry and fear plagued her mind completely and there was no way to snuff it out.

The tray of breakfast was barely touched, for she hadn't the stomach for it. The babe was so quiet, Sansa almost forgot she was there. Unlike her brother, she hardly made a sound. Alex cried relentlessly no matter what Sansa did. Only Petyr seemed to be able to console him. Catelyn was perfectly content in her little bassinet. She didn't cry to be fed, nor to be held. It was as if she didn't care that her mother was consumed with guilt and depression.

Sansa was afraid to hold her. Terrified of creating a bond that would be even more horrible to break when the moment came to give her up. It was all she could do to put the girl to her breast and it didn't go unnoticed.

"I don't understand," his voice echoed from his room. "She hasn't left the bed for a fortnight. She always wanted a girl and yet she barely touches her. It's as though she doesn't want the baby. Every time I try to speak to her, she says she's tired. Something is wrong...she must be ill. I just don't know."

True fear was in his voice and it made Sansa feel all the more monstrous as Sarah took another half-eaten lunch away. What could she say to him now? Beg for his forgiveness at selling their sweet daughter to the spirit world? If he didn't kill her for such a thing, surely he would lock her away for good.

"You have to eat, my dear," Mrs. Ames said, entering the room. "You need to be strong."

Sansa turned on her side away from the old woman.

"What's the point? We're either both dead or I'll be shortly after. I can't tell him, face him... I can't even look him in the eyes. He'll kill me when he finds out," Sansa whimpered.

"Oh child, I have no words of comfort. Sooner or later they're going to come for your daughter," Mrs. Ames sighed heavily. "It's possible we could still find a way, unless you've given up completely."

"Have you seen him with her?" Sansa asked, her voice muffled by the linens. "How can I possibly do that to him? To her?"

Mrs. Ames stood next to Catelyn, gently rocking her. "She'll die. Is that what you want for her? If you don't think they'll do it, you're sorely mistaken. They don't take kindly to false bargains."

"And then what do I do when Petyr takes my son and throws me in an asylum? I'd be better off dead. I can't stand this. The waiting. The knowing. What I'm doing to him and Alex is wrong. I'm not worth saving," she cried softly.

"Just as I told him, it's the effects of childbirth that's making you talk this way. You know what you have to do. Don't let the sadness drag you down. I know that's why you don't want to hold her. You don't want to feel anything because it will only make it harder. Have they told you when or how you're supposed to bring the child to them?"

Sansa released a long, deep breath. For days she had puzzled over the riddle and her dreams. Little by little, she pieced it together and thought she might finally know the answer. However, she didn't dare say anything about Petyr's strange behavior the night Catelyn was born, not to mention he seemed to share her dream.

"I told you how I found Lady," Sansa began.

Mrs. Ames nodded and sat down watching the young mother intently.

"The spirit said to bring her to where the mother is buried at the rise of the sun. In my dreams, I see that tree over and over. Lady's mother is buried at the base of that tree," she explained.

"You saved the wolf and the girl spirit appeared there to protect you. Is the tree on a hilltop?" Mrs. Ames asked.

"Yes," she glanced up at the old woman. "How do you know that?"

"There are ways to get... *there*," she said slowly. "The villagers called them faerie mounds... a burrow, gateway to their world. Lakes, puca pools... there are so many paths if you are shown the way. Now we know where but it's a question of when. It's been weeks since you bore her, and yet here you are. I've been waiting for your instructions but they never came."

Sansa closed her eyes and cleared her throat. If she went through with this, she was going to need Mrs. Ames help.

"The summer solstice," she reluctantly said.

Mrs. Ames calculated quickly, "That's in four weeks' time. I wonder why they are waiting. I expected them to take her the first day. The child is perfectly healthy. If his lordship had stayed away, perhaps..."

The woman pondered it over looking at the baby and sighed. "I think they are giving you time to find a way. Maybe they sense how protective he is right now over the both of you. He won't let her go. That is plain enough. They must want her badly to give you time to bring his guard down. Nothing good will come of it if he finds out...and they seem to know this."

"Why are you so eager to help them?" Sansa wondered suspiciously.

"Eager?" the woman gasped. "I have no loyalties to them. I'm only trying to help you. What else

can you do? It is unfortunate our plan did not work. But that doesn't mean there isn't another way. This whole thing is unfortunate."

"If he finds out beforehand, we both die. He won't believe and she'll burn," Sansa choked up, looking at her daughter. "I'll want to die. He will hate me and I can't live without him or my children. Maybe..."

She observed the woman carefully, remembering her other offer.

"Maybe there's another way you can help me. A tea or tincture... something quick and painless," Sansa mumbled. "I can't let her burn but I can't give her up either. This was a fool's bargain. I can't live with this."

The old woman's face reflected Sansa's torment.

"It doesn't have to happen this way, my dear," she said with such sadness.

"You promised me, remember?" Sansa countered seeing the hesitation in Mrs. Ames eyes. "I'm telling you I can't do this."

"I remember," she answered gazing at the sleeping child, so peaceful and innocent.

The silence in the room was unbearable but Mrs. Ames had not agreed to Sansa's heart wrenching demand.

"I could do it for you... when the day comes. You won't have to burden yourself with such a terrible thing," Mrs. Ames offered. "You could drug him in the night. He won't know or be able to stop you."

Sansa's eyes drifted down to her little baby. This was getting worse by the minute.

"And then what?" she murmured. "What do I tell him when his child disappears? Some marauder in the night stole her away? A ghost or goblin? I know what he's capable of."

"He would never harm you," Mrs. Ames retorted calmly.

"So sure are you? How much would it take to push him over the edge? He'll believe then, won't he? I am an evil witch that sacrificed their child to the Devil for saving my life. Even he has his limits. What do you think he will do to me when that moment comes?" Sansa sighed. "He was right and wrong. We're both monsters."

"Sansa..."

"No, I can't bear to have him know what I've done," she said cutting her off. "I don't want to see his face, the hatred in his eyes. I'm not afraid of death any longer. I'm afraid of my son and husband knowing the truth and loathing me for eternity."

Mrs. Ames picked up Catelyn and the girl took her immediately without fuss. She laid the child in her mother's arms and sat down on the bed.

"Look at her, Sansa. You cannot change what's done. If you wish to die, I will help you. Don't condemn this child. She has fought to live. Whether you believe it or not, you chose life for her even if you still think your choice was a selfish one. No matter what you say, I still cannot believe he will hurt you. After everything you both have been through. No. I don't accept it. I've never seen a man love a woman as he loves you...and he loves his children. I cannot make this decision for you. I fear I cannot change your mind. What I ask is a favor. Consider saving her, giving her a life. If you wish to end yours, I will make it painless and fast. I think it is a mistake, but I will do as you wish," Mrs. Ames lamented.

The guilt was overpowering. The little girl in her arms stretched out and opened her beautiful green eyes. Sansa had never seen a baby with such eyes. They were more brilliant than her fathers. Petyr had touches of grey in his. Catelyn's were a blend of jade and emerald and completely mesmerizing.

How could she be this selfish? Sansa couldn't poison her little baby because of guilt and fear. What Sansa did, she alone would have to atone for. It was her decision and if Petyr hated her till the end of her days, then at least their daughter would survive.

"When do you want it?" Mrs. Ames voice cut through her thoughts, full of despair.

Would it be better to end it all now? Sansa didn't know. Four weeks felt like a lifetime.

"To-tonight," she stuttered in tears.

Sansa didn't notice when Mrs. Ames left or when Petyr came into the room. It was only when Alex bounded inside with Lady in tow, that she took notice of her husband sitting in front of the window. Catelyn was still in her arms when Alex climbed on the bed.

"When do I get to hold her, Mummy?" he squeaked with excitement. Everyone, including him, took to the girl at once. There was no jealousy from her brother as Sansa might have expected.

Looking from Petyr in the chair, quiet and expressionless to her son, Sansa couldn't stay sullen. The dark circles under Petyr's eyes were prominent. He still wasn't sleeping well. He was worried and it was killing her inside. If this was her last night with them, she wanted it to be cheerful.

Managing to paint a smile on her face, Sansa gestured Alex to come closer to sit by her side.

"Here," she gently placed his sister in his little arms. "Hold her head."

Catelyn didn't cry at all. She watched her brother as he smiled and played with her tiny hand.

"Was I this small, Mummy?"

Tears were welling up again and Sansa wondered if she would ever stop crying.

"You were a bit bigger, my love."

"Do you love her the most now?" he innocently burst out and Sansa fearfully glanced to Petyr.

At that, Petyr finally rose and brought his attention to them on the bed. The smile did not reach his eyes as he sat down and ruffled Alex's hair.

"That's a silly question. We love you both equally..." his eyes caught her own and they were intense. "Don't we?"

Sansa's heart was pounding but she couldn't look away. She couldn't have read his mind if she tried.

"Yes, very silly," she whispered and took the moment to break her husband's stare. "She's very little and fragile. That is all. You were too once. She just needs extra care right now. I love you both the same."

She kissed her son's head and inhaled his scent. Some days she could remember every detail of his birth and others, it was a hazy memory. With Alex, Sansa had so many memories to fill her heart. Would she forget her daughter in time? Her red hair, her father's eyes, that smile...

From the corner of her eye, she could see Petyr watching her curiously. He knew something was wrong. No matter what Mrs. Ames told him, Sansa knew better. She knew him and how his mind worked. Petyr would figure things out eventually.

"Can I have my supper up here with you tonight, Mummy?" Alex asked sweetly, still holding his sister.

"*May, I...*" Petyr gently corrected him. Always and ever the teacher, she inwardly smiled.

"Yes, you may. I would like that," Sansa replied and took Catelyn back from her son.

"Papa and Lady, too?"

Sansa looked up at Petyr and swallowed. The way he looked at her, Sansa thought he could see right through her façade.

"Yes, that would be lovely," she whispered.

It was strange how normal everything felt even if for only a couple hours. Petyr and Alex ate at the little table while Sansa stayed in bed. She watched them and the love Petyr had for his children was undeniable. He was a different man all together.

Alex and Lady played for a while and when the boy finally tucked out, falling asleep in front of the fire, the wolf immediately went to Catelyn. She sniffed inside and the girl gurgled and squealed without a shred of fear of the animal leaning into her cradle. All at once, Lady sat and guarded the baby. Maybe the loyal wolf knew she needed protection. For the first time, Sansa wasn't sure if the danger was from unseen spirits or from her own mother.

Petyr lifted his daughter into his embrace and she was so small in his hands. This time a genuine smile lit up his face and Sansa felt such a remorse for what was to come. He rocked her and hummed a sweet tune and the child reacted to everything about him. Unlike with Alex, Sansa felt no jealousy as she watched father and daughter. Pure joy radiated off Petyr and Sansa knew if there was one thing he was meant to be, it was a father.

The crickets evening song drifted up from the garden below while the early summer breeze filled the room with the scent of honeysuckle and the coming rain. There was something else on the air, a strange humming as if trees were calling her name. Everything smelled clean and fresh and Sansa closed her eyes only for a moment until Petyr's soft chuckle caught her attention.

He was completely captivated by the baby in his arms. Her tiny hand grasped his nose and the two were in their own world.

"My little Caty," Petyr's sing-song voice called her in that deep timbre of his. "You will have everything your little heart desires."

Given the chance, Sansa knew he would spoil her to the point of ridiculousness. Most men wanted sons and she knew he loved Alex to heaven and back but watching him with their daughter... he was completely smitten. Sansa could see it all now. Petyr would take her with him everywhere he went. He would annoy everyone with his beautiful daughter. He would protect her with everything he had. God help the young man that attempted to court the girl. Yet, none of it was meant to be and it was a tragedy.

Despite what he had done his entire life, all of it could be swept away for the love he had for his children. Sansa knew he would die for them. He would kill for them. Even if Mrs. Ames drugged him, he would still wake to find his beloved child gone and Sansa didn't know how she could face him and tell him the truth. Knowing what he did to Duncan and Myranda and God knows who else, Sansa wasn't confident like Mrs. Ames. She honestly did not know what he would do.

Sarah brought in Sansa's evening tea, setting it next to her bed. Next to her teacup, a tiny vile lay in wait.

"Mrs. Ames said you wanted something to ease your pain and help you sleep," the maid said, fixing her mistress's tea as she always took it.

Petyr gave Sansa a look of concern and questioning as he sat near the open window rocking Caty to sleep. Sansa dared not look at him, worried he might see everything in her eyes.

"Thank you, there will be nothing more tonight," she said and the maid left with a soft click of the

door.

"Do you need me to send for the doctor?" Petyr asked gently, apprehension lacing his words.

"No. Mrs. Ames is taking care of me."

"Sweetling, I'm very worried about you," he stated matter of factly but kept his attention on Catelyn.

"I know," she answered and wondered what to say. "It hasn't been easy. I don't know how to explain it."

"You're melancholy all the time. I thought she would have given you happiness. I know how much you wanted her. What has changed since Caty was born? Have I done something?"

"No. Of course not," she replied a little too quickly and his eyebrow rose in disbelief.

"Then what is it? I know something is wrong. Mrs. Ames says sometimes mothers become despondent after giving birth but I can't understand why you would be so gloomy when you've wanted a daughter for so long. You never want to hold her, at least not when I'm around."

Let him believe what he wants to believe.

"I don't know how to explain it, Petyr. I just feel exhausted."

Sansa sipped from her cup and tried not to look at the vile on the table.

"You're in pain?" he asked remembering Sarah's words.

"A bit. It's just discomfort. She makes a tonic to help me sleep. Like she used to do when I first came here," Sansa lied easily but Petyr had a strange look in his eyes as he glanced down at their baby. "It won't harm her, if that's what you're wondering."

"Alright, if you say so," he said but his tone did not agree with his words.

"Don't you trust me?"

God, why did she ask him that? What was wrong with her? She might as well just tell him the vile was filled with poison.

Petyr didn't answer right away and she began to panic.

"Yes. I trust you," he breathed with a tone of finality.

Do you? I don't believe you.

"Good because I trust you. I've always trusted you," she replied evenly.

Petyr chuckled and placed Catelyn in her bassinet before walking to the table where the hot tea waited.

"That wasn't always true, little witch."

This was the first time Sansa hated that nickname he gave her years ago. It was humorous but now she felt like an evil witch in the faerie tales her father used to read to her and Arya.

"Be as it may, there is no one I trust more than you," she tried hard not to sound overly convincing.

Her nerves were getting the best of her as she watched him fix a cup of tea. The vile was so very near and her fingers twitched. Petyr was a seasoned gambler, and if he looked at her, he would know she was hiding something.

To her horror, he picked up the vile and removed the stopper. His nose twitched for it must not have had a pleasant scent. Lady perked her ears and walked over to him. Never had this animal ever bared her teeth at him, but she growled and Petyr playfully swatted her away.

"I haven't slept well either. Not for days," he admitted and Sansa held her breath as he studied the vile. "Does it work? It must if you're willing to drink it considering how rancid it smells."

Sansa's mouth was dry as sand, "It's not good for a man to take."

"Why ever not?" he laughed. "Men need to sleep too. Granted, I'm not in pain. Well, except for the headaches but those are bearable."

Her mind raced as she watched his hand the entire time.

"It has herbs that are meant for women. Mrs. Ames makes it especially for me...in my condition," she stuttered.

"You said you used to take this years ago. You weren't a mother then," he eyes narrowed a bit but then he grinned and he deliberately poured a bit into his teacup. "I doubt it will do me harm. However, I don't think even whiskey could dilute the taste, but as long as it's effective..."

Before Sansa could scream at him not to drink it, Lady jumped up and knocked the cup and saucer out of his hands. The china shattered on the floor as Petyr cursed at the wolf. The vile had spilled across the table and Sansa almost fainted. Catelyn cried for the first time in days and the commotion had a maid rushing into the room.

"Damn it," he cursed again, wincing from the scalding tea.

"I'll clean it up, my lord," the maid quickly started picking up the broken pieces before anyone could step on them. "Do you wish for more tea to be brought up?"

"No," Sansa answered just as quick. "We'll be fine."

"I'll finish up so it doesn't stand the rug," the girl said as Petyr walked into their bathroom.

Sansa got out of bed and picked up her daughter to quiet her down. Pacing the room, Sansa was in shock at what just happened.

He could have died... If it hadn't been for Lady...

Catelyn hiccupped and Sansa stilled, looking at the baby searching for her breast. Suddenly, she remembered a dream from long ago. The glass doll at her chest and she was sitting alone in the cold library.

You were going to kill yourself and your child tonight. You could have killed him as well.

Sansa felt sick. What was she doing?

"M'lady, do you need anything more?" the girl's voice startled her.

"No, goodnight," she forced a smile and waited for the door to close.

Catelyn made sucking noises and feeding her was a welcome distraction. She could hear Petyr washing up in the next room as she brought the child to her breast. Lady sniffed at the spill on the rug and Sansa shooed her away.

"Lady, no," she ordered and immediately the wolf obeyed. Sansa didn't know how strong the poison was but she didn't want Lady to succumb to it either. She opened the door and let the wolf out. "Go sleep with Alex tonight."

When Petyr returned, Sansa had already crawled back into bed nursing the girl.

"Are you burned?" she asked.

"Nothing to worry about."

"Do you want some of my tea?" she offered knowing it was safe to drink.

"I think I've had enough tea tonight," he smiled and looked around for Lady. "She's never done that before."

"Will you stay with me tonight? I know I've been distant," Sansa changed the subject.

"If you wish me to," he gazed at her curiously.

When she knew he was asleep, Sansa still lay awake. Tonight could have been a disaster. Petyr had to live. Alex needed him. Catelyn wasn't going to die just because her mother was consumed with guilt and fear. A month is what she had left. She thought they would have taken the baby the first day just as Mrs. Ames said. Now, she would have a month of grace. She would ease Petyr's mind and when the time came, their baby would live on and Sansa would make her final decision.

The first week passed and she pretended to be happier. She dressed and went downstairs every day. Petyr was wary at first, always watching to make sure she was alright. She hadn't played the piano in months and it couldn't have been more soothing. One afternoon Petyr sat beside her and it was as if they had gone back in time when it was only the two of them alone in the world.

Petyr was the tutor and she the pupil once again. She would tinker with a tune and he would turn it into something beautiful. Something that was only for them. Catelyn would lay quietly and Sansa felt she was just listening. It was so strange how still this child was. Lady was constantly at her side, guarding her and Sansa didn't know what to make of it. Like the child, it was as if they *knew*. The voices on the wind moved in and out, just as it drew Sansa's attention, both Lady and Catelyn seemed to hear them too.

The summer days were warm and the first time Sansa took her baby outside it took her breath away. Whatever happened in that fire, there was a bond stronger than mother and child. Something else had been created. A oneness with nature? Sansa didn't know what to make of it. She could feel the cool grass under her feet, but it was something more. A connection.

Catelyn responded to everything, especially Lady. The wolf acted like a mother to this human child. Lady played with and was always protective of Alex but this was different. Lady was tuned into everything – the baby, her and even Petyr. Maybe Sansa wasn't alone in this as she feared.

The happiness was real and she saw it every day on Petyr's face. That smile reached his eyes every time. As much as she tried to hide it, it was hard to pretend that everything was going to be fine. But every day, she could feel it. Something was pulling her away, further to the edge of the gardens. Her wrist would itch and tickle as if they were reminding her of what was to come.

As the days and weeks passed, the feeling grew stronger and stronger. The trees would whisper to her from the wind rushing through the leaves. She was being drawn to the woods as if being pulled by an invisible string around her middle. Sansa didn't want to give up her baby but each day, she found herself wandering further to the edge of the grounds. Time and time again, she couldn't remember how she walked that far with Catelyn in her arms until she reached the water mills and Petyr came flying to her side.

"Sansa!" he yelled and she finally pulled from her stupor and blinked at him.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking up at him on his horse.

"*Wrong?* I've been calling you for an hour. Looking for you. What are you doing all the way out here?" he growled, climbing down from his horse.

Sansa glanced behind him and realized how far she wandered with Catelyn in her arms and Lady

dutifully at her side.

“Oh. I just wanted to take a walk. It’s so beautiful out today... I didn’t realize...” she muttered as Petyr looked her over as if she were dazed and confused.

“You’ve had too much sun, I think. Come on, I’m taking you home,” he grumbled, tucking Catelyn safely in his arms. They barely made it onto the terrace when a terrible burning engulfed her arm. Letting Petyr walk ahead of her, she glanced down and the mark was bright red.

Like a child, Petyr sent Sansa to her room and it wasn’t long until Mrs. Ames came calling upon her patient once more. She applied cool compresses and was too quiet for Sansa’s liking.

“You feel it too, don’t you?” she asked pointedly.

“Yes,” Mrs. Ames replied. “I would exercise caution if I were you, child. You’re arousing his attentions again.”

“I can’t help it. Sometimes, like today, I have no idea how I got so far from the house. And she’s always with me. Every time.” Sansa said looking at the empty cradle. Petyr took her while Mrs. Ames was tending to his wife.

“The closer the solstice comes, the stronger the urge will be. The harder it will be to resist,” the old woman explained as she wrung out a cool cloth, putting it to Sansa’s forehead.

“You don’t have to do this,” Sansa pulled the cloth away. “He’s not watching and I’m perfectly fine.”

“Are still going to go through with it?”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?” Sansa sighed and rose from the bed. Lady was playing with Alex outside her window as the lace curtain billowed in the summer breeze.

“I just want to be prepared. You haven’t told me what you want me to do,” Mrs. Ames joined her by the window.

The trees and bees were singing a sweet tune, a song to come and join them.

“Can you hear them?” Sansa wondered aloud.

Mrs. Ames had a strange look on her face as she looked out across the gardens towards the woods.

“Sometimes,” she sighed. “I’ll hear my name on the wind or just sweet mutterings that no one else understands. I try not to hear them, my dear. It’s better that way.”

She didn’t say anything more and clearly the woman had no intention of talking about her experience. It filled Sansa with dread. She wanted to believe Catelyn would be happy and live a long life, but Mrs. Ames came back. Sansa glanced at her dresser where the vial was hidden. They still had a way out, both of them.

“Just as you said, we will need to drug him,” Sansa changed the subject. “It’s better that he doesn’t know anything until it’s done. Will you promise me one thing?”

“Anything, my dear,” the woman took Sansa’s hand.

“Watch over him,” she said gazing at her son below in the garden. “He adores Sarah. Do what we can to keep her and William. When it’s finished, I fear the worst. Petyr and Alex will need people they trust.”

“You speak as though you’re already dead,” Mrs. Ames lowered her voice.

“I died months ago,” Sansa breathed. “I have thought of every conceivable explanation to tell him afterwards. The truth won’t matter because he won’t believe it.”

“You don’t know that for certain,” the old woman replied.

Sansa thought back on the last dream she had before giving birth to Catelyn. The way Petyr acted as if he were someone else. They shared a dream. She was sure of it.

Mine for yours

She didn’t imagine it. Petyr said those words. He didn’t know who she was and Sansa vaguely remembered previous dreams. *He needed to remember.* Remember what? How she sold their daughter away? Why was she wearing his ring? Was he giving it to her because he didn’t want to be married to her anymore?

I don’t have a wife

Her greatest fear was that ultimately he would hate her and leave taking her son away. Then she would have nothing to live for. It was better to end it soon. She should have died on the pyre. At least this way, her daughter would live.

She couldn’t tell him. He would try to save them both. In the end, Petyr would be forced to watch them burn again and Sansa couldn’t let that happen. She couldn’t put Catelyn through that.

Here I’ll stay

Yes, Petyr needed to be here. He had to take care of their son. Most of her visions had come true, hadn’t they? All of them told her, Petyr was meant to stay. He would forget her. Maybe he would marry again. She didn’t want to think about that. She couldn’t bear his hate any more than the idea of him loving another woman...a woman Alex would call mother one day...

Sansa couldn’t even imagine it. She didn’t want him to become a bitter, old man either but the thought of him hating her was too much.

"I know him," she countered. "Maybe better than he knows himself. He loves me. I believe that deep in my soul. But love isn't always enough, is it? If I tell him now, he'll lock us both away and we'll burn, then he'll blame himself. If I tell him after, he'll assume I've gone mad and killed our child. His logic will win out. He will still love me when he locks me away. He will tell me he loves me when he kills me for killing his child. Whether by his hand or my own... it will be a mercy."

Sansa turned and looked at her loyal friend, "Are you still willing to help me?"

For the first time, tears filled the eyes of the older woman and Sansa did the only thing she could and embraced her.

"Thank you."

For three days Sansa heard the calling – in her dreams, in the song of the birds, the wind through the trees...

Every day she had to stop herself from taking Catelyn to the tree. She could feel Petyr's eyes on her. He watched her every move. In those weeks, Sansa managed to completely fail in distancing herself from her daughter and easing her husband's fears. He rarely let her out of his sight.

Now, it was only hours away.

Sansa spent the day with Alex, making everything about him. She loved and kissed on him until he was tired of it. He wouldn't understand tomorrow. No one would. Even if Petyr never questioned her, everyone would wonder what happened to the little baby.

She was the Red Witch, wasn't she? They would probably say she sacrificed it to the Devil. The woman that walked away from a bonfire and lived in the haunted house by the lake. The insane duchess locked away in the tower or murdered by her crazed husband. Who would blame him? Probably not a soul. Petyr handled ridicule and slander his entire life. If he truly hated her, it wouldn't bother him in the slightest.

It was Alex she worried about. He was still so young. Maybe Petyr would take him far away from here. It would be for the best. He would probably hate her too for leaving him. She promised she would never leave and yet tomorrow Sansa would probably never see her son again.

Mrs. Ames was right. The desire, the need to take Catelyn to the woods was overwhelming. She had to keep her mind in the present. Focus on her son and husband. When the time came, they would be fast asleep with dreams of a perfectly joyful day.

It was a perfect day, too. Every chance she had, she took Petyr's hand or found a way into his arms. Even though he was more than affectionate, there was always that little look he gave her that said volumes. He still wasn't sure.

For the longest time, she sat on a woven blanket on the cool grass with Catelyn while Alex played with Lady endlessly. Sansa could sense everything. The buzzing of bumblebees yards away, the chirp of two finches by the lake and the fluttering of butterfly wings.

Her wrist burned again and as she looked down, the sight was ethereal. Butterflies were everywhere. They flitted in a song on the gentle breeze and they were all around Catelyn. She giggled and reached for them, one even landing on her arm.

It was then Sansa saw it, a tiny red mark on the inside of her arm. She had bathed the child a hundred times and never noticed it. Looking at her own, the mark was red and aching on Sansa's wrist. Her daughter was marked and a hopelessness washed over her. They marked her in the womb. She was theirs and Sansa's heart dropped into her stomach.

It was meant to be.

Sansa insisted putting Alex to bed, running her fingers through his hair. It has been such a busy day, that he fell asleep almost as fast as his head hit the pillow. Even as he slept, Sansa sat there taking it all in. Her first born. Her son. She would love him forever.

The house was quiet and the full moon lit up so brightly, that Sansa didn't need a candle. She wandered around finding a little memory in every room before making her way back to her bedroom. Sarah helped her undress, and surprising the girl, Sansa hugged her and thanked her for all she had done these past years and for being so loving to her son.

She could hear Petyr bathing and took the moment to herself in her room. It was a beautiful room. So many wonderful memories. Both of her children were born here. The first time she and Petyr made love was in this bed. The idea of going down to the pool one last time was enticing but she didn't want to raise any suspicions and she knew Petyr was still questioning her every move.

Mrs. Ames asked how she wanted it done – meaning the drugging of her husband. He had almost completely stopped drinking but if she offered him a nightcap he would surely know something was strange. Instead, it would be tea tonight.

The housekeeper said she would come for the child just before dawn, but Sansa declined. It was her duty as a mother, not Mrs. Ames. She wouldn't lie and wait as another woman delivered her child as some package. No, this was her doing. Plus, she was worried for Mrs. Ames. She didn't want Petyr to have any reason to think the loyal woman was involved. She didn't deserve that and Petyr would need her once Sansa was gone. No one understood Harrenhal like Mrs. Ames.

The tea was hot and ready and Catelyn was already asleep when Petyr came into the room. He looked more handsome than ever. Maybe it was because this was the last time he would look at

her with such love. Petyr had changed greatly since she first met him and yet he was still the same. So much had happened between them in such a short time that most lovers didn't have in a lifetime.

"You're staring, my lady," he smirked. It had been so long since he attempted anything that resembled flirtation.

Sansa wrapped her arms around his middle and held him tight.

"I almost forgot how handsome you are, my lord," she flirted back and he chuckled, holding her to him.

"I think your eyesight is failing you, sweetling, or your memory is worse for wear."

"My memory and eyes are perfect, thank you. I *am* much younger than you," she quipped and he stifled a bark of laughter knowing the child slept nearby.

"You are cheerful today," he kissed the top of her head and she held him firmly.

"Very happy," she leaned back and smiled at him. "It was a perfect and lovely day, wasn't it? I wish every day could be like this."

"It can be," Petyr tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear. "You know I want nothing more than to make you happy."

Sansa smiled brilliantly not wanting him to see her heart breaking inside. This, tonight, would be the last time he loved her without a care in the world.

"You'll stay tonight, won't you?" she asked walking over to the tea.

"You know I will, if you want me to," he said following her but checking on Catelyn first.

"Why wouldn't I?"

Sansa poured the tea in which she already added her witch's brew to make him sleep.

"Sweetling, you think I don't know you?" he chuckled softly and it stilled her hand.

When his arms circled her waist, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"I know when you don't want me near. I suppose it's better to ask than to assume," he sighed into her hair and she automatically leaned back into him. It had been so long since she felt desire for him. "Perhaps I just want to hear you say it."

"Say what?" she asked as her heart pounded.

"I want you," he kissed her neck. "To stay, to lie with me, to hold me... love me..."

It didn't matter that she had given birth over a month ago, the ache between her legs was raging and he had only kissed her neck.

"The tea is getting cold," she said stupidly. He needed to drink it. He needed to go to sleep.

Petyr turned her around and his eyes were dark as his hands caressed her back.

"I'm not thirsty for tea, my little witch."

Sansa couldn't deny herself and kissed him to point of fainting. How could she have forgotten this? She had to have him, just for one more night. She would make it all worth it.

Breaking his kiss, she took his hand and pulled him towards his bedroom.

"I don't want to wake her," Sansa whispered. "We'll keep the door open."

Petyr didn't need any persuasion. It had been ages since they were last together at the Eyrie and the hunger in his eyes had her core pulsing.

His room was pitch black except for the moonlight streaming in narrow beams. It just enough to see and Sansa was grateful. Her tummy wasn't smooth and taut and the embarrassment of not having that slender body that would inflame his desire, wanted her to keep in the shadows.

One lace after another, she slowly undressed him. They had just enough time and Sansa did not want to rush it. She wanted to feel and see all of him. His lips found every pulse point as those slender fingers brushed her nightdress to the floor.

The moment his bare body touched hers, it was clear Petyr desired her and Sansa's shyness disappeared. It wasn't her young body but her that he coveted. He wasn't young anymore either but it didn't matter. She wanted all of him. Sansa felt his need and it was all she could do not to push him down on the bed.

Petyr was a patient lover. They hadn't touched each other in months and he wanted to savor every moment. His hands traveled down her back, until one slowly kneaded her fuller bum, grinding their hips together. His mouth tasted every inch of skin from Sansa's ear to her collarbone. Every nip, lick sent chills down her spine and stoked the fire where she craved him to be.

When she finally moaned his name, the groan that erupted from his throat was pure lust. Petyr hiked her thigh to his hip, letting her feel the full extent of his desire as it slid against her wet folds.

"Tell me you love me still," he hissed and Sansa wanted to cry and slap him at the same time.

Of course, she loved him. She never stopped loving him, wanting him. Yet, he was asking for reassurance. How could she blame him? He probably thought she hated him for the longest time. Even if she did for a time, Sansa couldn't deny this love they had. It was a mad love. Something they would never be able to fully understand.

"I've always loved you," she tried to hold back the tears. This wasn't the moment for tears for they had very little time left.

Pushing him back until he sat on the bed, Sansa straddled him and kissed his fears away. This is what they needed. No words. Just love, if only for tonight.

Petyr lavished her breasts with attention until she was mewling. Occasionally, they would both look to the open door, hoping the child next door wouldn't hear them. Before having children, they didn't care who heard them screaming each other's name. When he tried to angle himself to slip inside her, she stopped him briefly. The look on his face was anguish, thinking she had changed her mind.

"I want you on top of me," she whispered and he smiled.

Once on her back, Petyr sat on his haunches and studied her for moment. Her hands immediately went to her wrinkled little belly and he frowned as he leaned down.

"You are the mother of my children and the most beautiful woman I've even seen," he breathed in her ear before kissing down her neck and nuzzling between her breasts which were full and tender.

He didn't stop and traveled down until his head rested gently on her tummy. He spread her legs and let his hand dip in between, feeling her slick arousal. Those hands were magic in their blissful ministrations as he worked her over until she was thrusting up to meet his fingers. When his head moved down and lips finally claimed her, it was all Sansa could do not to yell out.

She had barely caught her breath as his mouth descended upon hers feverishly. Petyr tasted of her and his tongue matched the movement of his hips, asking to come home. Sansa opened herself, grasping his lower back. The moment he filled her had Sansa shaking a second time. They were meant for each other in every way. She belonged to him completely.

It was slow and tender, feeling every part of his body on and inside of hers. The summer night was warm and their bodies wet with perspiration. It wasn't long before Sansa wrapped her legs around his narrow waist urging him to go faster. She loved having him on top when they made love, the weight of his body, that feeling of being ravaged by him – letting him take control.

He loved it, she could tell. His face full of concentration and desire as he thrust harder and faster. She knew him so well. Knew when he was close. She could feel the beginning of the end and thrust back hard meeting his hips each time. Now the chase was on, that burning and pulsating need driving them both mad with lust.

"Look at me," he grunted, taking her arm and wrapping it around his neck. Their face just inches from each other. She could die right now from the look in his eyes. It was all consuming as if touching his soul to hers.

It was a silent scream when it hit. Her body clenched his but he never stopped and never looked away. Again, her body went rigid and again when finally, she couldn't stand it any longer and brought his mouth to hers. A few more thrusts and Petyr growled against her neck, pulsing inside of her.

Sansa loved his body on hers. She wanted to hold him inside her forever, claiming him. His chest heaved as she caressed his sweaty back. Oh, how she wanted to wake in the morning curled inside his embrace – to hear him tell her everything would be alright.

Instead, she all she could do was hold him. Petyr was the father of her children and the love of her life and in only a few hours it would change forever. Right now, she would bask in his love for the last time.

Petyr rolled off her but only long enough to pull practically on top of him. Her breath was hot against his skin but he didn't care as he drew small circles along her spine. He was holding her and nothing else mattered. Her fingers played with the fine hairs on his chest and she could feel him getting drowsy.

"If everything had been equal in this world when you were younger," she wondered. "What would you have liked to have been?"

She felt him kiss the side of her head and smile.

"You mean a profession other than mischievous nobleman bent on bringing down a dynasty?" he japed. "Everything else seems so mundane."

"Seriously," she teased gently. "I want to know. A musician perhaps?"

"Hmmm, so it's Beethoven you would have preferred as a husband, is it?" he teased back but then became quiet, as if seriously mulling over her question. "You know I don't like playing for an audience. Just you. But perhaps...yes, that would not have been a terrible profession. You would have been married to a pauper, I fear."

"I don't care. As long as it's you," she snuggled into him. "You should write down those songs, I would like that."

"Anything you wish," he yawned.

This was better than any drugged tea, she smiled but then frowned almost as quick. Now it was only going to be harder to do what had to be done. Sansa wasn't sure of the time when she glanced at the window and a faint blue was far off in the distance. Suddenly, her wrist burned with a deep fire and she knew it was time as she wiped away the emerging tears threatening to spill.

Just as she began to pull from him, Catelyn cried from the next room and gave Sansa a timely escape. Sleepily, Petyr dragged her back to him and it took all the will she could muster to deny him.

"Petyr, she's hungry," she whispered and kissed his lips softly.

"So is her father," he groaned, trying to pull her down with him.

"You're insatiable," Sansa shook her head with a half-smile. "She'll keep crying the rest of the night..."

"Hmph, I knew you loved her more than me," Petyr's devilish grin turned into yawn. He would fall asleep in no time.

"You have no idea how much I love you," she breathed more to herself but he didn't seem to hear her anyway. Leaning down, she kissed him longingly on the lips. She wanted to remember him this way – completely at peace. "Close your eyes, I'll be back before you know it."

Lazily, Petyr's lips landed upon her hand and Sansa knew if she didn't leave now, she would lose her resolve and all would go to hell. At the doorway, she took one last look and her heart felt like it would die. The tears came and Sansa covered her mouth as to not make a sound and closed the door.

The second she picked Catelyn up, she stopped crying but her mother was practically sobbing instead.

"Mummy?" a tired voice called from her doorway.

Alex was rubbing his eyes and Sansa was filled with fear. He had to go back to sleep or he would end up waking Petyr.

"I had a bad dream..."

Sansa laid his sister back down and thankfully she didn't start crying again. The boy came and latched his arm around his mother's waist.

"It was only a dream, everything is alright," she cooed and drew him onto her bed but the boy sniffled and Sansa's heart broke in two. "What did you dream, darling?"

"They took you away again. You left me in the dark and I couldn't find you."

That did it, the flood gates opened and Sansa hauled her son into her arms. She couldn't imagine how terrible it must have been for him the day the gold coats came. Now, she was going to abandon him again and it tore Sansa to pieces. How could she leave now?

Perhaps that's what Petyr was trying to tell her that night they shared her dream. He knew and would understand. She didn't have to die. Sansa could come home before Alex awoke.

"Sssh, my love. I'm here. I'll never leave you. Do you know why?"

Alex shook his head tearfully at his mother.

"Because I'm here. Always," and she pointed to his heart. "And you are here." Sansa pointed to her own. "So is Papa, and Catelyn."

A blue haze was on the horizon and Sansa knew she had very little time left as she held her son.

"Here, drink this," and reached for the cold tea next to the bed. "It will help you sleep. You can stay in my bed, would you like that?"

He nodded and obediently drank the bitter tea, wincing a bit at the taste. Sansa was taken back to that day in Petyr's dressing room. He was so scared and when Mrs. Ames put the cloth to his nose, he fell limp in the woman's arms. Sansa was sick with fear that would be the last time she would ever see him. Now he lay in her lap as she stroked his silken hair, so like his fathers. She was the worst mother imaginable. Her own mother, whose name was given to her daughter, would be ashamed.

When Mrs. Ames opened the door, the boy was already tucked into bed and Sansa didn't know what to do. She didn't bother dressing as she put on her warm wrapper. The morning light was growing and Sansa knew they would barely make as it was before the sun peaked over the hillside. They couldn't take the horses and wake the stable boys. Sansa didn't want to implicate Mrs. Ames any more than she had to for the woman's own safety.

Swaddling her daughter as tears streamed down her cheeks, the girl made not a sound. Lady whined and Sansa glanced back at Petyr's door. She didn't want him to hear and shushed the wolf. Lady growled and it shook Sansa to the core. She never disobeyed her before nor growled. Even she knew what was happening was wrong.

"You have to stay, do you hear me?" Sansa commanded harshly and every word was a slash to her heart.

Without looking back, Sansa closed the door and followed Mrs. Ames down the stairs. The woman handed her another small vial and Sansa knew what it was.

"You still have a choice. You don't have to use it," the old woman opened the terrace door leading to the gardens.

Sansa thought back to her sleeping son and husband. *Maybe, just maybe...*

Don't you trust me?

Yes, I trust you.

If he trusted her, why couldn't she trust him to believe her?

Because this is the ultimate test of love. Forgiving the unforgivable and you don't believe he can. You really don't believe in him or that he believes in you. Without trust, there is no love.

“We must go now, child. The dawn won’t wait,” Mrs. Ames said.

“Lady, be quiet,” Petyr muttered in his sleep. Why in God’s name was that wolf acting up the last few days? Ever since she bit him the night Sansa gave birth, she had been out of sorts. She never bit anyone since the day they brought her home.

The wolf whined and cried relentlessly while scratching at the door. Petyr thought for sure she would wake the baby. Angrily, he got up and strode to the door wondering why Sansa closed it. The moment it opened, Lady charged in jumping all over him.

“Get down, damnit,” he hushed worried he would wake everyone up. “What in the world is the matter with you lately?”

Lady rushed over to his window and started barking and Petyr had enough. He glanced at the bed wondering how Sansa could sleep through such a ruckus finding it empty.

She must have fallen asleep feeding the baby, he smiled to himself.

Petyr put on his dressing gown and walked back into her room. Oddly, Alex was sound asleep in her bed but no Sansa. He must have come in the middle of the night, Petyr deduced. Glancing around the room, Sansa was nowhere to be found. When he moved to the cradle, even worse, the baby was gone too.

“Alex,” Petyr shook him gently. “Wake up. Where is your mother?”

The boy mumbled but did not wake as Lady ran back into the room barking like a mad dog. She pawed at the window and Petyr thought that the damn animal was going to jump when he made his way over. A heavy mist lay across the garden but what was unmistakable were the two figures rushing across the lawn in the dim light.

“Sansa!” his voice called out before even thinking and the figure stopped. Their eyes met and she mouthed something while tucking a bundle under her wrapper. She was only in her nightdress and wrapper and he Petyr knew she had Catelyn with her. Had she finally lost her mind? Someone was with her. A woman. Petyr had no idea what to think.

What the hell is going on in this house?

He dressed quickly and flew down the stairs leaving Alex asleep in his mother’s room. Lady didn’t wait as Petyr crossed the garden to the stables. She headed out in the direction Sansa had gone and his fury was taking over as he woke one of the boys to help him saddle his horse. He would be damned if he was going to chase after them on foot all the way to the water mills. This wandering had turned to walking in her sleep. Why she had the baby was beyond his reasoning.

Just then a chill went through Petyr. Every time Sansa wandered off, it was in that direction and always with the baby in her arms. For the first time, even with all the ghostly nonsense before they were married, Petyr felt true fear in his wife’s sanity.

No, she wouldn’t hurt Catelyn... would she?

Petyr hated himself for even thinking it but that fear was growing stronger in his mind and he couldn’t let it go. Sansa’s detachment since birth, her depression, the strange wanderings, and even the abrupt change in disposition the last week or so, suddenly had his heart racing. Even Lady’s strange behavior seemed to be making sense now and it filled him with alarm.

He rode out at break neck speed and couldn’t see them anywhere in the distance. Why in the world did she come out here so early in the morning? It wasn’t even daybreak yet. The water mills were just ahead and his eyes searched all along the river bank leading from the lake.

“Sansa!”

His voice roared but she was nowhere to be seen. Riding over to the lake’s shore, he searched for her or the baby in the cold water.

Where are you?

“SANSA!” his voice almost broke from the strain.

“Forgive me.”

Dear God, he saw her. Just as in her dream of the lone figure in her bedroom window. He would come. He would find her. Terror and heartbreak seeped from every pore and without a word, she ran.

The light was growing and Sansa could hear that buzzing in her ears. Mrs. Ames could barely keep pace with the young mother but it didn’t matter. She had to get there before he followed. And he would follow. Sansa knew it deep in her soul. Petyr was coming.

She passed the watermills, and glanced back to the house.

I don't see him. Where is he?

The moment she entered the edge of the woods, Sansa could barely run for the tears were blinding. The thicket was dense and the air was thick with fog from the lake. Hardly being able to see, Sansa knew they were close. She could feel it.

The air cleared and there it stood, that great oak tree on a small hill. She felt the call, it pulled her forward until another broke her from that trance. Her name on the wind but it wasn't the spirits, it wasn't the trees... it's was Petyr's voice.

The sky grew brighter and a fiery glow appeared but it wasn't the sun. The little girl stood there with her red hair flaming, holding out her hands.

Mrs. Ames huffed and wheezed and Sansa didn't realize how far behind she left the elderly woman. The look of her face was horrifying and calming at the same time. She could see the girl too as the housekeeper stared at the girl standing before the tree. What made her heart skip a beat wasn't that Mrs. Ames could see her, it was a recognition.

"Cadhla," the voice spoke.

Mrs. Ames' hand went to her mouth and choked on a sob. Cadhla, that was her name. In all these years, Sansa never asked and the woman never offered.

Sansa turned back to the little girl and she was shaking her head sadly looking directly at the old woman.

"Don't be frightened, she will hold your hand," she said cryptically.

Mrs. Ames sank down to her knees and Sansa felt that tug again, pulling her towards the tree.

"She's beautiful," it said serenely but Petyr's voice rang out again and it was closer.

Sansa looked down at her baby and her heart stopped. No, she couldn't do this. This wasn't right.

"You made an oath," it told her and Sansa felt her arms reach out against her will with Catelyn in her hands. *"We saved you...and she belongs – "*

"To me," Sansa whimpered and struggled to pull the child back to her chest. *"She doesn't belong to you."*

A noise broke the connection between them as Lady came charging forth and stood between Sansa and the spirit. Her hackles were high as she growled and snarled, forcing Sansa to take a few steps back. She was protecting her against Them. Animals were supposed to be connected to the faeries and here a wolf stood her ground against them to protect her human mother and child. Sansa held Catelyn tighter as she heard Petyr's voice cry out in desperation. It didn't matter now if she died. But every fiber of her being said no to giving them her treasured daughter.

"Tá gach rud bré..." it said in a soothing tone before turning the attention back to Sansa. *"You don't want to burn again..."*

Lady held her stance and howled as it echoed to the heavens and back and Sansa fished in her pocket for the vial.

"No," she sobbed, uncorking the vial. *"And we won't. I won't give her to you."*

"She doesn't have to die, Sansa," it cooed. *"You will live. Go back to your husband and son..."*

"No," she cried and the tears fell. *"There's nothing here for me now. I know she'll live, but she's not meant to go with you. You can't have her and I won't let her burn for her father to see."*

Sansa tilted the vial just above her daughter's lips and she could hear a horse's gallop.

And see it, he will...

Mrs. Ames warning rang in her head as she heard Petyr approaching and a desperate panic filled her heart.

"You can't have her, but you can have me," Sansa begged. *"You wanted me once..."*

"That was not the bargain..."

"Sansa! What are you doing?" Petyr's voice rang out and it was filled with anger. Oh God, this wasn't happening. Why didn't she die that day instead? This was far more painful than any fire.

"I'm dead already," she whispered. *"I'll do it. The poison is quick. I swear on her soul, I'll do it. God, forgive me, I will. Please..."*

Petyr couldn't process the scene before him. Mrs. Ames was leaning against a tree sobbing as Sansa and Lady faced the large oak tree he vaguely remembered from years ago. The sun was cresting and it cast a long shadow to his feet.

"Sansa! What are you doing?"

Petyr could see something in her hand, a vial and his mind was terrified. Who was she talking to? There was no one but the wolf and the damn tree.

Oh, God, she has lost her mind...

"I'm dead already," she whispered. "I'll do it. The poison is quick. I swear on her soul, I'll do it. God, forgive me, I will. Please...."

Petyr approached steadily and reached his hand out, "Sansa, it's me. Come on, sweetling. Whatever you're thinking of doing...*don't...I beg you, please don't...*"

The tears burned in his eyes as she turned slowly with the Catelyn in her arms and dropped the vial on the forest floor at her feet.

"Forgive me," she cried and she handed the baby to him.

Petyr closed his eyes and felt the tears stream down his cheeks as he clutched the child to his chest.

Dear God, no...

The sun rose and that golden light lit up the oak tree as if it were on fire. A cry filled the air that shocked his eyes open. Petyr looked down and Catelyn cried will all her might.

"I love you," he heard Sansa's voice.

The brightness of the sun was almost blinding and Sansa started backing away. Suddenly, he could see who...what she had been talking to...

It looked like a child but it was engulfed in flames and it smiled taking his beloved's hand, drawing her back. Petyr set Catelyn down on the ground and immediately Lady came and laid down, wrapping her body around the child protectively.

"What is happening?"

Petyr was transported back to the day she watched her burn and live. He couldn't process it then just as his eyes couldn't believe what they were seeing now.

"It's not your fault. I did it for you, for all of you," she whispered. "Promise me, you'll take care of them. Tell them their mother loves them."

She had told him the truth all those years ago when he thought she was mad or making up stories about spirits and ghosts. What was pulling her back wasn't mortal and Petyr stood in shock.

"No," he muttered and reached out for her hand. The light was so bright and he could barely see her.

Let me go

Never

Petyr rushed forward and grabbed her left arm. Whatever was pulling her was strong and it dragged him with her.

"Let her go!" he yelled tried to grab a branch from the oak tree for leverage, clutching her arm for dear life.

"Petyr, you have to let go," she cried and the fear and anguish in her voice only made him tug back harder.

"No, I'm not letting you. I'm not losing you...not again," he cried out in pain when his hand lit up in flames as if he touched the sun itself. "Don't you leave me."

The flames shot up from his hand to her arm but Sansa wasn't crying out in pain, but fear. The bright light was dimming around them. She had been pulled straight through the tree and it was closing in, trapping her inside. It was portal of some kind and it was taking her with it.

Petyr was losing his grip, as his hand slid down her burning arm that crisped and cracked like a burnt embers in a dying fire. Her hand seized and grasped it with all his might, her ring cutting into his palm.

"Oh God, Petyr, I'm scared... don't let go," she screamed.

"Sansa!" he panicked and held onto her hand, trying hard to pull her back through.

All at once the portal closed, cutting off her scream into deafening silence but her hand still had his in a vice grip. In horror, Petyr watched the bark of the tree as it grew over her arm until reaching their joined hands. Her hand crunched in his and the branch grew out from her fingertips around his hand and forearm, anchoring him to it.

Lady howled and Catelyn was screaming as he had never heard before.

"Let her go!" he bellowed but nothing happened.

The branch was growing and cutting through his hand as his blood dripped down. It's wasn't the pain in his hand as he tried desperately to free himself that cut through his heart. She was gone and he didn't know how or why. All he knew was he needed to get her back.

Petyr tore his hand free with a curse and frantically went around the entire trunk of the massive tree. There had to be a way, an opening, something, anything as he searched in vain. It was solid and there was nothing to suggest anything else. It was just a tree.

"SANSA!" he wailed in anguish, so loud that the fading stars would hear him.

Sinking down, the heavy bark scraped down his back until he felt the ground.

No, this isn't real. It's a terrible dream, he tried convincing himself and closed his eyes, but the crying of his daughter and the searing pain in his hand said otherwise.

Petyr heard something drop to the ground and opened his eyes. Bleeding from the huge gash and the burned flesh, Petyr leaned down to pick up the glittering object. The emerald ring was covered in blood and he felt something missing. His left hand was mangled and burnt but his own ring was gone from his finger.

Nothing in his life had prepared him for what just happened. Everything Sansa ever told him ran through his mind like a sickness. She tried to tell him. So many times, she tried and he didn't listen. He didn't believe. Even the day, she was burned, he convinced himself it was something else, *anything else* than what his own eyes witnessed. Whatever took her, wanted their daughter. Sansa sacrificed herself for her...for them.

Why didn't he believe her?

The sobs racked his chest and he couldn't move or breathe. He had never felt such pain.

It's not your fault...I love you

Everything was his fault. Each time something terrible happened to her, it was because of him. She was gone because of him. He glanced over to the old woman who was crying and Petyr felt no anger towards the woman.

"You knew, didn't you?" he asked simply.

She must have been expecting rage from him and his soft voice was a shock when she looked at him.

"She wanted to tell you," the woman sniffed. "But..."

"I know."

The morning lark was singing and the woods were coming alive as the sun painted its light on every leaf and flower. Catelyn's cries brought Petyr back to the present as he slowly got up and moved towards his daughter that cried for her mother. Her mother he once again failed to save.

"Ssssh, my love," he hushed, picking her up and Lady started licking his injured hand.

It took a few minutes, but she eventually stopped crying in her father's arms and Petyr had no idea what to do or where to go from here. He still couldn't believe that they made love only hours ago and now... he was alone. His love taken from him and Petyr would have sold his soul and cut out his heart to bring her back. Two children would have questions and he would have no answers to give. How could he raise them without her?

"I need to know everything," he said and Mrs. Ames nodded her head sadly at the man who didn't understand.

"There's nothing you can do. She's gone," the woman muttered.

Petyr's chin quivered as he held his daughter and stared at where his wife stood only moments ago. Squaring his jaw, he shook his head. Sansa never gave up. She went through hell and never gave up.

"I don't believe that," he tried to convince himself.

"My lord, I ... " she whimpered in fear. "I've been there. I know."

She's not dead, then. I know in my soul she's alive.

"If they can get here, there's a way to get there," Petyr clenched his jaw. "You're going to tell me how."

"I couldn't take you even if I wanted to," Mrs. Ames sighed. "They won't let you in. You're not searching for them. You're looking for her. They'll never let her go. Even if you found your way there... it won't do any good."

Petyr turned to face her, "Why?"

"You forget this world. She may not remember you. You may forget why you're there.... I can't explain it. You have to believe me. She knew you needed to be here – for the children. You have to take care of them. She entrusted you with them and knew you will be a good father."

"They need their mother," Petyr shot back. "I'm not leaving her there – wherever it is. She doesn't belong there. She belongs here. It should have been me. Not her. I can't live without her."

"You can, and you must, for their sake," the woman pleaded nodding to the baby in his arms. "She can't come back. Whether it's fate or... for better or for worse, our choices make us who we truly are. No matter what you've done, or the guilt you feel... what you do now is what will define you. She saved that child. She did what she had to do. Don't let it be in vain searching for something you'll never find and ignoring what she left you."

Petyr could not accept it. Her logic was sound but he knew Sansa. If she was alive, she wanted to be home. No matter what the old woman said and what she knew, Petyr wasn't going to abandon her.

He held Catelyn firmly and walked up the tree where his blood was still fresh on the newly created branch which was now sprouting full leaves. Bringing Sansa's ring to his lips, he touched the trunk of the tree as if trying to make her hear him.

"I will find you."

Chapter End Notes

If you have made it this far... I hope you make it to the very end with me. I know with Season 7 being complete crap, we're all kind of angry and sad, but I still hope you will stick with me to the end of this fic. There is still so much coming...

Daddy Petyr is so wonderful and Caty is so important. There is something truly precious between them.

Cadhla is pronounced "Call-ah"
Aibhilin "Ave-leen" ...meaning "child that was longed/wished for"

Thanks for reading. Comments are always appreciated and welcome! I want to start working on the next chapter next week and get this fic moving again.

Sparrow

Chapter Notes

Okay, this chapter is so much bigger than I anticipated. I had to break it up. I'm working on the rest right now and will send it over to my beta. I figured I've made you wait long enough. So, I hope to have the second part of this finished soon. I can't believe this story is almost finished. I think there are maybe 5 or 6 chapters left. I don't think I can break up the second to last chapter at all, so I'm pretty sure it will be really long. And the last chapter is huge too.

Thank you to everyone who is still reading after that horrible season 7... or who haven't lost interest in this story. I still have some doozies coming for you in this story. It's may be close to being over...but not over yet. Still soooooo much will happen to these characters.

Petryr paused before the great oak tree in silence. He could hear Lady's howls and Caty's cries. The sun, bright in deep hues of red and orange, was dipping below the horizon. It reminded him of that horrible morning that he saw his love disappear, except now, it was the wrong time of day. Petyr could still see it, as though time had stood still. The sun lit up her fiery hair as she was pulled back into that damned tree...into that other world.

Her screams, dear God, her screams haunted him. She didn't want him to let her go, even though she begged him to only moments before to do the exact opposite. She was frightened as he held onto her. Her hand was so delicate and small in his, gripping it for dear life. In an instant, she was gone and he was all alone. Petyr felt as if he never left this place. Part of him stayed, waiting for his return. The answer was always here.

Breathing in the evening air, Petyr stared at that cursed tree. How long had he been out here? The stars twinkled just above the dusky midnight blues of the sky but he knew daybreak would come soon. The forest was eerily quiet tonight and he vaguely wondered if that was a sign. A breeze whispered through the leaves and Petyr could feel it. There was a charge in the air.

"You know I'm here, don't you?"

After all this time, Petyr felt he finally had an answer to that question. How many times did he come here after that fateful morning? Everyday, sometimes twice a day? For weeks, he was here every morning when the sun rose and when nothing happened, he started coming at sunset. He inspected every centimeter of that tree. The branch that unnervingly still looked like her forearm and hand which had sprouted sparse leaves. Bringing her ring every time, Petyr tried to place the ring on what appeared to be her fourth finger, hoping that was what was needed. He tried putting his mangled hand in hers, replicating the moment they took her but to no avail. No matter what he did or said, it was just him lingering and studying an old oak tree, like a madman... waiting for someone who was never to return.

Petryr gazed down at his hand holding the dagger. He wore a glove most of the time now to cover the burned and scarred flesh. People always stared and it was better to keep it hidden than to answer the same questions over and over again. He knew what they wanted to ask but were too frightened. He knew what they said about him... *and her*. Not once did he care what any of them thought. Petyr knew the truth of it. The old woman knew. It was his children that he constantly worried and obsessed over, especially Alex.

I couldn't make him believe. I wish I could have been a better father, the one you said I would be. Don't judge me too harshly, sweetling... I did the best I could...

Petryr closed his eyes and felt as though he had never left this place. Every emotion came back in a rush over his senses and played out in his mind as if it were only yesterday.

I will find you.

Returning from the woods with Caty in his arms and Mrs. Ames following slowly behind, the question plagued his mind like a disease.

What am I going to tell my son?

In the kitchen, Mrs. Ames was quiet as she cleaned up his hand in the early morning before the servants woke to start the day. The insertion of the needle to sew up the large gash in his palm had Petyr biting his tongue as the woman worked quickly and efficiently. The burned flesh seared in pain as the thread pulled it back together again.

"If infection doesn't take hold, it will still take months to heal. I'm afraid there's nothing can be done about the scarring. Hopefully, you'll still have use of it," Mrs. Ames muttered.

"Am I so vain in your eyes?" he replied evenly. "I don't care about the scars."

"I didn't mean it that way, my lord," she sighed. "At least it wasn't your right hand."

"And you think I really care about my hands?" he winced again at the stitching. "I'd cut them both off if it meant getting her back."

Mrs. Ames tied the threads off and started bandaging his hand. The entire time she avoided looking at him.

"I have salves to help with the wounds and burns, but it will take time," she said in nothing more than a clinical fashion. She was evading all together what had just happened.

"What makes you think you'll still be here to administer such remedies?" he growled lowly, and that statement got her attention as she looked at him with wide eyes. They weren't filled with fear as he expected but sorrow.

"I anticipated one of two things," she breathed. "You would order me to leave this house or kill me. The latter would be a kinder verdict, for I'm too old and tired to care about the manner of it. What I witnessed this morning... the shame and guilt I feel..."

"You told her to do it?" Petyr's eyes flared a bit that this woman convinced Sansa to sacrifice herself.

"No," she paused and closed her eyes wearily. "I knew what they wanted. Both she and the child would have died. They took Sansa instead of the baby. A life for a life. The bargain was sealed that day of the burning. Only she couldn't give them the child as promised for saving her own life. She wanted so much to live *and stay with you*..."

Petyr's heart constricted, but he waited eagerly at hearing what Sansa could not tell him. She confided in this woman though. He knew Mrs. Ames was a northerner, and they had a special bond of sorts, but it didn't hurt any less that Sansa did not trust him with her secrets. How many times had she tried to explain to him what she was going through over the years? Sansa knew something was happening to her and what did he do in return? Petyr ridiculed, scoffed and had a logical explanation for every strange thing that happened to her. Ever since that damned music box sat in her room when she first came to live here. Why should she have trusted him? He never gave her reason to. She was worried he thought her mad...and she was right. Only in the end did he finally understand and it was too late.

"They saved her from the fire and wanted Caty," he thought aloud. Sansa then felt guilt for it all, for saving herself. That's why she was distant and sad after the child was born.

Petyr rubbed his face in dismay. God, why didn't he see it? Why didn't he listen? He remembered those old faerie tales as a child. Lysa and Cat loved reading them to him when they were little, before he could read himself. Faeries, banshees, the shape-shifters... they stole children or replaced them with changelings. It was all superstitious rubbish meant to frighten children who disobeyed their parents...

"Don't stray too far or the faeries will get you!"

"There's nothing you could have done," Mrs. Ames interrupted his thoughts, knowing his troubled mind. "You were going to lose one or both of them. She chose to save the girl. She knew you would take care of the children."

"They could have taken me," he began but the old woman shook her head sadly.

"No, they wanted one of them," she lamented. "They wanted Sansa for years but couldn't get her. Duncan and Lady Myranda gave her to them. You can't blame Sansa. Burning has to be the worst death imaginable. I've seen many women burn... the slow agony..."

"It was my fault," he gulped. He didn't want to appear weak in front of this woman, but his heart was breaking to pieces at what his beloved sacrificed... all because of his selfish ways. "None of this would have happened if I had left her in Riverrun where she belonged." Petyr felt the tears welling in his eyes. It was because of him that Myranda and Joffrey wanted her dead. No one cared about the Stark orphan until Petyr brought her into his game.

"And there she would have died miserable and alone or suffered a lingering death at the hands of those dirty men," Mrs. Ames consoled the best she could.

"She told you about that night?"

"What does it matter? She loves you and the children. She was happy here, hold onto that. Those good memories are what you'll share with this little one."

Mrs. Ames washed her bloody hands before picking up the child who watched the old woman with smiling eyes.

"I don't think she'll need convincing. She knows already and I doubt that she'll forget her mother," she smiled back at the child in her arms.

"What am I supposed to tell them?"

The question slipped out of his mouth as he worried about the boy sleeping upstairs.

"My father told me to always speak the truth. I'm a very old woman, my lord. You know as I do, that the truth sometimes isn't the best course of action. The truth can make things worse. The truth, especially in this case, could be deadly. Some lies are a blessing. I would think hard on what you decide to tell everyone, especially your son. They have their whole lives ahead of them. Don't make her sacrifice for nothing. Give them the life she wanted for them."

Mrs. Ames was a direct woman and Petyr respected that. He wasn't going to throw her out or harm her and she most likely knew it. He was going to need her to find Sansa, whether she liked it or not. Whatever resided in this house or the nearby woods gutted his family. There had to be a way to get her back. Petyr refused to believe she was lost forever.

In the meantime, he had a decision to make and it was a terrible one. Petyr didn't know how long it would take to find her, even if he could. What would he tell everyone? The servants would be curious as to the whereabouts of the lady of the house. Robert, Edmure... the smallfolk would sooner or later notice her absence. If he told the truth, everyone would think he'd lost his mind. The newer servants had not experienced the 'hauntings' of Petyr's making in the past. Even if he told them a ghost story, he didn't want Alex to believe and be frightened of his own mother.

Ultimately, Petyr didn't want to lie to his son. What story would hurt him the least? Alex wouldn't understand why she was gone. Petyr closed his eyes remembering how happy they were last night. Alex held his baby sister tenderly before falling asleep on the floor. He was sleeping in Sansa's bed this morning and Petyr was sure the boy saw and possibly spoke to his mother. Did she tell him she was going away?

Carrying his daughter up to Sansa's room, Petyr felt his heart pound with anxiety. It was very early when he entered through the doors to find Alex still snuggled in her bed. He would let the boy sleep. It gave Petyr time to think and form a plan.

Caty, as he liked to call her, didn't seem to have a care in the world. She smiled and gurgled as he laid her down in her cradle and it broke his heart. She would never know her mother, how wonderful and loving she was... what she sacrificed for them. She reached out for her father and that's when Petyr saw it. A small red mark just inside her tiny wrist. He knew every inch of this child, bathed her... how did he never notice this before or did it appear this morning? Sansa said she was marked. A shiver went down his spine, wondering if his precious little girl was doomed to follow her mother?

Lying down on the bed, Petyr curled his body around his son, who was blissfully unaware of today's events that would change his life forever. One tear fell and then another as he observed Alex's peaceful state. The pain Petyr felt when she fell in the labyrinth, waiting for days wondering if she was going to die, even that horrible day in the town square hearing her scream in pain and terror... it was nothing compared to this. He was empty but it wasn't his pain that hurt the most as he watched the gentle breathing of his child.

She was gone and didn't want to leave. She was stolen from them. All because he was a selfish bastard and couldn't see the forest for the trees. Their mother was taken away from them because their father was a cruel and terrible man. Sadly, at the same time, had fate not worked its way, Petyr wouldn't have his son and daughter. Sansa told him that many times, whenever he felt that punishing regret for his past transgressions. *They wouldn't be together*. Life was a punishing and unforgiving joke.

Promise me, you'll take care of them. Tell them their mother loves them.

She knew you would take care of the children.

Sansa left her precious babies in his care, the children she sacrificed so much for. She hid Alex when the gold cloaks came and she gave her own life for little Caty. How was he supposed to take care of them on his own? Suddenly, Petyr felt like a novice for the first time, so unsure of himself. What did he know about raising a girl? He spoiled Alex to death and poor Sansa was left with the discipline, which had angered her on so many occasions. Glancing at Caty, perfectly content in her cradle, Petyr had such fears. She was so young and not ready to be pulled from her mother. He would need to ask Mrs. Ames about hiring a wet nurse. The thought of his daughter forced to suckle from a stranger cut his heart.

Wiping a tear from his eye, Petyr knew how selfish he had been even with his son. He left everything else to Sansa. She was the one to teach, discipline and take of their son every day. Petyr brought him presents and lavished Alex with attention and love. So many times, Petyr remembered, Sansa quarrelling with him about spoiling the boy. Petyr was always away on business, more focused on his game than his own family. He couldn't buy his children's love. He needed to be the father Sansa believed him to be.

"Papa?"

His sweet little voice shattered Petyr's heart. Alex's drowsy eyes stared at him with questioning and Petyr had no idea what to say.

"I'm here," he said softly, wiping those tears away.

"Why are you sad?" the boy asked, and Petyr was speechless. How in God's name was he supposed to explain this to his son?

Petyr ran his fingers through Alex's hair and stared into his son's eyes. Caty might have her father's green eyes, but Alex had Sansa's beautiful blues.

"I love you, Alex," he began. "You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Papa..."

The boy glanced around and Petyr knew who he was looking for before the words followed.

"Where's Mummy?"

Sweetling, help me find the right words.

Lying had come so easily to Petyr until now. His entire life had been a lie before Sansa. She found the truth in him. Made his true self come out of the shadows. He could tell Alex she was dead. He would cry but sooner or later he would come to accept it and live his life. However, if Petyr found Sansa and brought her home, how would he explain that to their children? Except that Sansa wasn't dead. Petyr couldn't lie to them like that. He had lied to Sansa for what he thought was all

the right reasons and now she was gone.

Petyr closed his eyes and hoped it was the right choice.

"Mummy..." he gulped hard, "is gone, Alex."

"Did the soldiers take her away again?" the boy whispered frightfully and Petyr's eyes shot open. "Will you rescue her, Papa?"

He could say yes, but it would still be a lie. He would believe it now being only five years of age, but as he grew older, he would find out it was a lie. Besides, Petyr never rescued her and it was sad that he never corrected Alex on that point. The boy was still so very young.

"No soldiers," Petyr sighed.

"I had a dream they came again and took her away. Mummy said it was just a dream," the boy yawned sleepily and Petyr wondered if he woke and watched as his mother ran off into the distance. Alex never spoke of ghosts nor had he ever read stories about faeries or goblins. Alex liked to hear about knights, and far off travelers in distant countries. He never fancied children's tales. Petyr honestly didn't know if Sansa had ever read such things to him or educated the boy in that manner. It didn't appear to be so.

"Did Mummy tell you anything last night?" he breathed.

Alex touched Petyr's chest and snuggled into his arms.

"Am I in here too, Papa? Mummy said I'm inside her heart all the time and she's in my heart," Alex mumbled.

"Yes, you are. You and your sister. Forever," he smiled sadly.

"Mummy, too?" Alex looked up at him in confusion.

Petyr kissed the top of his head.

"Yes, Mummy too."

"When will she be back? Will she bring me a present from town? You always bring me presents..."

"Alex, listen to me. This is very important."

The boy sat up, his eyes heavy with sleep and looked around the room again, seeing his sister in her cradle.

"Your mother..."

God, he couldn't say it. The words were lodged in his throat.

Dead? Disappeared? Ran away? Abducted by ghosts and goblins?

"She's not coming back."

Alex couldn't comprehend it. He would never understand. Petyr didn't want him to blame his mother for leaving him behind.

"She said she would never leave me. You're lying..."

His whimpers cut through his father's heart.

"It's my fault, Alex. It's because of me," Petyr said truthfully. "I'm so sorry."

What else could he say? No one would believe the real truth. Not even a young child.

"I'm here. I won't leave you or your sister. I'll do everything I can..."

"I don't believe you!" the boy cried and started the baby and Lady. "She promised! Mummy!"

Alex jumped off the bed and ran to Petyr's room and then out into the hallway screaming for his mother. He would wake the entire household but Petyr let him go. He needed to understand she wasn't here. Petyr wasn't lying. His mother wasn't coming back on her own. Petyr would find her. He had to. In only a few hours, he was already lost without her. The children needed their mother.

He could hear his son's wailing as it echoed around the house. When Sarah, in her wrapper, knocked nervously on the door, Petyr's voice could barely muster enough words to ask her to watch the baby.

In the stables is where Petyr finally found him. William was holding the boy as Alex's horse was anxiously pacing the stall. The boy had tried in vain to get the stable hands to saddle his horse when William held him down knowing Petyr was on his way here.

"NO! I'm going to find her. I don't believe him. I don't!"

Petyr took the screaming boy as he kicked and struggled in his father's tight hold. The loyal young man was clearly confused at what the young boy was screaming about as he glanced at the master of the house.

"Let me go! I don't believe you!"

Without question, William ushered the stable hands from the stall as Petyr sat down in the fresh hay and held his son with difficulty.

"Sssh. It's going to be all right."

Alex struggled and kicked with all his might but Petyr didn't let him go.

"I hate you! You're a liar. She didn't leave! She didn't!"

Let him hate me. I don't want him to think she abandoned him. Dear God, it would be easier to tell him she was dead. I just can't do it.

"It's alright to hate me. It's my fault. She never would have left you of her own accord. She was protecting you and your sister. She had to go away to protect you. I couldn't rescue her, I tried but I failed."

"You said the soldiers didn't come back," he pushed and hit at his father.

"Something else took her."

For a second the boy stopped and looked at his father in fear. It was the moment of truth and Petyr took a deep breath.

"The faeries took her away."

Alex's tear stricken face was motionless. He blinked a couple of times and Petyr knew instantly the child didn't believe him. A boy of almost six years. This poor child had been put through so much since his last birthday.

"They aren't real. You said so. You said those stories were ..."

"I know what I said. I didn't believe. I do now. I saw it. I saw one of them take her," Petyr breathed and even he didn't believe what he just said. If he couldn't convince a small boy, how would he ever be able to explain it to anyone else?

It was one tiny movement and then another as Alex removed himself from his father's embrace. Standing up, he took a few steps backwards shaking his head slowly. His wide eyes told Petyr everything.

"Is she dead?"

"No, my son. I'm telling you the truth."

Alex looked older than his years as he weighed his father's words. He was not a stupid and gullible child. He never was. Alex was afraid of his father. Petyr sensed it days after he killed Myranda and Duncan. Something had changed in the boy and their relationship was never quite the same. The suspicion in his innocent eyes hurt Petyr more than he could bear.

"No... I thought it was a dream... I saw you," he sniffed and something caught Petyr's eye. Alex held something in his hand.

Petyr felt such a chilling fear. Did Alex wake and follow them into the woods? Did he see it all and think it was dream? The boy was scared stiff and stepped away when Petyr reached for him.

"She was scared and crying."

Shocked, Petyr sat there unable to voice a single word. A glimmer of silver drew his eyes down to the boy's hand where the priest's cross hung from his little fingers. It was the cross Duncan gave him that day in the market, the one Petyr fixed for him with every intention of never giving it back to his son.

"I saw you, Papa," Alex whimpered. With that he turned and ran out of the stables, leaving his father speechless.

For days and days, Alex refused to speak to his father. Petyr was finally forced to make the announcement to the household that Sansa had left Harrenhal in the middle of the night and Mrs. Ames corroborated his story to her credit. He gave no reason for it and as the master of the house and the newly appointed Duke of the Vale, he wasn't required to. It certainly didn't quell the gossip he knew would come.

Petyr could hear the whispers from all the servants. When entering a room, they would all go silent. He knew what they were saying. His wife finally left him. He let her burn and maybe she really was a witch. Perhaps he killed her once the baby was born. He heard talk about the Mórrígan and that Caty could possibly be a Changeling. Maybe she was locked away in the mysterious dungeon under the house. Old stories of the Devil and what Duncan used to say about Harrenhal – it was cursed, began to surface as well. At least Duncan was correct about that. This place was most definitely cursed.

Just as Petyr feared, Caty didn't take to a wet nurse as first but finally she was hungry enough and relief washed over him. He couldn't have her die too after all of this. Alex refused to be anywhere near Petyr, especially alone in his presence. He stayed close to Sarah and William. The pain was too much to see his child frightened of his own father. Maybe it was best to leave him alone for a while. Sooner or later the boy might come around to accepting reality. There was no point in forcing the issue. Whatever he thought he saw that night was burned in his son's mind. There was no consoling or reasoning with the boy.

In despair, Petyr turned his attentions to his newborn daughter. She was so fragile. She needed him to stay strong and not lose himself in grief or alcohol again. They didn't have a mother now. He was all they had. Petyr had to be father and mother to them. He couldn't give up on them or their mother.

Every dawn, he rode out to the woods. Sometimes he just waited in silence and others he tried talking, hoping maybe Sansa might hear him. She had to be here somewhere. There must be a way in, a way to get there, a way to come home. Petyr would sit sometimes for hours in that early

morning hoping for a sign that she knew he was there, that he hadn't forgotten her. The chirping of birds and noises from animals in the forest were the only thing that answered him. Petyr wasn't sure what to expect - perhaps a voice on the wind, or in his dreams to aid him? Oh, those damned dreams were maddening.

Petyr started having strange dreams before Sansa was even taken. He could never quite remember them when he woke. There was a bird, not as small as a finch, that was always around singing its abstract tune. He kept seeing Catelyn when they were young at Riverrun. She would run through the trees in the meadow. He could hear her laughter. Petyr remembered the music box he made for her as he carved it in the stables.

Mine for yours.

Glancing down at his left hand and studying the indentation of his ring finger, Petyr recalled those very words from his dreams. He had never taken off the ring since Sansa put it there that beautiful Christmas Eve. Strange, he could still feel the coolness of the gold and yet it had been weeks since that day in the woods when she left him. He kept her ring in his dresser drawer and would look at it every night before going to bed. It barely fit on his pinky as her fingers were so slender. There was something about their rings that was important. Why would he have hers and she have his? Petyr searched all around the tree, wondering if his wedding band slipped off his bloodied finger that morning. It was nowhere to be found and Petyr concluded that for whatever reason, Sansa must have it.

Riding back to the house, he could sense all of Harrenhal watching him. The gossip had spread and the servants knew he rode to the woods every morning. Petyr could only imagine what they were thinking. Perhaps he had her imprisoned somewhere in the forest or was making sacrifices to the Devil? After a while, he started taking a musket and rifle with him with the pretense of going hunting. It was a stupid thing, for he never hunted in his life. Occasionally, he would bring back a rabbit and Mrs. Ames would always stay silent. She understood.

It didn't take long before the first servant left. Petyr had expected it at some point and he knew it wouldn't be the last. Everything had changed in this house since Sansa was burned and made for worse since her disappearance. The news had spread to town that Lady Baelish had vanished. When Edmure came charging through the library doors days later, Petyr sat quietly with his cigar and brandy and let the man rain down every manner of threat and damnation on him.

"Where is she?" Edmure roared and Petyr vaguely wondered if the entire household was listening, waiting for an explanation.

"I don't know," Petyr seethed under his breath, refusing to look at the man.

"I wouldn't be surprised that she left you, but to abandon the children, a newborn? I don't believe it for a moment."

"Frankly, I don't care what you believe. I could tell you the truth and you'd laugh," Petyr retorted downing his drink in one swallow. "Like me, you still don't believe what you saw that day, what happened to her. Why should I try to explain anything to you now?"

Petyr didn't need to expound on the day of her burning. Edmure was there. He saw it just as Petyr did. She walked away without a mark on her. After capturing Miranda and Duncan, Edmure never returned to Harrenhal until news of Sansa finally reached him.

"You're a murderer. I know you killed them. It's not too hard to believe that you're capable of it. Is she dead, Petyr?" Edmure growled just now seeing Petyr's bandaged hand. "Tell me that much and I won't let your son see you die at my hands."

"Oh, I daresay he won't be bothered by it." Petyr walked over to the sideboard and poured himself another drink, offering one to his one-time brother.

"She didn't die in childbirth, so don't try and lie to me. What did you do to her?"

Petyr chuckled lowly, "Of course you would think that. Is it so easy to believe I would hurt her...murder her? I couldn't harm Sansa any more than I would harm my own children. See this?" He held up his hand. "I would have gladly torn it off for her. I would have stabbed myself in the heart without a second thought."

"Where is she, Petyr?"

"You wouldn't believe me even if I told you. So why don't you just get the fuck out of my house!" He threw the glass so hard, it shattered against the wall.

Edmure drew his sword and Petyr walked straight up to his face.

"Do it, you spineless coward. You've wanted to kill me for years, here's your chance. No one would question you. You're only defending the honor of your family, are you not? They falsely accused her and sentenced her to death and no one came to her aid. Accuse me of her murder and no one would question why you ran me through. The justice in this fucking country is its own sad little joke."

"I came for her. You let her burn, you son of a bitch," Edmure pressed the blade against Petyr's abdomen. "I was there when they marched her to her death. I tried to save her. Where were you?"

"But you couldn't save her any more than I could that day. Yes, it was my fault. I didn't take Miranda seriously enough. Don't you think for one moment that her screams, hearing her call for me to help her, doesn't haunt me every single day? We didn't protect her. I couldn't save her then or now. She's gone and I wish to God I could turn back time and change everything. I'd sell my soul to hell forever, but it doesn't matter because I'm already in hell. So, run me through. Take revenge for your niece, but remember you betrayed your own sister and she's dead. All her children are dead. Maybe Sansa would be somewhere else, married to someone else if you had a fraction of the rage to safeguard them as you do right now to kill me." Petyr grabbed the hilt of Edmure's sword, locking both of their hands on it. Petyr pressed it so close the blade cut through his waistcoat. "Do it!"

Edmure's eyes were filled with hatred and yet a fear hid behind it. Or was it shame? For the first time, Petyr didn't fight back. He almost wanted Edmure to stab him, to end it all. Suddenly, the image of his sweet, innocent daughter flashed in his mind and Petyr stepped back. No, Sansa didn't sacrifice herself so he could die and leave their children as orphans. He made a promise.

Trembling, Edmure sheathed his sword. Petyr's words were sharp and cut deep. Once it would have made Petyr feel superior but now they were one and the same. Petyr didn't betray Sansa as Edmure did with Catelyn. Not trusting or believing her was a different and arguably a worse kind of betrayal. Both men abandoned these women in their time of need.

"Just tell me where she is," the man shuddered, leaning against the sideboard. Petyr knew Edmure wanted a drink badly.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be here talking to you," Petyr huffed.

A clattering of crystal pulled Petyr's eyes to the man pouring himself a whiskey. Edmure took a sip and sighed deeply. Clearly, he hadn't a drink in some time. It was quiet for a long time and when the man spoke next, it didn't surprise Petyr in the slightest.

"Give me the children, Petyr. Let me take them to Riverrun."

He wasn't pleading, it was just a statement for the welfare of his niece's children. Petyr couldn't fault him for asking. Any decent man would under the circumstances. Edmure hadn't touched a drop of alcohol in years. He was going to marry the village girl Sansa told him about at Alex's birthday celebration. Petyr would be lying if the idea hadn't crossed his mind. Alex hated him and Petyr wanted to find Sansa. How was he supposed to do that with two young children?

Over and over, her voice pleaded. Her face full of trust and love filled his mind. No, he couldn't leave them. Petyr promised her that *he* would take care of them, not her uncle. Sansa left knowing he would be here to care for their children. That knowledge, even in her fear at the end as Petyr desperately held onto her hand, helped her make the choice to leave – not so Petyr would leave them alone to come and search for her.

"No." He sat down wearily on the leather chair, slumping down. Caty's cries could be heard from above and Petyr rubbed his face, cursing the pain in his hand. The ingrained sense of politeness came out before he could stop and laugh at the banality of it all. "It would best if you take your leave, Edmure. My daughter needs me."

Exhausted, Petyr walked past the man and didn't pause or worry that he might strike him down. Before passing into the gallery, Petyr halted for half a moment, thinking he spied his son on the stairs before turning back to his one-time brother.

"Do not come back, Edmure. I'll sign all the necessary papers. Riverrun is once again yours. Pass it down to your children. I had no right to take it from you. Let it be a peace offering," Petyr sighed and added with a touch of venom. "I will only say this once, if you ever try to take my children from me, I *will* kill you. If you attempt to turn Robert against me, I will kill you and burn Riverrun to the ground. You know me. You know I will do it. Now, get out."

Edmure did not give his word, but he did not return either as Petyr demanded. It gutted Alex for a long time. Edmure's heart was in the right place, but he was still a coward as he left Harrenhal and the children he said he wanted to protect, behind.

The whole house could hear the boy from his room upstairs as his uncle rode away and Petyr wondered how much Alex overheard in the library. If Edmure wanted revenge, he had succeeded without knowing it for Alex wanted to go with his uncle. His son had taken to Edmure on his birthday celebration and Petyr remembered feeling a twinge of suspicion and jealousy that day, not to mention Sansa admonishing him for it.

The pain of knowing his beloved son chose another man, one he barely knew, to look up to, to father and protect him was too much and almost drove Petyr back to that calming amber liquid to dull his senses – to make him numb. Every time that need to drown his sorrows reared up, a joyful gurgle from his daughter would remind Petyr that someone else needed him too.

Months slowly passed and the house was like a tomb. The only happiness was the sweet laughter of a baby girl, bringing sad smiles to people's faces.

Poor thing, they must have been thinking. Abandoned by her mother and left with a sullen, mad man who spent most his time with his nose in a book. He needed information about those that took their mother. Mrs. Ames always referred to the faerie folk as "*them*". Which seemed to be smart considering one never knew who was eavesdropping in this house. Regardless of the hundreds of book he possessed, Petyr's library didn't accommodate such frivolous writings. There were many tomes of fiction, of course, but stories he tended to like and probably of no interest at all to anyone else. He was a scientific, modern man and such fanciful tales of otherworldly creatures never interested him.

Petyr wrote letters to philosophers, historians and others to send him everything they possessed on old folklore and legends. He badgered Mrs. Ames to tell him everything she knew but the woman was irritatingly hesitant. He even threatened her once, in a drunken haze, with the rack he used on Duncan but the woman never budged an inch and it was infuriating. She had to know something. Why did she remain silent?

Shipment after shipment arrived, and Petyr read and studied. Stacks of books had pages marked for reference but it still didn't tell him anything. There had to be more, someone had to know something about all of this. There was one, but she always told him what little she knew would be of no use to him and Petyr couldn't understand why she was refusing to aid him.

The leaves had turned to shades of red and gold as Petyr rode out again to the woods. It was still mildly warm and soon he knew the chill of autumn would be upon them. He watched the sun set

and wondered if he should bring Caty with him next time before it became too cold. He had racked his mind of every possible way to connect with Sansa – all except using the one other person present that morning. His daughter.

She'll kill me if I bring our baby back here.

Petyr didn't want to give up and in his sorrow, had considered bringing his baby girl here, with just the slightest hope of reaching her mother. Maybe he was going mad after all. Sansa sacrificed herself to save Caty and all Petyr could think about was getting the woman he loved back. Had he learned nothing?

"Tell me what to do?" Petyr begged resting against the trunk of the great oak tree. After months of researching and talking to this damn tree, the same silent answer came with rustling breeze through the dead leaves.

Riding back, Petyr was shocked to find Alex on the terrace waiting for him with a lantern and Sarah peering through the library windows.

"Where do you go every day?" the boy asked suspiciously. It had been the first time in weeks since Alex had spoken one word to his father.

I go to talk to your mother, Petyr wanted to say, but the look on his son's face said that was a useless statement.

"Hunting," he lied instead, dismounting his horse and handing the reins to the stable boy.

"You're not very good," Alex answered skeptically and Petyr cracked a small smile at his son's truthfulness while shouldering his rifle that hadn't been fired in weeks.

"My aim was never the best. It's more difficult to hunt with a sword," Petyr reminisced with a touch of bitterness of that day Brandon shot and almost killed him. He picked up fencing and the elegance and precision of it suited Petyr more than the crudity of gunpowder and a lead ball. The sword took a level of mastery and speed to beat one's opponent. The other was just aim and a trigger. The irony was never lost on Petyr that he never seemed to master what he considered a more effective and modern weapon and supposedly simpler to use.

The boy's next words stilled him to silence.

"Will you take me with you next time?"

Petyr wasn't sure how to answer his son. On the other hand, he was thrilled Alex was not only speaking to him but actually wanted to spend time with him – alone. But another, more selfish part of Petyr liked having that time unaccompanied – with her. He could be himself and talk to her, not knowing if she would ever hear him. It gave him a sort of peace every day, for even in his own home, Petyr had to return to wearing that mask he grew to loathe so much in Kings Landing. He was always playing his role, never knowing who was watching or listening. Only with Sansa was Petyr ever truly able to be himself.

Answering his son carefully, "Well, I think it would be wise to teach you how to use a musket before going hunting. You've only just turned six and I think you need a couple of years before you can handle something like this."

"I want to learn now," the boy huffed and Petyr almost wondered morbidly if Alex was just waiting to learn properly so he could kill his father for taking away his mother.

Petyr walked with him into the house and patted his little shoulder turning Alex to face him in the firelight.

"I'll make a bargain with you, my son," and tapped his forehead. "Learn to use this first. If you wish, I'll teach you the sword now and when you're a little older, we can discuss this." Petyr nodded to the rifle he handed to William with a smile. It was a small step in possibly repairing this relationship with his son, but a step all the same.

A strange noise filled his ears as Petyr slowly woke the next morning. He had taken to sleeping in Sansa's room ever since she left. It seemed natural with Caty's cradle already here and everything reminded him of his sweet wife. The combination of chirping and a staccato high-pitched tunes became so loud that Petyr thought he must still be dreaming. A squeal of delight made his eyes pop open to find the entire room bursting with birds of every sort imaginable.

Petyr jolted up and startled many of the winged creatures into a frenzy of flapping little feathers. A few were perched on the side of Caty's cradle while others flew around the room with other larger birds and even a white barn owl sat on the open sill with its eyes glowing a deep gold from the reflecting light.

Caty wasn't scared at all. She giggled and squealed at all the little birds fluttering about as her father tried in vain to shoo them all out the window. Where did they all come from? This time of year, they should have been headed south already. Yet, dozens of all manner of birds where in this room all wanting to get close to his little girl it seemed.

After several minutes of exasperation, Petyr managed to get them all out and rushed to his daughter's side. Perched quietly on the cradle was a small brown and white bird right next to her head. Caty laughed and reached for it but Petyr quickly swatted at the creature, knocking it to the floor. He was worried the thing would peck or scratch his delicate baby.

All at once, Caty cried as if he caused her pain. The bird flew off but Caty was inconsolable. She wailed and wailed and even Sarah couldn't calm the child when Petyr was at a loss. Not since

Sansa's disappearance, had their daughter cried so terribly. And moments later, as if it had never happened, the child was once again happy and wanting her father to hold her.

It reminded Petyr of something, a dream he had long ago. There was a bird in his dreams too. The rings, the oak tree, in every one, his hand was always bleeding. The same hand that Petyr practically ripped apart when they took Sansa away. Gazing down at the mangled flesh, Petyr sighed. It looked as though Lady chewed it to pieces. The scars were deep and it took multiple stitchings, but now it was starting to heal enough so that Petyr could actually use it; however, it was an ugly reminder of that fateful day.

Days flowed one into the other all winter long. Petyr had no choice but to play his part and keep up appearances. Young Robert's hold on the throne was still in a precarious position, for the revolution was quite fresh in the minds of the people. If they did not see any progress, they would certainly have no qualms about bringing down another king.

Petyr lied to Robert, knowing the boy would believe him no matter what anyone else said, and told him Sansa died in childbirth. Clearly, the young cousin was devastated and Petyr knew just how much he adored Sansa. It was kinder to tell him she died. Just as Mrs. Ames foretold, the truth was going to be dangerous to Petyr and his children right now. Robert's mental state had always been fragile; now with power, Petyr didn't need to give him reason to distrust his beloved uncle. He was godfather to Alex and to make this world better, Petyr needed to revert to his calm and collected strategies if his children were to survive.

Unlike Sansa, Petyr had his first born later in life. He was a year past his mid-forties now and had two young children. He wasn't going to live forever and had to provide the best he could for them. Petyr had to prepare for the worst – that he may never see his loving wife again.

Spring came and with it Caty's first birthday. She was growing fast and teething but Petyr could rarely recall the child being unhappy. She craved her father's attention above all things and that love gave him moments of pure bliss in an otherwise dreary existence. Petyr loved his children but Sansa's presence was sorely missed and he couldn't stand it. She should be here to see how her baby girl was growing.

Caty had grown a full mess of curly red hair that made those jade eyes almost glow. In certain light, there were flecks of emerald and it made her eyes stunning. Petyr smiled to himself that he would have to beat off suitors when she came of age. A very beautiful lady she would become. She looked exactly as he pictured Sansa must have been when she was a child. Catelyn, her grandmother, was a beauty at such a young age and it passed down to daughter and now granddaughter. The only thing Petyr could see of himself in her was his eyes. Thank God for that, he laughed silently. She would have been a homely girl indeed if she had inherited his masculine looks.

She made noises as if attempting to talk to him. It started with 'bah' and 'dee' sounds and Petyr delighted in trying to make her say Papa. He was in love with his daughter, that he knew, and was obvious to everyone in the house. He would kill anyone that tried to harm her. Just as he spoiled Alex, she would have the best of everything. Petyr wanted to give Sansa everything she desired and more. Since he couldn't do that, he would dote on Caty until his dying day.

Mr. Wiltshire was very pleased at all the purchases coming from his wealthy patron, despite all the horrific whispers in town. Petyr had ordered dresses already for when Caty was able to grow into them. He remembered how quickly Alex outgrew his clothing and continued to do so now. Wiltshire bragged about all the stunning fashions he made for that of the Grand Duke of the Vale, Marquis of Harrenhal and his children. He seemed to be the only person in the county that wasn't scared to death of Petyr or gossiping about this late wife, as people seemed to be assuming a year later. Not a word nor glimpse of the woman anywhere led people to believe she must be dead. She was either a captive in the haunted house of Harrenhal or the witch in the woods. The servants had spread many stories and there were times that Petyr had to laugh at what Mrs. Ames told him, just never in her presence. If his heart wasn't completely broken and filled with such guilt, Petyr would find the whole of the all the ghostly tales utterly absurd.

Gratefully, the gossip mostly kept to the Riverlands for the people in power now in the south were on Petyr's payroll and indebted to him for their new wealth. Everything Petyr had planned for after the revolution and Robert's crowning, was at the beginning stages. This summer would make for a big harvest. The small folk would be better off by next year, with more land, money and food to feed their families. By next year, they would be praising the new king and his wise governance. Petyr could establish his power and title as second only to the king, only this time not in secret. His children would now be accepted in all of society. He made traders and merchants very rich and those children of such men would not shun those of low birth. The common man now could rise if he wished it. He could marry whom he desired without having to worry about titles as well as family, duty and honor.

The thought of his children being able to become whomever they wanted and love who they wanted brought a smile to Petyr's face. Sansa would want that for them. She was never given a choice, but Caty would have all the opportunities in the world if his daughter desired it so. Petyr would build a life for her better than any royal princess. She would have everything her mother couldn't have.

Mrs. Ames, Sarah and the remainder of the servants made a little birthday party for the young child and even Alex appeared to be joyful. He didn't remember his first birthday, of course. Petyr bought his son all manners of gifts and toys. Alex was not just his son but his first born. Petyr tried in vain to bring the boy back to him, but for all his efforts, they were never going to be the same.

There were dozens of dolls and little things meant for little girls and Petyr spared no expense. It was one of the few things in the past year that gave him pure bliss, to spoil his little princess with everything a young girl could possibly want. It didn't matter that she was too young to understand how much her father adored her. He even gifted Alex with a new saddle for his horse. Petyr felt at times like he was trying to buy his son's love, but pushed those thoughts aside when he saw a

fleeting smile on the boy's face. Alex loved his books, maps and mostly his horse. Soon he would turn six and Petyr knew that these childhood days wouldn't last long.

Caty responded to music in a way that her brother never did. This little girl loved being in the music room even though Petyr had the most lavish nursery a child could ever dream of. Alex seemed to be pleased that the nursery was still his and didn't have to share it with his sister. That would possibly change in time once she became old enough to play with such toys.

It was a beautiful afternoon as Petyr played on the piano. It was the first day that he forgot to wake early and ride out to the oak tree. He hated himself for it at first but when Caty demanded his every attention, he whispered out the window that he would come at sunset instead today. Caty played on the floor next to the piano while William took Alex riding. The music filled the room and for once, Petyr felt completely relaxed. He didn't know what it was about playing the piano. Even in the midst of plotting and setting traps for his enemies, he would find solace in playing in the middle of the night to calm his ever-working mind. When Sansa came into his life, it became something special between them. He imagined her sitting next to him, picking out a little melody as he created a harmony to join it. This room was theirs in so many ways.

Birds chirped and sang outside the open window and Petyr recalled the morning they filled the bedroom. It was such a strange thing. A little bird caught his eye that perched on the window sill and watched him curiously. It was brown and white, much like the one he swatted away from Caty that morning. This time, it hadn't moved to come further inside. It seemed to be listening and Petyr couldn't take his eyes away as he played.

Caty loved to be outside. Everything aroused her curiosity: flowers, bees, butterflies and any animal that caught her attention. Lady had become her nursemaid in an odd way. The wolf never left the child's side. She would occasionally play with Alex only if they both children were together. Petyr felt that Alex took it as a small betrayal that Lady preferred his sister, but the boy never said a word about it. Instead he took to reading quickly even for a young child and Petyr kept him amply supplied with books, maps and everything that sparked his interest. If Alex was content, it was all his father could hope for. He didn't ask about his mother anymore, but Petyr knew she wasn't forgotten. Many times, as he stood outside Alex's room at night, he could hear the boy praying.

Petyr wasn't a religious man and he certainly didn't teach Alex about it, nor did Sansa other than an occasional trip to town and keeping up appearances for the townfolk. Alex was baptised after all. Petyr felt that the loss of his mother pushed the boy to hope she was in a better place. Petyr couldn't take that away from him. They hadn't attended services since before Sansa's burning and Petyr wasn't about to start up that charade again. Alex's prayers were simple, just a little boy hoping his mother was thinking of him wherever she was and it gnawed at Petyr's heart, knowing he was the cause of his son's grief.

Caty's laughter caught her father's attention, bringing it back to the present. A butterfly fluttered around her head and then landed on her arm. Petyr watched in awe at her gentleness. The insect's wings were a periwinkle blue with little flecks of white, oddly reminding Petyr of Sansa's dress when he found her dancing in the ballroom by herself. He didn't know why that memory popped into his head all of a sudden. Caty giggled at the butterfly and Petyr didn't realize he stopped playing to watch her. She was too precious for words, he thought. She was humming as if trying to talk to the pretty thing on her arm.

"Muhhhh"

Petyr couldn't move. The girl pointed at the butterfly and then it flitted and landed on her finger. She smiled and laughed, and the insect lifted off and fluttered, landing on the piano's edge. Caty wasted no time and crawled over to the bench, trying to pull herself up. Petyr picked her up gently, setting her on his lap as she became excited and hit the keys with her tiny hands. Suddenly, the little blue winged insect fluttered out the window.

Just then the bird flew over and across the top of the piano, making its way towards his baby daughter. This time Petyr didn't attempt to swat it away. He was mesmerized at what was happening. The little thing chirped and hopped around while Caty reached for it, but was held back by her father's firm grasp.

"Maaahh...ma"

His heart stopped. Petyr had been trying to get her to say "Papa" or something like it for days. Since Alex had stopped talking about Sansa, Petyr couldn't remember saying the word "Mama" around Caty. Alex had always called her "Mum" or "Mummy". It was possible that it was only gibberish. She didn't know what she was saying. She kept pointing at the bird, a sparrow, from what Petyr could tell by its markings and color.

"Bird," he corrected lightly and she looked at him with a smile. "*Biiird*. Caty. *Bird*."

She knew her name and responded to many words, but speaking was still coming slowly. Alex started forming small words around this time and "Papa" was his first much to his mother's dismay.

"Buhhh," she gurgled and laughed and pointed to the sparrow again. "Maaahh...maaaa..."

"Bird," Petyr smiled and pointed to it so she understood.

The sparrow chirped loudly before flying off and all Caty said over and over to her father's complete shock was "Ma! Ma!"

That scene played in his head the entire time Mrs. Ames was attending to his hand, applying a new salve to help the pain.

"You were playing the piano today," she stated while working the medicine into the scarred

tissue. "How does it feel?"

"Hmm?" he answered absently.

"Your hand," she smiled at his daydreaming. "You need to use it more or it will stiffen up."

"Oh," he flexed it a bit and winced. "It never stops hurting. It's bearable enough."

I deserve to have pain for the rest of my days, he wanted to say. Even that wouldn't compare to the price Sansa paid.

"I'm afraid there's not much else I can do here," she examined his mangled hand, marred by the huge gash in his palm and the burns that distorted the flesh, making it look like it belonged to a demon than a man.

"What you can do is talk to me," he suddenly grumbled. It had been a year and with all his reading and researching, Petyr was no closer to an answer. This woman knew and yet refused to help. Why?

Mrs. Ames sighed and sat back in the chair. The summer breeze billowed through the curtains in Sansa's room while Caty slept.

"I told you it won't do any good. She's gone and there's nothing you can do to bring her back," the woman eyed him with such sadness.

"You don't know that. Not for certain. *Nothing* is for certain, that I do know."

Petyr stared at the woman and then grabbed her hand when she tried to stand up.

"Sit down," he commanded and when she didn't attempt to move again, Petyr stood and began pacing. "I've read everything I could get my hands on and it couldn't be more vague. I've hardly learned anything more than what I read as a child."

"It's ancient legends, my lord," Mrs. Ames shrugged. "You won't find a book detailing their history. It's been passed down from generation to generation in songs and poems. What original writing, if it still exists anywhere up north, has faded from man's understanding. I doubt you'll be able to find anyone able to read it. Even then, it's not going to give you directions on how to find her."

"That leaves you, doesn't it? You were there. You told me so that day," Petyr retorted softly not wishing to wake Caty.

"As I told you then, it won't matter even if I could find my way back. They'll never let you in. Your only reason for coming would be to take her back and they won't let you. Besides, the longer she stays, the more like them she will become. It's only a matter of time. She will forget you. She will forget the children."

"No, I don't believe that. Did you hear her? She didn't want to go. She was scared. She doesn't belong there," Petyr pointed out. He remembered everything from that day as if it happened this morning.

"She was never meant for this world," the woman whispered softly. "I've often wondered, even though she said no, if they tried to reach her when she was a child in the north. It wasn't until she came here that I could sense how much they wanted her."

"Why? Why her?"

"She's pure. A true innocent. A believer in a world of skeptics and religion. They've become a tale for children's books. Ghost stories and legends. People nowadays don't believe in such things. You didn't. They'll take anyone that they can trick and make believe in them."

"And what do they do to those they take?" he asked with a fear of knowing.

"Make them theirs. Their bloodline is dying, I believe. They take those that are strong... and beautiful. I think in Sansa's and even Caty's case, pure of heart," she sniffed looking at the sleeping babe, so peaceful in her little bed.

Petyr swallowed hard. The image of Sansa being used as nothing more than a brood mare made his stomach turn. No, she would never allow it, would she?

"Is that what they did to you?" His eyes hard as he glared at the old woman sitting before him. "Why did they take you?"

"They didn't. I sought them out. I went willingly," she cried at the memory of her youth. "I hated my life. I wanted another one. I wanted to be somewhere beautiful. I wanted to be someone else. You know what that feels like, don't you?" The woman looked at him with a knowing that made Petyr feel like that little boy again in Riverrun. He wanted to be anyone than the poor, low born thing he really was. "It started in my dreams and then I would hear them calling me to the woods. One day I started walking into the forest and I can't explain it... I don't know how I got there."

Petyr sat back down and threaded his fingers together, listening intently. He had to learn something from this woman.

"What did you see?"

Mrs. Ames looked up at him with glassy eyes. "Beauty. Everywhere. You might as well ask what Heaven looks like, if there is one. There's no hate, greed, or pain. Just peace."

"Except that you're forced to give them children, is that it?" he sneered. "How can a place be beautiful if you're nothing but a slave?"

"As compared to this world, my lord? You're not a woman. Walk in her shoes and somehow you might think differently. What have men done to women all this time? Have they given them a choice in what their lives will be?" the old woman tossed back without a shred of fear and Petyr

was stilled into silence.

Petyr closed his eyes at his own arrogance. Mrs. Ames wasn't wrong. Not at all. Did Petyr give Sansa a choice? No, he forced her down the path he made for her. They had this particular conversation many times before. What if things had been different? Would they have ever been together, had children?

"I'm sorry. I know you love her," the housekeeper sighed and dabbed her eyes. "It's not what you think. They don't force themselves on you. Just like us, they seduce, woo, and hope that enough time has passed that the ones they take will forget their former lives. Those of us who seek them out, do so because we're unhappy. The ones they take, and it is wrong, are usually healthy children. Hence the changelings exchanged who are most often ill. It isn't right what they do, but we'd be hypocrites of the worst kind to think we're much better. You're not a naïve man, my lord. You're more than what you've pretended to be all these years I've known you. I know what you did to Royce's daughter and Duncan. I know about the boy you buried. We are capable of such great love... and such horrors."

Petyr could not form a single sentence. She knew what he had done. Petyr told no one about the Bolton boy. Only the one servant had aided him bringing Duncan, Myranda and her son to the tunnel by the lake. No one asked about any of them since. Surely there were whispers after he executed them, especially considering he burned Duncan alive. But the servants hated both of them for what they did to Sansa.

Mrs. Ames picked up his right hand and turned it over, studying it. "For us, our right hands are what we are born with and the left is what life, or what we've chosen to do with it. For men, it is the opposite," she spoke running a finger down Petyr's palm. "Such pain, just like her. So many terrible things but you are capable of so much more."

She picked up his scarred hand and sighed, "Whatever you were born with will remain a mystery. I refuse to believe you have always been this way. You've been alone a long time, but now you have two beautiful children. They are your destiny now."

Petyr yanked his hands from her. "My God," he breathed in horror.

"God has nothing to do with this. There's no God or the Devil, but there is good and evil. I have seen that all my life. You have an atonement to make. Your choice, right now, will define you forever. Sansa paid the price to save these children. Don't waste yours and their lives looking for her. I told you that day in the woods, even if you found her... she may not know you. You may forget why you're even there. Then what happens to your children? Why do you think she left them in your care?"

"They need their mother," he breathed.

"No, they need their father right now or you risk losing them too," she stood and pulled the blanket back from Caty's sleeping form.

"What do you mean?" he asked as fear tore through his belly.

She turned the girl's arm enough to expose her wrist.

"Do you see it?" she asked and lifted her own sleeve and Petyr saw a mark on the old woman's weathered arm. "Her mother has one too. I thought it might disappear after that morning, after they took Sansa but she is still marked."

Petyr remembered questioning the very same thing almost a year ago.

"Are you telling me she sacrificed herself for nothing?" Petyr seethed with anger. After everything that happened, was his daughter still at risk?

"They marked her in the womb that day of the burning. I tried to explain to Sansa years ago that they are tricksters and liars... they wait until you're most vulnerable. I worry about this child." Mrs. Ames studied Petyr for a moment and frowned. "You've seen it haven't you? The way animals respond to her... everything. Harrenhal sits on much older, ancient ruins. I fear she isn't safe here. I almost wished you hadn't brought Sansa back from Kings Landing. It would have been better had you taken her far away," the woman slumped back into the chair.

Petyr had thought the same thing many times. Why hadn't he just taken her away and lived their lives in peace and left this damned game that ruined everything? Was Caty in danger staying here? The birds, butterflies... was it a sign that they were after her too regardless of what her mother did to save her?

They are tricksters and liars...

Of all the stories Petyr read about faerie folk, daoine sidhe and Tír na nÓg, the tales of finding such a place was through caves, puca pools, lakes or crossing the sea on a magical horse. Were these tales false too? The Other World was told to be a place incredibly beautiful and where one could live in youth forever. Were these stories told just to entice people to go there?

"If it was so perfect and beautiful, why did you leave?" Petyr asked dreading the answer.

Tears fell, tracing down the deep lines of the old woman's face. "It is beautiful. That I remember. Sometimes I wonder if it was a mistake to leave. You forget. Your former life feels like nothing more than a dream you once had. I can't even describe it to you. When you come back, it's as though you have woken from a deep sleep and the Other World was just a dream."

"Why did you come back?" Petyr asked again.

Mrs. Ames took a deep breath, "Because I missed my family. I wanted to come home."

Petyr nodded with a frown and it reaffirmed what he already knew. Sansa did not want to be there. He knew her. She wouldn't forget. She wanted to be home. She wasn't meant to be there.

"And they let you go?"

"Yes," she cried softly. "You must understand, with her it's different. I *chose* to go. In doing so, I could choose to leave. Sansa made a pact with them. She promised them the baby to save their lives. In breaking that bargain, she gave herself to them. She doesn't have a choice. That was the price to save her daughter. You can't help her now."

Petyr shook his head. He was stubborn man, he knew, but he made Sansa a promise. He wasn't going to give up on her.

"You won't take me there, will you?" The question was pointless for her knew the answer.

"No. Your place is here. For a while you might sense her every now and then – the wind in the trees, the birds that perch on your window and seem to sing only to you..." Mrs. Ames ran her hand over Caty's red curls and smiled sadly. "She feels her. I thought it would be the other way around if Sansa had given her to them. Caty was born with a sense of her mother."

Petyr was taken back to the music room when she called the bird, "Mama". It couldn't be a coincidence, could it?

"I could sense my family back home. It felt like a hazy dream at first but when it grew stronger I knew I had to go home. If I had stayed, I know I would have forgotten them in time. It's going to happen to Sansa at some point. Her strong love for you and the children may stave that off for years, maybe your lifetime, but in the end it will happen. She will become one of them. At least she will live forever."

Live forever in peace and beauty but forget everything she was, is what Mrs. Ames really meant. At the same time, she would have been dead in that dreadful fire had she not made the promise. Sansa must have sat here and pained over the decision to give Caty away to immortality knowing that she would never know her parents and life here. In the end, Sansa chose to give her daughter a normal life and go into that beyond herself. She didn't choose to go there because she hated her life and wanted something else, she chose only to save her beloved child. Sansa knew what Mrs. Ames was telling him now.

"With this mark, I worry that they lied to Sansa and may attempt to take the child another way," Mrs. Ames voice broke his thoughts with a sudden terror.

"But she gave herself to them," he argued.

"And they saved the child... for now. They saved both of them from certain death. That doesn't mean they won't try and work their lies on Caty as she grows up. Sansa didn't fulfill her end of the bargain, she forced them to take her or she would have poisoned herself and the child. She broke the pact. I don't trust them to leave this child alone forever. Caty is highly attuned to everything around her, and she's barely a year old. I worry they might use Sansa to call her to them. They want children more than anything. Just because Sansa saved her that morning, doesn't mean they won't try and get the child again."

Petyr picked up his sleeping daughter and she didn't even wake. Caty curled into his protective embrace as he slowly backed away from the woman.

"She wouldn't," he protested.

"I saw what happened in the music room today. I was bringing your tea when she called out to her... It's going to happen. Just like Sansa, she will find herself wandering further from the house and to the woods. The wolf knows, why do you think Lady hasn't left her side? The Mórrígan is a protector, maybe it's Sansa coming through Lady. I don't know. The point is, Sansa may not know after a time. She won't know you or her daughter. I would like to believe she would protect her daughter...but..."

Mrs. Ames stood wearily and walked to the door, opening it softly.

"You need to leave Harrenhal, Your Grace. Take the children away from this house. Your son is miserable, you are haunted and can't see anything but your loss, and I believe your daughter will only be in danger here. The gossip and rumors have swelled about Lady Sansa and it will be terrible for your children to learn about her from vicious whispers. You must know by now what they are saying about her... and you."

A fortnight passed and that conversation infected Petyr's mind like nothing else. He lay awake at night with nothing but worry as he watched Caty until troubled sleep finally closed his eyes. Petyr didn't want to admit Mrs. Ames had spoken a truth and logic that he didn't want to hear. She said almost the same things the day they took Sansa but Petyr convinced himself he could find a way. Stacks of books, letters and research had done nothing to further his pursuit. Petyr wanted Sansa back so badly that he didn't stop to think of the cost it might bear on the children. The county folk were thinking he was mad or murdered his wife. If they stayed here, sooner or later the children would learn of it.

Petyr sat against the oak tree for what felt like the thousandth time. Not once since he came here daily had he discovered anything that would bring him closer to his love. She didn't give him a sign she was here or hoping for him to save her. Not a voice on the wind telling him to wait, that she was coming back.

He didn't want to believe it. He didn't want to listen to reason from the one person that had been to that other world, that actually knew what he was dealing with.

"It's not your fault. I did it for you, for all of you. Promise me, you'll take care of them. Tell them their mother loves them."

He didn't have to promise her, Sansa knew he would take care of their precious children. He would never let them forget their mother.

"Don't let go!"

"Never," he whispered to himself. "You're always with me, but I must protect her now. You've knew that or you wouldn't have given her to me."

It wasn't goodbye, Petyr told himself when he rode out to the woods this morning. Every day for over a year, he came here and was no closer to finding her. Mrs. Ames refused to aid Petyr any further and instilled a fear in him for his child's safety. Since that day, it was obvious Petyr couldn't keep Caty here any longer. Every little creature that came to her she called "Mama" and it worried her father to death. Petyr dreamt of that bird constantly and wondered if it was indeed a warning. He remembered how Sansa would wander further and further from the grounds and not recall how she got there. If they stayed, Petyr would be frantic about Caty's whereabouts every minute of every day. He couldn't lock her inside the house forever.

Standing, Petyr found the branch and slipped his scarred hand into its rough and knotted grip.

"Tell me to stay, sweetling," he begged softly. "*Please*. I'll never leave this place if you give me a sign. I'll wait forever."

Just as he feared, like the hundreds of times before, nothing happened. Petyr's heart ached and he found it so hard to leave, not knowing if or when he would return. He asked Mrs. Ames one last time to help him find Sansa and she refused.

"Then I'll find someone who will," he bellowed, marching from the kitchens in a foul temper. Petyr could have thrown the housekeeper out once and for all but something told him to keep a cool head. He didn't know if he would ever need this old northern woman in the future. She was very old and had no other home than Harrenhal. Sansa trusted her and Petyr didn't have it in him to send her away.

Packing the last of his trunks, Petyr looked around Sansa's bedroom. Everything in this house reminded him of her. He could hear her laughter, feel her touch. Even the bed still smelled of her. Wandering into her dressing room, he sifted through her many dresses. All of them were a memory. The emerald gown she wore to the opera: how stunning she looked that night to the jealous eyes of the ton. God, it felt like ages ago. He was a different man back then. All he wanted was to win the game and marry her. Petyr foolishly thought everything would be fine in the end.

Sansa's dressing table was just as she left it. There were even a few auburn strands tangled in her hairbrush. Perfumes, jewels, hair combs and everything Petyr bought for her since he first brought Sansa here from Riverrun lay still on the table. Catching his reflection in the mirror, Petyr couldn't see the man he used to be when they first met. The eyes that stared back were that of another man.

Returning to her bedroom, he opened drawers and looked through her things as he had done so often over the past year. He saw the key to the padlocked doors under the house and pocketed it. Some of her drawings and smaller paintings lay in one corner of the room where he placed her easel. Choosing the one she painted of Harrenhal in spring, Petyr stored it in his trunk with a little smile. He still had the signed sketch she drew of him that day in the music room. Petyr remembered he was so close to kissing her, when her dress and the drawing caught fire.

The footmen announced themselves to carry his belongings down the to carriage and Petyr nodded as he followed them out and closed the doors. Alex was bursting at the seams with excitement of leaving home for the first time. Petyr wished he could share the boy's enthusiasm. Once he would have been thrilled at taking his son on a pilgrimage. Now, Petyr was filled with regret. He was leaving her behind.

Caty was being fussy and the nurse was having a terrible time feeding her before the long carriage ride to Kings Landing. Alex was furious when he was told he couldn't take his beloved horse with him, but Petyr said they weren't staying in the capital long before sailing for Prussia. Petyr had procured apartments in Hanover. It seemed like a good place to start. He didn't want to head north this late in the year with two small children. It was far too cold for Caty. The mainland was rife with old legends. The Vikings had believed in many Gods like the Romans and Greeks. Trolls, giants and faerie like creatures. There had to be similarities, or was what happened to Sansa purely of Northern mysticism?

The wars had ended and a strange sort of peace spread across Europe. It would be a good opportunity to explore the region without the threat of Napoleon's armies reeking havoc any longer. It would also be a prime time to expand and forge new commerce, in King Robert's name. He only needed a short time to deal with Robert and set things in motion. Robert took his uncle for the grieving husband and father he was and didn't question it. Petyr had trustworthy men around his nephew and anything of importance would come to him on the mainland. Alex and Caty would be able to learn from other cultures, languages, everything Petyr and Sansa wanted for them.

Petyr gazed at Sansa's portrait with a sad smile. He recalled how stony her expression was until that day she spied him watching – after he had written the music for her. She was swollen with Alex at the time but the painting kept her slim figure. Petyr moved to just the right position as he tended to do so many times. If he stood just next to the sculpture, her eyes stared right at him. The little hint of a smile lit up her face with such love – love for him. A love he didn't deserve.

Petyr was going to miss her face, and then an idea popped into his mind. A miniature portrait. That's what he would have made. One for each of them. Petyr wanted her likeness to fit inside his pocket watch, so he could look at it any time he wished.

"Here she is, Your Grace. Finally ready," Sarah handed him Caty who was reaching out for him. Funny, Petyr smiled, it took them over a year to finally call him by this new title and now he was leaving.

"Paaapaa," she squealed and Petyr grinned; it always reached his eyes with her. She finally learned to say it.

"We're going to miss these little ones," she sniffed with William at her side. "But you'll come home soon, won't you, m'lord?"

Petyr only smiled and nodded, not sure if it was a lie. He spied Mrs. Ames in the grand gallery as he passed by with Caty in his arms while Alex ran to the carriage. They didn't say a word to each other, only Caty reached out for the woman.

"Caa!" she belted out and Petyr saw the housekeeper dab her eyes with an handkerchief before turning and walking away. The child cried out for the older woman who took care of her over the past year in vain as her father ascended into the carriage leaving the only home his children ever knew.

The Key

Chapter Notes

This chapter has taken me some time to finish. I know it's been months but for those you who have probably given up on this story or to the few followers I may have left... I have been typing with one hand. Due to some serious medical issues, I'm losing the use of my left hand/arm. Something as easy as typing has become increasingly difficult and time consuming to do now.

I will finish this story whether anyone is left to read it or not. I have to finish it. I want to thank my beta for being so sweet and helpful. So for the first half, I feel the mistakes are minimal. However, the last half of this big chapter are all my potential mistakes. If I had to go back and rewrite it, I was afraid I'd never post it and I've made you wait long enough for this chapter.

I said once before, I think there's approximately 6 chapters left in this story. The two last chapters will be huge due to the plot and the nature of what happens to sew this story up. As I've said before, I hope there's a few that will still be here until the end. Due to the show eliminating our favourite king pin/mastermind... I don't expect many of my past readers/fans to still be around.

I think a lot of people are upset and most likely will move on to some other ship/characters. This story has become bigger than the PxS to me and I will finish it.

To those PxS or just Petyr fans. I love you all and thank for all the support and friendship this fandom has offered. I'm not giving up on this pairing because I love it very much. I hope you all keep reading and for those of you talented authors, keep writing.

"Allez plus vite, Papa!" Caty laughed. "Allez! Allez!"

She always wants to go as fast as possible.

Petyr could only grin with pure happiness in the moment. He had a vice grip on his daughter and she didn't have a care in the world as the wind whipped through her auburn hair. One thing she had in common with her brother was the love of riding. After the very first time, she wanted to go with her father every time she saw his horse saddled.

Petyr commanded the horse at a quicker pace, just shy of a full gallop. She was still so very small, and yet had no fear of the large animal.

"Tu es sûr?" he asked with a chuckle. If she was sure, he would go on that instinct. Never had he known a child to be so sure of herself and without fear.

"Oui! Allez!" she screamed and held onto his arm.

Alright, he laughed to himself and jabbed the horse with his heels. Faster, we go!

Caty giggled with delight as her little bonnet fell off and hung loose around her neck. A vision of Sansa popped into his mind from so long ago. The day he gave her the mare and they raced home, her hair was flowing behind her and her bonnet had come undone, hanging on only by the ribbon. Even Caty's little laugh sounded like her mothers in this moment and Petyr felt a pang of loss once again.

No, it's a lovely day. Don't ruin it. Stay in the present.

Summer in France was always beautiful. The countryside just on the outskirts of Paris was brimming with life. Everything was in bloom and his daughter was so happy here. Every day she managed to bring a smile to his face. This lovely little girl, who was the spitting image of her mother, radiated life and love.

"Father!" he heard Alex not far behind, catching them up quickly.

"Whoah..." he pulled back on the reigns and slowed down to Caty's dismay. "Décidez vous de nous rejoindre, après tout?" Petyr grinned as his son approached. Perhaps Alex changed his mind after all to join them for a ride. He rarely rode with them anymore.

"Nein. Es ist ein Mann im Haus," Alex responded. "Ich bin gekommen, um dich abzuholen."

A man at the house? Petyr wasn't expecting visitors today. It must be important enough for his son to come fetch him. At the same time he sighed at Alex's continued use of German. The boy was just being obstinate at this point to irritate his father.

"En français, s'il vous plaît?" Petyr pressured the boy with a half-smile. Alex's French needed attending to. They left Prussia over a year ago, he had to learn the language sooner or later. "Nous ne vivons plus à Hanovre."

“Ich ziehe Deutsch vor,” Alex argued.

Of course he would prefer to speak German language – or was it because his father was urging him to learn a new one? By the age of eleven, Petyr’s son was more than a handful. At times, Petyr felt more like a teacher than a father. Fatherhood was far more difficult than he ever expected. The boy challenged him on practically everything nowadays.

“Warum konnten wir nicht länger in Hannover bleiben? Ich mag es hier nicht,” Alex grumbled.

Why did we leave Hanover? Because there was nothing left to learn there, Petyr wanted to toss back at him but held his tongue.

Petyr stopped trying to explain that the places they ventured to only served a primary purpose – finding their mother. They had traveled all around Prussia, Austria, Holland and the Scandinavian countries. There were variations on similar legends but nothing new to discover in finding a way to get Sansa back. Not one scholar could answer his strange questions about the Tuatha Dé Danaan and it wasn’t as though a Druid priestess was just waiting about for some rich duke to find her. Petyr might as well have told them he was looking for Merlin himself for all it afforded him.

Petyr was tempted to take them to Winterfell, where their mother was born. They had been away for so long. He had debated the idea for days and ultimately decided against it. Did he really want to risk taking his children back there? Winterfell was where their grandmother and family were murdered. They were too young to understand the gravity of it all. There was a chance someone up north might still know about the *daoine sídhe* and how to get there.

The more Petyr ran it over in his mind, it seemed like too much of a danger for his daughter.

What would become of his children if he found a way in? He couldn’t just leave them alone. After all this time and watching Caty grow, it frightened her father too much. As time moved on, Petyr became more afraid for Caty’s safety. Taking her to the North... he might as well spit on her mother’s sacrifice. Petyr didn’t dare entertain the thought of leaving the children to continue his search alone. He left Sansa and Alex alone to finish his game, believing in their safety and he lost both of them, only in different ways. It wasn’t going to happen a second time.

Every place they traveled, it wasn’t long before some mystical force seemed to follow them. Just like at Harrenhal, animals and nature flocked to his daughter. Petyr would find her alone talking to no one. Her governess told Petyr that children often create imaginary playmates, but this was eerily different. Caty had no desire to play with other children. She was in a world all to herself and whatever little creature that entered it. They didn’t stay in one place for long, and perhaps that in itself was the problem. Hanover felt more like home to the children than anywhere else they ventured to.

There, Petyr was still connected to the modern world and to that of his young nephew back in Kings Landing. He was able to conduct business and trade to improve relations with his king. Hanover was a cultured and modern city and hadn’t been hit as hard by Napoleon’s wars. It was a perfect jumping point to other places Petyr wanted to investigate. His gold went far here and no one asked unwelcome questions. He was a wealthy, widowed duke with two children and a direct line to the new king. Petyr’s reputation for trade was already well established in these parts well before Stark’s failed rebellion. The only thing Petyr made effort to keep secret was his hand. Rarely, did he ever remove his gloves and thankfully decorum allowed him to keep that grotesque flesh hidden from view. He wasn’t completely truthful to Mrs. Ames in his vanity. He detested the look and feel of it.

Alex liked his tutor, whom Petyr employed from the university in Stuttgart, and seemed to really take to the Prussian people. Petyr taught his son fencing and how to ride. Alex was fascinated with politics and asked Petyr a barrage of questions about it. The boy was well read and intelligent for his age, especially in mathematics and science. The German tutor was most impressed with the lad and complimented Petyr many times on the father’s own instruction to his son. Petyr felt it was unwarranted as his title seemed to be the sole reason for the praise. A grand duke was certainly a noteworthy patron as it was well known now that he was virtually the only advisor to the new, young king.

Alex was a quick study like his father was at that age. Sometimes he felt bits of his mother in his son but Petyr saw more of himself in so many ways. Not that all of Petyr’s qualities were bad, but that arrogance, stubbornness and even worse bitterness were ever present in Alex. It was enough to give his father pause to question whether he was raising him right. Was he being too strict, or not enough? Alex didn’t want to be coddled or gushed over. Those attentions seemed to be only loved by his daughter. Why Alex took such resentment in those affections, his father couldn’t understand. Petyr thought praising the boy in his accomplishments would satisfy but everything Petyr tried never seemed to affect Alex for long.

However much Petyr felt he lacked as a father, his need to protect them was foremost in everything he did. When he heard Caty having a conversation with a bird, much like the sparrow from the music room, Petyr knew it was time, once again, to leave. The old housekeeper’s warnings still were ever present in his mind years later. Moving to France was more of a haven than an archeological site for legends. He wasn’t giving up on his beloved but perhaps it was time to let the children root in one place for a while. He could conduct his business from here and continue his research. Although as the years had passed, Petyr was becoming more despondent no matter much he fought the feeling. He didn’t want to believe that Mrs. Ames was right after all this time. He didn’t want to admit that his search was in vain.

Watching his son ride off towards the chateau left Petyr frustrated. Maybe Alex was right. He hadn’t been much a father to him as he was to Caty. Petyr had to be both mother and father now and it was taking its toll. His search for Sansa was keeping him distant from his children. Those dreams that plagued him at Harrenhal, persisted even now about their wedding rings. Recently, he would wake to find his hand bloody, holding a key - only to wake again with empty, sweaty palms. Petyr didn’t know what to make of it. Whenever he felt as though he needed to let Sansa go, he would have a terrible nightmare.

“Pourquoi, Papa?” Caty asked, looking up at him with wide eyes. She understood her brother’s last statement. She was so bright at such a young age, it was unnerving at times.

"Ich mag es hier nicht."

Of course Alex didn't like it here, Petyr mused. The boy put up quite the argument when Petyr told him they were moving again. Petyr caught up to his son, trotting along side him.

"And what's so terrible about France? The food and wine are infinitely better as well as the weather," Petyr retorted with exasperation. "I thought you would have preferred it."

"You said we could go to Rome with you next time and yet we've come here instead," Alex replied with a tone of irritation. "The people are rude to us because we're foreign. I wanted to see the ancient cities."

"Alexander, we're in Versaille, not some little village in the mountains. I've taken you all around Paris, Notre Dame, the palaces..." Petyr sighed. "The French just survived Napoleon. Let them breathe a bit." The city was filled with beautiful architecture and history. Granted, much of country had been ravaged by war with Austria and Prussia but like home, they too were rebuilding their lives.

His son shrugged, jabbing his horse a bit faster towards the chateau. "I suppose I wanted to see the places that Alexander the Great had conquered – Greece, Egypt... I was named after him wasn't I?"

Petyr held onto to Caty following him and noticed she was watching her brother intently. She knew a few German words but French came naturally to her as English. Her nurse maid was French and only spoke in her native tongue. Even in Hanover, the girl started picking up both languages as she learned to speak more and more.

"You were also named after a wolf, but I don't see you begging to go back home," Petyr barked under his breath.

"Mother named me Faolan, didn't she?"

That surprised Petyr. Alex hadn't mentioned her in a very long time. He even stopped praying when he was younger. However, the way he said it gave Petyr a strange feeling. Did his son have an issue with his northern name? He had never expressed such in the past. There was no reason for him to be embarrassed about his maternal heritage.

"Yes. She saw a strength in you. We both did. Alexander the Great conquered much of the known world. He was a man of science, tutored by Aristotle himself..."

"He also came to power once his father was murdered... and his mother was a witch, or so I read," the young boy interrupted his father into silence.

Petyr grabbed the reigns of Alex's horse, forcing him to stop. "Alexander Faolan, I've had enough of this. I've brushed many things under the rug but I'll not have you insult your mother. What's become of you lately? Have I failed you so much as a father? Where does this hatred for me come from? I couldn't save your mother, is that it?"

"She's dead and you're *her* father. When was the last time you were a father to me? Why don't you just ship me off to school like all the other boys I know? Then Caty can have you all to herself," Alex snapped staring at his sister.

So, that's what this was about? Jealousy? God in heaven, it was times like these Petyr wished Sansa was here. She would know exactly what to say. Alex could be absolutely impossible at times. Out of the clear blue, he would fly into a rage. Petyr wondered if he was this obstinate when he was Alex's age. He couldn't remember all of his childhood. Mainly key moments that, for better or for worse, impacted him to manhood.

Alex's statement wasn't untrue, for Petyr knew his history. Pointing out Alexander the Great's mother was a witch, shook Petyr to the core. Sansa's burning wouldn't have reached this far after six years. Who was she to anyone outside of the Riverlands? He would delve into that topic with his son later. It was the nasty tone Alex used towards his sister that Petyr would not allow.

"Alex, she's six years old. You'll be twelve soon – and manhood not too far off. Trust me when I tell you how fast time flies. You're not a little child anymore," Petyr admonished him and then immediately regretted his choice of words.

"Then I want to go to school. I don't care where. Anywhere but here. All my friends back in Hanover started school a year ago. Why am I still here with a governess?"

With that, the boy took the reigns and galloped back to the house leaving a stunned Petyr and his little sister behind.

"Papa?"

"It's alright, Sparrow," Petyr kissed the top of her head. "I'll speak with him later. You have done nothing wrong. He's angry with me, not you."

Petyr had nicknamed her Sparrow two years ago in Austria. On a day, much like today, she was playing in the garden when dozens of birds surrounded her. They weren't scared of the little girl at all but seemed to be transfixed by her. The servants were all a-chatter about how she was like a faerie child, at one with nature. The maids thought it was the most lovely thing and yet the father stood there with an underlying fear.

All manner of forest creatures would walk right up to his daughter. He understood why the servants thought it precious as if from a children's fable. It started with birds and butterflies, then one day a fawn approached her and Caty was never afraid for a moment. She talked to flowers, animals and insects as if they could talk back – in a voice she alone could hear. Petyr couldn't count the different types of animals he had seen approach her, let her touch them as if they were

friends all along. Lady was always at her side. People tended to give Petyr a strange look when they saw the large, white wolf that he kept as a trusted companion. Lady was so gentle with Caty and watched her relentlessly. Only a few times did the wolf bark and scare away other animals, a doe in particular that was brave enough to come too close. However, all of the smaller creatures, Lady remained silent but watched her human child protectively. Lady even bared her teeth once at Alex to everyone's shock. His sister had a favored toy of his, and when her brother tore it away from the young girl's hands, the wolf took a stance between them.

His daughter was a curious girl, they all told Petyr. Beautiful and pure as an angel. She had a grace about her even at the age of four. Caty didn't walk or act like other children her age. She glided as if floating on cloud and spoke in soft tones. She never fussed or acted out and she adored her father in which he lavished his only daughter with affections. Petyr would throw her up high, her frilly dress catching the air as she would come down knowing he would always catch her. Christmas and birthdays, she loved her drawing pencils, dresses and the new pony he bought, thinking a horse was too much for a little girl even though her brother had one on his fifth birthday.

"He doesn't like it, Papa. His back hurts," she told her father when she asked him to remove the little saddle. "I don't want him to feel bad."

She adamantly refused to ride him. To Petyr's astonishment, that grey pony followed her everywhere in the gardens. Caty even tried to bring him into the house one day, but at that her father had to put his foot down. She was so pure of heart, just like her mother, wanting to take care of everything and everyone. Like her brother she learned to read early on but music was her true love. It didn't surprise Petyr in the slightest. As a baby, she loved to hear her father play the piano or sing her to sleep with sweet lullabies. Petyr couldn't remember how many times she asked her father to 'dance' with her. He would hold her in his arms and when she grew bigger, she would stand on his toes in time with the music.

Petyr hid a smile as he and Lockland, the man Alex told him about, sat in his study discussing King Robert and necessities for Westeros. They could hear Caty playing the piano in the other room and she was improving every day. She was already years above the skill level expected for one so young. Not exactly a Mozart, but Sansa would be so proud of her daughter's accomplishments.

After Lord Lockland left, Petyr formalized plans for returning to Kings Landing by next year. He had hoped to stay in Versailles for a few more years but Robert was struggling and demanded his uncle return as soon as possible. He was making himself ill Lockland advised, one of Petyr's trusted middle-men turned Baron of Elderton. Petyr was rather surprised he was able to spend this much time abroad as it was. He was expecting Robert to call him back at any time to be by his side – and essentially run the kingdom for him.

Walking to the music room, Petyr lingered just outside the double paned-glass doors. His daughter was so sweet and lovely. Her little feet dangled, unable to touch the pedals of the piano. Petyr considered buying her a smaller instrument but now it wouldn't matter, for they would be heading back home. The afternoon sun filtered into the room as Lady lay on her back in-front of the windows. Petyr was taken back at the sight. This is how Sansa must have looked at Caty's age.

Her auburn curls were wild from riding and it was a striking contrast to her blue and white lace dress. Caty reflected everything beautiful about her mother since she was just a baby. She rarely ever cried as a child and was just a stunning creature. Petyr could still feel her tiny fingers grasp one of his as he held her in his arms. She would stare at him with those brilliant green eyes for the longest time as he sang her to sleep.

Those same hands would bang on the keys of the piano as her father laughed. Even at the age of two she wanted to play and would find a way onto his lap whenever he sat on the polished bench. She would watch his hands as he played and occasionally strike a single key, looking up at him with a smile.

It took Petyr back to one day in Hanover, when he could hear the tinkering of a couple of keys from his study. Putting his ledger away, he crept to the sitting room, the only room that could accommodate the piano in their apartments. Caty sat at the piano playing with a couple keys in a simple, random pattern. Every so often she would find another note that complimented the other two. She had kicked off her shoes as those little stocking clad feet swayed to a rhythm she was trying to find.

Her fourth birthday had only been a fortnight ago, Petyr smiled as he watched her from behind the doors. Again and again she tried to find whatever tune was in her mind on the keys. It was austere and completely endearing.

Petyr walked in and Caty looked up at him with the most heart-warming smile. It was the kind of smile that Sansa would give him when she was truly happy. The love he felt for this child still could not overcome the pain of losing his beloved wife. It was unfair, Sansa should be here to witness all these little things with her children. People said the pain of loss lessened after time, but Petyr felt as each year passed – it only became harder.

He sat down next to his daughter, as she made room for him, just as her mother always did. Caty returned to playing the notes she was practicing before. After a minute or two, Petyr would take her hand to a specific key, hearing the note she was seemingly looking for. At that she smiled as if finding a treasure and went back to playing and adding in what her father showed her.

Just like with her mother, Petyr's hand found a simple melody to accompany his little girl. Whenever they were together on that piano, time stood still and nothing else mattered. A year went by in a whirl, and Petyr had spent so much time instructing her. If he let her, Caty would spend hours on that instrument much to the displeasure of her brother. How many occasions had Alex complained about his sister making noise? Perhaps Petyr hadn't noticed how much time he spent with Caty over the years, whether it was riding, reading, playing or ... Yes, Petyr sighed. He gave more of his attention to his daughter than his son.

Caty's playing improved steadily. No matter the numerous sheets of music he bought for her, she always came back to that little tune she created. Whenever Petyr would hear it, he had to stop

what he was doing and join her. It was one of the few moments of peace he could find in his day. It was something special he shared with Sansa and now he could do the same with his daughter.

A pretty melody grew in time and when Caty was in bed, Petyr would find himself downstairs tinkering on the piano like he used to at Harrenhal. Only this time it wasn't to scare the servants. There was something in this song and he added to it, writing it all down as time went by. It was a progression of her learning, starting humbly and evolving into something more complex and beautiful.

Petyr had been daydreaming again, when Caty's little voice brought him back to the present. He was about to answer her question, when he suddenly realized she wasn't speaking to him. She didn't know he was there at all.

"Where are you?" she asked aloud and stopped playing the piano.

Petyr watched her intently. He hadn't caught Caty talking to herself in months. The girl sighed as if the unknown entity had answered her question.

"I'm scared," she whispered. "Don't leave me."

She was quiet for a time and played with the lace on her dress, deep in thought. Petyr was about to speak when he was once again stilled into silence.

"Papa never smiles anymore," she said and glanced at the window. That same little bird was perched on the flower box that Petyr had seen so many times. "Will you speak to him?"

Not a sound came from that bird as it sat there and his daughter eerily seemed to be listening to some ghostly voice that her father couldn't hear. She nodded her head sadly and then the bird, *a sparrow*, was startled and flew off. That bird was a constant in Caty's young life, hence, her nickname Sparrow came about. Sparrows weren't known for beauty in their song, their chirping was staccato and abstract. They were gentle birds and were usually found around one's home and garden. Those early days when Caty was just learning to play the piano reminded him of that bird that would always be present in the music room. Petyr jokingly called her Sparrow once, and it stuck there after. It was something purely between father and daughter.

Despite her governess' attempts, Caty couldn't sing. Proper young ladies were expected to be able to master some talent in the arts. Drawing and what promised to be the mastering of the piano made Petyr happy. She was so much like Sansa.

"You scared her, Papa."

Petyr tentatively walked towards his little girl as she began to play the piano again.

"Did I? Who are you talking to, Sparrow?"

"Does she talk to you, too?"

Petyr sat down as Caty made room for him, as she always did.

"Whom?"

The girl gazed up at him with wide eyes, as if he should have known all this time.

"Mummy."

His heart drummed in his chest and Petyr couldn't take a breath. Swallowing the lump in his throat, "She *talks* to you?"

"Mmhm..." she hummed and returned to playing the song from before.

Petyr chose his next words very carefully, "*When* did she start talking to you?"

"When I was little," she giggled.

Petyr wasn't sure she was being evasive on purpose. It was an innocent response. Placing his hands on hers, stopping the music, Petyr turned his daughters face to look at him.

"Do you remember when?"

She looked around the room and then smiled brightly, "I was on the floor and you were playing the piano, remember Papa? She looked like an angel with blue wings."

"What do you mean?"

What did his baby girl know that he didn't? Was Sansa really speaking to her daughter? Mrs. Ames said Sansa would forget them and it might be possible for him to sense her, but maybe it was Caty instead. Or... *they* were trying to trick his sweet little girl into believing a lie.

"She misses us."

Petyr didn't want to be over zealous, but his daughter could be maddeningly oblique in her own sweet way. She spoke in riddles and lived as if she were in her own dream world half of the time.

"Caty," he picked her up, setting the child on his lap. "This is very important, my love..."

"Papa, I want to go home."

She hugged him fiercely around the neck and the words died on her father's lips. What was he going to say again? Don't talk to them... it... her? It may not be your mother. What if it was? Sansa could have been trying to reach him all this time. He explored and spent years traveling when the answer could be holding him with her tiny arms and unquestionable love.

That night, Petyr couldn't sleep. He was bursting with questions and torrential emotions. Caty's first word was 'Mum'. It was directed at a butterfly when she was year old. How in the world could a child remember anything as a baby? Petyr couldn't even think of the word 'impossible'. After everything he had experienced with Sansa and Caty, that word was meaningless.

He remembered Mrs. Ames warning, pointing out the little mark on the baby's arm. Caty still carried that mark today. She and her mother were bonded more than just mother and child. That also meant something else. She was linked to that world too. It was their mark on her.

The idea that his own daughter could be the conduit in which he might reach his beloved, filled Petyr with excitement. Yet, a clawing dread made the acid churn in his stomach and he couldn't let go of his grounded reason and need to protect his children. It could be Sansa, but it could be a trick. It was gnawing his nerves raw between his desire to have one more moment with his love, wanting to have her back and keeping his daughter safe.

We have to go to Kings Landing. I don't have to take them back to Harrenhal. We could go to the Eyrie instead... Alex can attend school and Caty...

Petyr wanted smother himself with the pillow. He knew he wanted to go home. Caty, who shouldn't even be able to remember the home of her mother, the home where she was born... wanted to go back.

Looking at the decanter of brandy, Petyr was dying for a drink. There were nights, when it was the only way to calm his troubled mind into a deep and dreamless sleep. He made Sansa a promise well before Caty was born and controlled the urge to drown his sorrows.

Does she talk to you, too?

Sansa's emerald ring twinkled in the candlelight as Petyr picked it up, examining the symbol of their peculiar union. His finger traced the delicate scrollwork along the gold band. How many times had Petyr asked for her advice, begged her to speak to him? She tried to tell him the truth long before the children were even born, but he never truly listened.

"I'm listening now," he murmured into the darkness of his room. "I've always been waiting for a sign. Perhaps I've been going about this all wrong. If it is you, sweetling, I'm here."

Petyr wasn't sure what to expect - a phantom whisper or a nightingale to fly in and talk to him as the animals seemed to do with his daughter? The candle had burned low telling of the late hour as he waited in anticipation of anything and everything. Once again, to his upmost disappointment, only silence and darkness were his companions.

He felt a bit like an idiot talking to the darkness, but what else was he supposed to do, have a séance with some charlatan likely to rob him of his money and provide nothing but childish tricks? Petyr had already been down that road with gypsies and old women pretending to contact the spiritual world. It only took a minute before he knew it was a poorly rehearsed ruse, meant to swindle the foolish and vulnerable. Petyr had witnessed more of the supernatural than these imposters could dream up in their worst nightmares. He needed to speak with Caty again tomorrow and find out how she was connecting with her mother - if it was indeed her real mother.

Restless sleep slowly came, and Petyr felt himself falling deeper, suddenly sensing the chill of the woods. Where was he? The stars in the night's sky winked at him, teasing as if they knew the answers he was desperately searching for. The sun was on the horizon as its warmth glittered across the dark lake.

Gripping the cool metal in his hand, Petyr waited. She was here, his little witch. He could feel it. It had been ages as he stared at the shore of that lake. Cresting slowly, her head rose above the chilly waters like a mermaid greeting the mortal world for the first time. Painfully slow, she waded up to the shore, her pretty dress weighed down by the water. At first, Petyr wasn't sure it was her, but a mere ghost come to haunt him.

An emptiness filled his mind when she came so close that all he had to do was reach out and touch her, to finally know she was real. Those blue eyes were swimming in a cauldron of fear and sadness as she stared at him.

"What are you?" she breathed in horror, gazing at him as if he were a perfect stranger.

Petyr was about to reply when he couldn't remember her name. He knew this woman, didn't he?

Who are you?

"I'm your wife... I've come home," she pleaded with tears in her eyes.

I don't have a wife.

Caty's voice, that of a young woman, whispered in his ear.

You must remember, Papa.

Glancing down, Petyr spied the gold band on the woman's thumb. A ring much too big for her slender finger.

"Yours for mine," the beautiful woman echoed.

The pains of old age disappeared when she took his hand and Petyr felt young again. His heart soared with life anew when she kissed him, and it was as if it lasted a lifetime. The glow of the morning sun streamed through the branches of that damned, old oak tree, but it wasn't the sun's warmth that burned his skin.

A fire skirted around the edges of her lovely dress until it singed their joined hands, but it didn't hurt. The woman wasn't wailing in pain like some far off memory he once had, or an old legend remembered from childhood. Breaking the kiss, the woman moved away from him, still holding

his hand.

“Don’t go,” Petyr finally muttered, gripping her hand fiercely. She had to stay this time. How would he find her again?

“The key is in your hand, my love,” she smiled.

Petyr felt that cold metal when he opened his palm. He had been searching for this for years. It had been here all this time. His hand began to bleed as the blood dripped onto the forest floor.

“Where is the door, sweetling?”

When he looked back up, she was gone. Only the tree remained.

“Papa, you must be patient, she will come.”

Turning around swiftly, a beautiful young girl with flowing red hair smiled brightly at him. She reminded him of someone from his past, an old love. The hair and delicate face... but her eyes – no, they were different. Those eyes belonged to someone else. That young girl was long dead many years ago.

Petyr’s hand was aching with pain as it pulled him from that strange dream. The softness of his bed, the warm linens, even the scent of French lilacs filled his nostrils reminding him where he was. This time Petyr could remember the dream fully. How many times, in vain, had he wished he could remember his dreams? Gazing down at his injured hand, droplets of blood stained the bedclothes. Opening his palm, Sansa’s emerald ring was practically embedded in the scarred flesh. He must have had it in a vice grip all night.

“Yours for mine,” he muttered and recalled the details of the key he must acquire if he was to see his beloved again.

Everything in the dream told him Sansa was coming back. His little Caty was right, they needed to go home. It was Harrenhal – the key to where all of this lay. Petyr wiped his blood from her ring and placed it on the table next to his bed, cursing himself.

We never should have left. Why did I listen to that damned woman?

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Petyr rubbed the sleep from his face, his mind racing. If they left soon enough, he would have adequate time to winter in the capital and set things right with Robert. The first sign of melting snow, he could take the children back to Harrenhal – *back home*.

Alex would be furious. They were just getting settled in France and his father couldn’t contain the frustration at uprooting his children again. Only Caty would understand, but not her brother. Not after making such a fuss about leaving Hanover.

Walking over to the basin, Petyr gently washed the blood off and inspected the little cuts in his hand. Perhaps he was overthinking it. Alex detested France, so he pointedly mentioned on many occasions to his father’s ire. The boy might be thrilled to go to the capital and see his godfather, the King.

Brimsworth, one of the best schools in the country was just outside Kings Landing near Rosby. Petyr knew his son would not want to travel all the way back home. Maybe it was time to cut those strings he stubbornly wanted to hold onto. Alex was right, other boys his age had already begun school but Petyr wanted to keep his children close by. He had to let his son go or suffer the boy’s growing disobedience and resentment of him.

Once, Petyr would have been ecstatic at the idea of going to the same school as Edmure. It was not meant to be, Lord Tully decided. The first blow to a young boy who thought he was equal to the other children around him. Petyr learned all he could from the two daughters taught by their governess. He was destined to be nothing more than that of his father or his father before him. After Brandon shot him and the family Petyr stupidly believed was his, abandoned him to the desolate coast of The Fingers; Petyr was on his own.

Glancing out the window, morning was in full bloom with the sun climbed high in the sky. Petyr rarely slept this late. The little grey pony trotted across the gardens where Caty was waiting with a fist full of carrots. Her father couldn’t stop the smile forming on his creased face. She was so young and innocent. His daughter hugged the animal as if it was a treasured friend.

By the time Petyr dressed for the day and came downstairs to eat, the clock struck noon. The children would be coming in for lunch soon and he decided to wait for them while reading the news periodicals. Even though the light was bright, the damned print seemed to be getting smaller these days. Sighing, he withdrew the spectacles the doctor had made for him a year ago.

How old was he when Alex was born? Caty? She would turn seven years by next summer and Petyr did the sum in his head. That made him...

“Did you just wake up, Father?”

The saucy boy walked in from the terrace, completely windblown. Alex had been riding this morning by the looks of it.

“I wasn’t feeling all too well this morning,” Petyr replied with half a smirk and flipped to the next page.

“What did you do to your hand?”

Was that actual concern emanating from his son or was Petyr imagining it?

“Nothing. It bleeds every now and then,” the father lied evenly. “It never truly healed.”

Petyr waited for a hot-headed retort from the boy, but it never came. Only twice since her disappearance had he attempted to explain the scars to Alex. The boy’s skepticism was always there and after a while Petyr didn’t bother. It was easier to hide the grotesque thing as it seemed to

embarrass his son when people stared or asked questions as to the terrible injury. Alex was probably more afraid of the ridiculous tale his father might tell strangers about how faeries took his children's mother away.

"Papa!" a tearful voice cried, as a flurry of red hair filled his vision. The paper forgotten, he lifted Caty into his arms, consoling her.

Alex chuffed across the table and Petyr warned him with his eyes not to test his patience today.

"What's wrong, Sparrow?" he cooed.

"You won't leave him behind, will you?" she sobbed into his shirt sleeves.

"Who?"

"Bartleby! Can't we take him with us?"

It was the name she had given the little pony and Petyr smiled wistfully. Smoothing the hair back from her face, Petyr tilted up her chin when Alex's voice chimed in making his father wince.

"What is she on about? Are we going somewhere?" Alex's tone crackled with anger.

"Papa, don't leave him behind. He'll be sad. They'll be mean to him again!" Caty wailed as Petyr rocked her, eyeing his son's fury. Petyr didn't want him to be the last to know but it wasn't his sister's fault.

Alex crossed his arms frowning at his father and younger sister. "Where are we off to this time? The Orient? At least it will be interesting. Do you expect me to learn that language too?"

Petyr sighed heavily. He didn't have a moment's peace with Alex anymore. Everything agitated his son it seemed lately.

"We're going home."

For a brief second, Alex's face lit up until he realized '*home*' wasn't going back to Prussia. The scowl that formed confirmed his father's suspicions.

"When was it ever home? I don't even remember it."

"Alexander!" Petyr glared at his son making the boy huff and stare off into the corner. "Not to mention you were both born there, it's the home of your mother and I. *Our home*. I firmly remember you not wanting to leave at the time."

"That's because you made me leave my horse behind! It's probably dead of old age by now," he bellowed and then pointed at his sister. "But you'll take her stupid pony back with us, won't you? It's all about her! Every time we have to leave it's because of her."

"One more word," Petyr warned with such anger lacing his words, "and that goddamned horse will outlive you. Apologize to your sister, this instant."

"No," Alex shot back without fear. Petyr had never struck either child in their lives, but as he set his daughter down, his desire to redden the bottom of his son was ever present despite that he was turning into a young man now. "What are going to do to me, Father?"

Child, you have no idea of what kind of man I used to be. I pray, you'll never know.

Sansa would never forgive him if he ever laid a hand on her precious babies, but Petyr was at the end of his rope. Alex was almost two and ten and he couldn't control the child now. How would he ever be able to handle him a few years from now? Petyr remembered vaguely how stubborn and vindictive Edmure was when they were little. If he didn't get his way, a new toy, or jealousy from the attention his sisters received from their father...

This was something far deeper. Alex had never been the same since his mother vanished. He blamed his father for it, every day. Alex detested the love and attention showered on his sister. All Petyr could do was take calming breaths. He had no intention of hurting the boy and they both knew it.

I should have told him she was dead.

No, she was alive. It would be a lie even if kindly meant. If his dreams were true, Petyr could bring her home and then Alex would understand. He would see for himself. That's what Alex really needed – to see the truth of it all. Petyr looked at his son and feared of what the boy might become if they continued on this present course. He didn't want Alex to become like him.

"I'm sending you to the best school my gold can buy," Petyr said with a controlled breath. "Isn't that exactly what you wanted?"

"You said we were going home," Alex challenged.

"We are," Petyr sighed setting his daughter down and wiping her tears away. "I received a letter yesterday. The king has called me back. We're going to Kings Landing. I will make the necessary arrangements for your acceptance to Brimsworth. Considering your travels, education and that your beloved father is Grand Duke, I doubt you'll have any troubles what so ever. Will that satisfy?"

"Just like that? You'll let me go?" the boy added skeptically. Oh, he was definitely his father's son.

"You were right, Alex," Petyr acquiesced. "I should have let you attend school last year. Accept this as my apology."

"We'll live in the capital with the King?" Alex needed his father a little more.

"Yes," Petyr answered. It wasn't fully a lie. They would live there until the spring. He wouldn't

have to tell Alex until the time came for him to return home from school.

Father and son eyed each other without blinking, as if testing the other to flinch first. The boy broke and glanced at his little sister with a smirk.

“If she gets to bring that stupid pony, I want to take my new horse,” Alex haggled.

Petry only smiled letting the boy have his minor victory. It didn't matter if Alex thought he won the battle, Petry was just grateful for the peace and quiet it would bring him.

Robert insisted Petry stay in the palace when they first arrived, and his favored uncle didn't contest it. Petry still owned his townhouse with the same trusted servants. He only had to placate the young king for a few months until moving there until spring. It would be a gradual severing of the paternal strings from the young man that still had not matured much over the years. Robert still behaved as if he needed a mother to coddle and control him.

The king spared no expense for a ball to welcome his uncle, the Grand Duke of the Vale home. It was just as frivolous and pompous as Petry expected it to be. The new aristocracy was that of Petry's choosing. Wealthy merchants, land owners and military men hand-picked years ago. It really didn't matter if it was old family money or new wealth. Gold and riches changed all men whether they knew it or not. After so many years abroad, Petry really did not see the difference between the old and the new men in power. In time, they would be just as corrupted, and no one would remember why there was a revolution at all.

Observing his son, Alex was entranced by it all. Petry remembered the boy's excitement during Robert's coronation and being named his godfather. It seemed to give Alex a sense of placement. He was someone of importance here – the Marquess of Harrenhal and Lord Paramount, even though Edmure acted more like a regent over the Riverlands the past few years.

Nephew and uncle reunited, and Petry felt a small twinge of jealousy. Edmure had a son now, only a couple years Alex's junior. He spent a great deal of the evening with his new cousin and the only time Petry cracked a smile was at the new attention payed to the fairer sex in their pretty little dresses. Petry remembered when he started seeing Catelyn and Lysa in a new light, when they were no longer just simple childhood playmates. A lovely girl with shimmering blonde hair had caught his son's eye. She was at least two years his senior but Alex managed to spot the prettiest young lady in the ballroom – even though Petry knew his son had no intention of talking to her.

They grow up so quickly. They'll never realize how fast the years go by until they spot that first grey hair or wrinkle on their face.

Petry's age, however, didn't seem to be a deterrent for several ladies at court either this evening. He was a wealthy duke after all and most importantly a widower. Quite the catch for any woman looking to improve her station only this time Petry wasn't the foppish lord with a terrible reputation. By the chatter, he was indeed the topic of conversation among the ladies looking for a wealthy husband upon his return. In fact, he had numerous applicants for governess to his children the moment his return was known.

Even though he hated every moment of it, Petry, at Robert's request, danced with a few eligible ladies. Petry didn't want to ruin what Robert meant as a celebration and obliged his nephew. Apparently, even he expected his uncle to move on and marry again. At least Petry was able to keep his gloves on all evening as decorum demanded. No awkward explanations about his hand. In fact, Petry did not overhear a whisper of Sansa's name or blather about his late wife. He had most definitely expected it and worried what his children might overhear. Petry did tell Robert that Sansa died in childbirth. Perhaps, after six and a half years, the torrid stories had become nothing, but old gossip forgotten in the midst of a revolution and reconciliation. Now, ladies were attempting to win over a widowed and very wealthy man. They were just another shade of Lady Myranda. These ladies were no different and weren't interested in him other than his title and gold. Funny how some things never changed.

Robert had a few ladies in mind for marriage and wanted his uncle's opinion. Petry knew immediately the awkward and sickly young man suffered from the same malady. Not one of these ladies would ever marry this boy king for love. Petry knew Robert was still a virgin too. He was far too timid, unlike his predecessor to just take any girl to sate his lust. Petry surely didn't have the lack of opportunity from willing ladies over the years. He easily could have re-married if he wished even if he knew Sansa would never come home ever again. Petry had many women in his life, but Sansa ruined him forever. Despite his age, Petry still had desires and yet refused to act on them. Sansa was his Isolde. She was all he could see and love. No other woman would ever compare. No other woman would ever do.

Petry happily used his daughter to excuse himself from any further and carefully constructed attempts to woo his interest to the dismay of several ladies and their fathers. One girl couldn't have been older than Sansa when Petry first saw her, and he wasn't as old as he was now. Greed knew no bounds, it seemed.

Instead of the boisterous fop, Petry played the contented and happy father to his daughter. He would not be seen at the sorrowful widower. A waltz played, and Petry excused himself to have the last dance with his little girl before tucking her into bed. It was Caty's favorite dance as it was her mother's. Her frilly dress in shades of lavender with white lace clung to his trouser leg as she stood on his toes as his feet moved to the music in small steps. Petry kept off to the side, away from the other twirling couples and then finally picked her up for the last half of the dance. She giggled and smiled making her father's heart soar.

He needed to appreciate these small moments now, for in a few years she would be like her brother and want to be wooed and dance with other boys her age. Petyr didn't even want to think about the day when he would have to introduce her to society and allow many a young man to court her. He dreaded the day when his little sparrow would fall in love. Petyr would need Sansa by his side. If he had his way, Caty wouldn't marry until she was thirty.

Thankfully, have a young child had its advantages. It was early in the evening when his little Sparrow yawned, and Petyr couldn't wait to leave the ball. Once, he would have drank, gambled and flirted all night. Now he was older and such things didn't hold his interest any longer. The sport of ruining a lady's reputation was something he reveled in. Petyr didn't know that man and wondered if he ever existed. It was as if it was some other man's sordid life. His little witch really had changed him in more ways she could have even known.

"Papa, may I please stay up a little longer?" she whispered and rested her head on her father's strong shoulder.

He chuckled softly, holding her in his arms as he carried his daughter up the stairs to their apartments.

"No, my darling, it's bedtime for you."

Laying her down and gently undressing his daughter, Petyr was struck with déjà vu. Sansa had been drunk with wine and he carried her up to her bed once night. They were in the library only a few days after she first arrived at Harrenhal. He had warned Sansa, but she rebelled and bantered with him. Petyr could still see her as if it were yesterday. Sansa was fast asleep on the sofa with the book laying in her lap. He didn't know how long he admired her before attempting to wake the girl. Sansa stumbled half way to the stairs when Petyr finally lifted her in his arms, carrying her the rest of the way to bed.

Sansa exchanged the exact same words. Such an odd thing to remember out of the blue, Petyr thought as he tucked Caty into bed and gently kissed her forehead.

She smiled and hugged him around the neck and her mother's voice echoed in his mind from the past.

Promise me...

Anything, sweetling...

Don't leave again...I don't want to be alone anymore...

"I love you, Papa," his little darling whispered sweetly. "Are we going home soon?"

The moment they stepped foot in Kings Landing, Petyr wanted to ride straight for Harrenhal but knew he couldn't just yet. Caty was just as anxious as her father. Even with the underlying fear, Petyr knew going home was right. It felt right and his daughter had no fear at all.

"Soon, Sparrow," he spoke, laying her back down. "Let me do right by your brother and by spring, we'll head home. They're already are expecting us."

Caty yawned and closed her eyes with a little smile.

"May I have the room that looks like my dress, Papa?"

Sansa's first bedroom was bathed in lavender and cream just as Petyr remembered it. He chose it for her, thinking it befitted such a lovely young lady. A flood of memories came back from the earliest weeks when he brought Sansa here from Riverrun. She hated him so much back then, he smirked. Petyr couldn't blame her. She was so innocent despite all she had been through to that point.

Glancing at the side table, Petyr remembered the music box she had been terribly frightened of. Sansa explained everything she experienced that one night, and he dismissed it all as superstitious ravings of a scared girl. All the things Petyr had done to frighten the servants had turned this lovely girl mad. Standing outside her door that night, hearing her cry inside, tore Petyr down with such guilt. He wanted to walk back in and confess everything.

If he had only listened... believed...

"Papa, where's your room?"

Her sweet, little voice always swept away his melancholy. At school, Alex was enjoying his independence and as he promised, sent letters to his sister – at his father's request. Petyr didn't want Alex to know he craved to read those letters as much, if not more so than Caty. He needed to know how his son was doing without acting like a mawkish mother. Petyr didn't realize how difficult it would be to let one of his children go. He had to do it. Petyr was destined to turn into a lonely old man the day Sparrow finally married. Without Sansa, Caty was all he had left. Sooner than Petyr would like, Alex would be his own man ready to live his life.

Petyr picked up his daughter, tickling her sides and making she squeal. Thankfully, this room was very close to his... and Sansa's. Petyr was almost tempted to make Caty sleep in her mother's room, so he could keep a closer watch on her. His little sparrow was adamant. She wanted this room. Caty chose it that night of the king's ball. His daughter knew things she couldn't possibly know. She was only a year old when they were last in this house.

When the carriage took the turn from Kings Road toward Harrenhal, Caty was bounced with excitement for the remainder of the journey. Petyr didn't tell her they were close to home. She knew. Petyr wasn't sure if he was just as excited to be home or scared to death. Every dream he had was the same since that summer evening in France. It was here. The key to everything was right here. His sweetling was telling him to come home. She was here – *waiting*.

It wasn't until Petyr watched his daughter run into the house for the first time in almost six years that he truly asked himself if he made the right decision bringing her back. This child didn't fear anything. All she understood and saw was beauty and love. She didn't know how terrible the world could be. Petyr wanted so much to protect his little girl from all of that. The way he couldn't protect her mother.

William had married Sansa's maid, Sarah and they had a son that wasn't quite two years of age. All of the loyal servants that had seen and heard everything since the first day their new mistress was brought home, greeted the master of the house with warm smiles, welcoming him home. There were new faces Petyr didn't recognize and was later informed that they were all displaced northerners loyal to the Starks. Frankly, Petyr was surprised, although grateful to find any servants at all after everything that happened here.

The look on the old housekeeper's face made Petyr's heart drop to his stomach. Mrs. Ames had aged so much. She was thin and frail. Petyr knew she was still alive from the dutiful reports sent by William throughout the years. Her small frame and gaunt appearance had no effect on the woman's mind. Their eyes locked and the sadness Petyr saw there made him question every decision he made in regards to his daughter.

Why did you come back, you fool?

That's what her eyes said to him, making Petyr feel like his mother was disapproving of him. Petyr tipped his head in acknowledgment to the old woman. She looked so different to him now. Mrs. Ames, despite her age, was strong in will as well as words. She commanded this household for years and protected his beloved wife and children. The woman before him now appeared so fragile. She stood with a cane, her gnarled hand, gripping it tightly.

"Mrs. Ames. I hope you're well."

"As well as to be expected, Your Grace," she replied simply. "I'm not in the ground just yet."

Caty came barreling around the corner after gushing over Sarah's little boy in the foyer. The red head stopped dead in her tracks and stared at the old woman.

Mrs. Ames smiled this time and that old warmth finally showed itself in those tired eyes.

"Catelyn, this is Mrs. Ames. You were only a baby when..."

Caty walked straight to the housekeeper with her arms outstretched and Petyr fell silent. With difficulty, Mrs. Ames bent down and let the child embrace her.

"I missed you, Cadhla," the little girl held her tightly. "I'm home."

Mrs. Ames' eyes widened at the use of her given and stared directly at Petyr. He couldn't speak even if he wanted to. Petyr never spoke about Harrenhal to his daughter, and he certainly never called Mrs. Ames by any other name. He vaguely knew her given name. Caty knew it and that knowledge shook them both.

Petyr could barely remember addressing the servants about his return home. He introduced his daughter and spoke briefly that his son would return during the summer months from school. No one asked a single question. They smiled and nodded in turn. Each new servant introduced themselves and their position in the household. Suddenly, he was taking Caty up the grand staircase with Lady following behind. The wolf wasn't as quick as she used to be climbing up those many stairs and Petyr sighed to himself. They were getting old, both of them.

The first room Caty headed towards was the lavender room. Petyr couldn't feign surprise anymore with his child. It was as though she never left this house and part of him wanted to pick her up and take her out of this place forever. Yet, it was possibly a sign that they were meant to be here. Petyr prayed it was the latter and he hadn't made the biggest mistake of his life.

"Where's your room, Papa?"

Petyr tickled his daughter. Was she really asking him where he slept? She knew Mrs. Ames at first sight. She knew where her room was and what it looked like... Petyr bet every gold coin that she could find her way throughout this entire house without asking one question. Frowning, he knew that meant one thing – he would need to watch his daughter constantly.

That first night, a father grinned like a fool in his wife's room while his little girl took a bath. She sang to herself and by God that child couldn't hold a tune. Caty could play the piano better than Myranda in her early twenties, but she was not meant to sing. Petyr didn't care, she such an adorable creature, his most precious treasure. Every off-pitch note had Lady grunting from the bathroom where she watched over the girl and Petyr bit his bottom lip to keep from chuckling loudly.

Petyr opened every drawer, looking through his wife's belongings. Everything was exactly the way Sansa left it. Nothing had been moved or stolen in his absence. The room had fresh linens and the entire house was well kept, as if they had never left at all. It was such a strange sensation knowing how many years had passed and yet in this house, time stood still. It did not lessen the pain of missing his beloved. They never should have left.

Sansa's dresses had lost her scent and some had begun to fade, revealing their age. Petyr perked his ear from Sansa's wardrobe, and then smiled when he could still hear Caty in the bath. The only thing Petyr took were his wife's jewels, her painting, the key...

The key.

Rushing back to his room, Petyr found the brass key he stashed away in the armoire when he

unpacked today. This key unlocked two doors beneath the house. Petyr left it in Sansa's possession when he abandoned her and Alex here to finish the game. No, he cursed himself. This key didn't make any sense. He was being too literal. Was the key allegory or was Petyr meant to really unlock something?

Tomorrow Caty's new governess would arrive, and Petyr would ride out to the woods and around the lake. All of his dreams involved the two. Mrs. Ames said gateways for the daoine sidhe could be strange mounds, caves, lakes and springs...Petyr studied all about the wailing banshees who appeared before someone died, pucas that could shape and morph into anything they pleased...

Glancing to the open door to the bathroom, Petyr couldn't hear his daughter any more. After almost seven years, this father was attuned to everything about his child. The bathroom was empty and the tub still full with warm water. Entering Sansa's room, he saw the little red head at her mother's vanity and his heart twinged a bit. Caty sat at the table, innocently running her mother's hair brush through her tangled curls.

You're staring, my lord.

Petyr could hear her voice as clear as if she were in the room. He loved watching Sansa readying herself for the day. Petyr would catch her eye in the mirror and smile as her reflection blushed prettily. God, he missed her.

"Do I look like Mummy, Papa?" the girl smiled in the mirror, catching her father's attention again.

A genuine smile crossed his face as he walked up behind his daughter playing with her mother's things.

"Very much," he kissed the top of her head and could smell the lemon soap – her mother's favourite. "She would be very proud of you, Sparrow."

Caty's brilliant green eyes lit up. She loved it when he talked about Sansa and how much they were alike. Caty stood on the cushioned stool and hugged her father and Petyr would never tire of it. He dreaded the day he would have to let another man come into her life, but right now she belonged to him. Petyr would savor every moment.

"May I sleep here tonight?" she smiled at Lady already dozing on her old mistress' soft bed. Lady missed Sansa too, Petyr smiled sadly. However, a strong relief washed over him knowing she would be nearby in this house. Petyr knew he wouldn't sleep one wink tonight. Caty didn't have her brother's penchant for wandering and hiding, thank heavens, but he still worried about her in this house considering everything.

"Of course."

Petyr kissed her nose and tucked Caty into the bed where she was born. She snuggled deep and yawned as Lady rolled onto her back. Her father had a mind to sit in that chair by window until dawn just to watch over her – to keep her safe.

The damned clock on the mantle read a quarter to three and Petyr's back was killing him. The candle had burned low with only the low embers in the fireplace casting a soft glow in the room. Caty was fast asleep, and her father refused to go back to his room. The moon was high and reflected on the black waters of the lake and it made Petyr think about that dream he kept having over and over. Sansa rose from the lake like some Arthurian legend. She said something to him, but Petyr couldn't remember no matter how hard he tried.

The lake, tree, key and then his hand would bleed. That's when Petyr would always wake, just on the verge of learning more, he felt. It was infuriating. So many mornings his scarred hand would ache with such pain. The nerves twinged and sometimes he could feel the burning and the tree ripping through his flesh. Had Petyr not wrenched his hand free when he did, the branch would have burrowed straight through. Only in private did he forego his gloves. The household knew of his hand and didn't seem to care, but Petyr hated the sight of it.

"The key is in your hand, Papa," her little voice sounded from across the room. Caty's eyes were bright in the stream of moonlight layered across the bed.

Petyr crossed the room and sat down next to her.

"What key, Sparrow?" he asked nervously.

"Mummy said to tell you," she yawned again and turned over drowsily.

"Where is it?" he pleaded softly even though she fell back to sleep.

A better question – what is it?

Petyr lay down on the bed exhausted. He didn't want to wake his daughter up and needle her with questions. It had been a long day of traveling and settling back in at Harrenhal. They both needed rest. She turned again and snuggled into her father side and Petyr could only smile. He heard the maids over the years talk about how unnatural it was for a little girl wanting to sleep in her father's bed, but Petyr paid no mind. It was those nights he tended not to have those strange dreams or worry about her. Just like Sansa, if the child moved, he knew and it gave Petyr peace.

He turned to blow out the candle, spying a book sitting next to it with a lavender ribbon marking a page. Picking up the tome, Petyr smiled. It was Byron. He never fancied poetry all that much but could at least appreciate some works.

Opening to the marked page and reading the first few lines, Petyr sighed. The memory came back in a whirl. He was reading to Sansa in the library next to the fire one evening when Lady was only a small pup. God, he could sense everything as if it were only yesterday. The scent of brandy in his glass, the feel of her hair as it teased his leg and the crackling warmth of the fire.

A change came o'er the spirit of my dream.

The Lady of his love;—Oh! she was changed,
As by the sickness of the soul; her mind

Had wandered from its dwelling, and her eyes,
They had not their own lustre, but the look
Which is not of the earth; she was become
The queen of a fantastic realm; her thoughts
Were combinations of disjointed things;
And forms impalpable and unperceived
Of others' sight familiar were to hers.
And this the world calls frenzy; but the wise
Have a far deeper madness, and the glance
Of melancholy is a fearful gift;
What is it but the telescope of truth?
Which strips the distance of its fantasies,
And brings life near in utter nakedness,
Making the cold reality too real!

Oh, how haunting this passage had become over the years. After the burning, Sansa had changed. She was a different woman from the young girl he seduced and married. The look in her eyes, that faraway stare. She was lost to him, he feared back then. When she left and disappeared that fateful morning, nothing could have prepared Petyr for the emptiness that consumed him for years to come.

Now they were home again. Petyr had to hold on to the belief that he would see her, touch her once more. After all this time, their journeys and searching, only to return back to the place where it all started – if this wasn't a sign, a real chance of Sansa returning, then he must be mad. If she didn't come back, Petyr would finally let her go – for the sake of their children.

Summer had come, and in a fortnight Alex would return from school. To Petyr's dismay, nothing significant happened since coming home. He wasn't quite sure what to anticipate, honestly. The answer to his questions weren't revealed the next day or the day after. Caty grew happier every day and her father tried to take enjoyment in that. She didn't disobey him or run off as he expected. Sparrow kept to the house and grounds under supervision at all times. Much to her brother's ire, Petyr brought the little grey pony from France or face the girl's hysterics. She had never acted that way before, but Lady had never been left behind either. Caty loved all animals but did not forge attachments as she did with the wolf and pony.

Alex's horse was still in its prime and healthy but was the principle of the thing. Petyr catered to his daughter's wishes and not his son's. He had to repair the relationship between them or Petyr worried his son would turn out just like him – bitter, hard and untrusting.

Caty has been with her governess most of the morning. Petyr glanced at his pocket watch and as soon as the second hand reached the top of the hour, he heard his daughter's gleeful voice as she hurried from the library. He didn't even reach the ballroom before his little sparrow flew straight for him. She was wearing her new green dress that flounced as she bounded to him. Caty's seventh birthday had been a thrill for the little girl. The servants fawned over her and they felt like a family again, one that Petyr had missed more than he would admit. Mrs. Ames tried to keep her distance from the child, but Caty wouldn't allow for it. She adored the old northern housekeeper as if they were old friends.

"Papa!" she squealed with delight as her father scooped his little girl up in his arms. "May we go riding today?"

"I think we can manage that," he grinned from ear to ear. It was a beautiful afternoon and perfect for riding. "How were your studies this morning?"

"Miss Cummings taught *eddy-cat*. It was boring," Caty frowned. "I like reading more and painting. May I use Mummy's paints tomorrow?"

Petyr couldn't help but chuckle loudly setting his daughter down. Etiquette wasn't her brother's favourite lesson either.

"Mummy is beautiful," she sighed and Petyr turned around facing her mother's portrait.

"Yes, she is, isn't she," he murmured.

Caty slid down her father and skipped into the ballroom spinning around a couple times loving the way her skirts flared out. Sarah attempted to curl Caty's wild auburn tresses that were growing long and tie them with ribbons. The red-head giggled and curtsied for her father.

"Does she like to dance?"

"Your mother loved to dance and was very good. She floated like an angel," he smiled at the memory of their first dance at the Eyrie.

"The ladies at the ball were silly, Papa," she took his hands and stood on his toes, telling him that she wanted to dance.

"Were they?" Petyr answered walking her around slowly without music to accompany them.

"Will I be silly when I grow up?" Caty asked watching their feet move together in time.

"Oh, not like that Sparrow. All of the men will be queuing up to dance with you. I'll have to beat them off with my walking stick."

"Will they be like you?"

They better not be. The man that wins my daughter's heart will have to be a saint and set her above all others. Being a reformed scoundrel will come in handy in weeding out her would-be suitors.

"One day you will find the perfect one, my love. I promise," he smiled. "When it happens to you, Sparrow, it will be forever."

"Like you and Mummy?" she looked up with the sweetest smile.

Petyr tried not to let the hurt show. She was so innocent. Luckily, a timely interruption came from the doorway.

"Ahem," Mrs. Ames coughed a bit. "I don't mean to intrude Your Grace..."

"Not at all," Petyr smiled warmly as Caty ran over to her new favorite person. "Is there something the matter?"

"No, m'lord. It's just that we'll need more hands for the summer and there are northerners needing work and so I wanted to ask you..."

"Hire whomever you need. You've been running Harrenhal quite well in my absence."

Caty tugged at the old woman's skirts until her demand for a hug was returned.

"Oh, I do believe you must give credit to William, m'lord. I'm not what I used to be," she smiled giving the young girl what she wanted. "Such a sweet girl. You look more like your mother every day."

"Papa says that too! When I grow tall, I want to wear her dress that sparkles like snow! Will I be as tall as her, Cadhla?"

There was no point in admonishing the child. She refused to call Mrs. Ames by anything but her given name. Petyr knew the gown Caty spoke of. It was the one her mother wore to King Joffrey's ball when he murdered Lysa and finally made Sansa his wife. When Caty looked through her mother's wardrobe, she saw nothing but pretty things. When Petyr looked at her dresses, each one had a memory attached and so many were ones in which he brought his sweetling so much pain.

"Your Grace?" a voice brought him back. Mrs. Ames was staring at him strangely with Caty holding on to her hand.

"I'm sorry," Petyr cleared his throat. "Did you say something?"

"Miss Catelyn wants to go with me to the greenhouse this afternoon," she answered.

"Oh, yes of course. I thought you wanted to riding today, Sparrow?" he smiled a bit sadly. Petyr enjoyed their rides.

"Tomorrow? You need to go alone today, Papa," Caty replied matter-of-factly, tugging on Mrs. Ames hand. Caty was always very direct, even for a child.

Gazing out the windows, Petyr could see the edge of the lake and from there, the woods beyond. He had been delaying going to that place and he wasn't sure why. Petyr certainly did not want to ride out there with his daughter. It still wasn't safe in his mind.

"Yes," he answered absently almost forgetting anyone else was in the room. "Tomorrow."

Petyr didn't know how long he stood there. When he finally came to his senses, he was alone. He made his way to the stables as one of the boys brought his horse, already saddled.

"Mr. William, m'lord, said you wanted your horse," the scrawny lad handed Petyr the reigns. Mrs. Ames must have advised them already. Where was his head today? Once he looked out at the woods from the ballroom, it was the only thing in his mind.

Petyr didn't remember how he got to the oak tree without so much as an upward glance. He had come here a million times it seemed but still nothing had changed. Like the house, this place was eternal. Just as every time before, Petyr found himself inspecting the tree as if hoping to discover something new. As always, he sat down and leaned his back against the trunk of great oak and talked to his beloved, wondering if this time she would hear him.

He found Caty playing the piano upon his return just as the sun dipped low along the horizon. Petyr sighed realizing he had been out in the woods for hours. Caty was playing the song she created and her father helped fashion into something the both of them shared. Quietly, he sat down next to his daughter who was wearing an old shawl that smelt of must and cedar. Petyr vaguely wondered if it belonged to Mrs. Ames.

A rainstorm was coming. Petyr could feel changes in the weather by the ache in his bones nowadays. He had forgotten how inclement the weather could be in the Riverlands compared to the mainland. Lady groaned a bit in front of the hearth, stretching out her long white body. The little girl didn't say a word and finished the song before smiling at her father as if she just realized he was sitting next to her. Caty started playing another song from memory and Petyr frowned a bit – he didn't teach her this.

"Where did you hear this song, Sparrow?" he inquired softly.

Petyr knew the answer, but he wanted her to say it.

"Mummy would sing it to me," she replied simply and continued playing the lullaby.

Catelyn Tully sang it to Petyr was he was just a boy. The music box Sansa destroyed was of the same tune. The last time Petyr heard this song was when a mother hummed to her newborn daughter not long before her disappearance.

"Has she sung to you since coming home?"

His little sparrow remained silent for a time, but her next words shook him to the core.

"Can you fix the music box, Papa?"

Caty knew things she shouldn't. She was either getting this knowledge from Sansa or that *other* place. It didn't matter for the music box was shattered the day he found out Sansa was with child for the first time. There was no point in asking how his daughter knew about the box he made a lifetime ago.

"Perhaps," he answered warily. "Where is it?"

"In the trunk."

It was then Petyr recognized the shawl. It was Sansa's. He couldn't even recall the last time she wore it. Caty had been in her mother's possessions while he was out this afternoon.

"Show me, Sparrow."

The child grinned brightly scurrying out of the music room and up the stairs. Petyr followed her into Sansa's wardrobe and cursed himself when he saw Sansa's trunk. It was hidden behind her dresses and furs. How could he have missed it?

Pulling the heavy thing into the middle of the room, Caty bounced with excitement. The child had already rummaged through it by the haphazard way things were stored inside. Paintings, trinkets, a gold watch that must have belonged to Stark himself lay inside. Petyr removed the items one by one. There was a stack of letters bound by a pale blue ribbon and Petyr set those aside to read. What caught his eye wasn't the broken music box laying at the bottom of the trunk but the drawings.

They were all drawings of him. Petyr still had the burnt sketch she drew of him the day her dress caught fire. He wanted so badly to kiss her in that moment. One after the other, Petyr counted nine in all. He had never commissioned his likeness to be made and Sansa was furious when he refused to sit for the portrait. Here were drawings of him, all by the hand of his wife. Why had she never shown them to him? They were good and wouldn't have mattered to him if they weren't. Why did she hide them? How many times had she been sketching and Petyr never knew he was her focal point.

Next to the broken music box lay another small painting, lying face down. Turning it over, Petyr stifled a sob that threatened to come out. It was a painting of him sitting in the library. It wasn't that it was beautifully artistic but how much time Sansa must have spent on it and he never knew. She never told him or wanted to show him these things. He couldn't stop the tears that rolled down his cheek. When did she paint this? Before or after the burning? The point was Sansa kept it hidden and it broke his heart. He saw himself through her eyes.

"It's alright, Papa. Don't cry," Caty wrapped her little arms around his neck as he sat on the floor. "I'll ask Mummy about it again, so you won't be sad anymore."

"What?"

Petyr pulled Caty away to look at her properly.

"The key. You need it for the special day. Didn't she tell you?"

Petyr wiped his face and held his daughter firmly. What was Sansa trying to tell him? The bits he remembered from his dreams still weren't making sense to him. It all had to do with him, the tree, the lake and some kind of key he was always holding in his hand.

"No, she didn't."

Something was happening, but Petyr wasn't sure if it was truly Sansa reaching out through their daughter or a nasty trick to take his daughter away. He needed to speak with Mrs. Ames tomorrow. God, he prayed he hadn't brought his daughter home to be spirited away because of his foolish and selfish desires. What if those faerie creatures were lying to Caty, pretending to be her mother? Maybe he should take his daughter away from here. How would that explain his dreams. How did Caty know about the key? Was he just a fool and being lied to as well? The special day she spoke could be Sansa's return. The constant questions made Petyr head ache.

Petyr made Caty sleep in Sansa's bed that night, even though she spent almost every night in her own bedroom. He wasn't taking any chances. Caty wouldn't leave his sight until he figured this madness out one way or another.

The next day, his daughter played in the music room while he sorted through the bundle of letters. The parchment was yellow with age as he unfolded each from their envelope. The address to his townhouse in Kings Landing was hastily written on only one. Petyr organized the letters by the date Sansa had written in the upper corner. The lot of them were from the year before her burning, the year he was hardly home and left Sansa and Alex to fend for themselves. She had nowhere to send these letters. It wasn't that Petyr was completely unreachable but correspondence between them at such a time would have been suspicious if they were intercepted. Petyr didn't want anyone to know that what he cared most for was the northern girl and child he was supposed to be saddled with. Everything Petyr thought he was doing right ended up being hell for his wife and son.

Petyr had to stop for a moment. It was killing him to read how lonely and frightened she was. She was begging him to come home, to take them far away. Petyr had hoped there might be some clue she left for him, hidden away in that stack of letters – waiting for him to find it... *to find her*. Instead, he read letter after letter of how terrible it was to be alone and afraid.

I did this to her. She never would have promised the child... she never would have left...

Petyr stood, stretching his sore back and wandered into the grand gallery, always keeping a watchful eye on his daughter who hadn't moved for her spot on the marble floor. Sansa's portrait hung adjacent to the music room and not a day went by that Petyr didn't stop at gaze at her. He found that special place by the potted palm where her painted eyes would find him. It felt as though she was here. The painting was so life-like, sometimes Petyr thought she might just come alive and walk out from its gilded frame and into his arms, but it was only a painting.

"Help me find you," he begged quietly. "Talk to me, little witch, I'm begging you."

Sarah brought his tea followed by the discernable sounds of Mrs. Ames' walking cane when he returned to his daughter who hadn't even noticed his absence.

"Good afternoon, miss... m'lord," Sarah smiled at the little girl drawing on the floor with parchment scattered everywhere. The tray was set on the table next to his chair as Petyr was deep in thought reading one of Sansa's letters meant for him. Gratefully, the light in the music room was bright and he wouldn't have to squint as much at her delicate handwriting. "Anything else you require?"

"No, thank you Sarah," he replied not looking up from the letter. "Spend the rest of the day with your son," he smiled sadly, wishing to be left alone today as it were. Petyr wanted to tell Sarah they grow up too fast and to savor every moment, but he held his tongue.

Children need their mother.

The maid left but the housekeeper remained as Petyr finally looked up from the letter that was making his heart ache.

"The salve, Your Grace," she said nodding at his hand, holding out the tiny jar to him. Her eyes, however, were fixed on the stack of letters.

"Thank you," he replied taking the container from her. "This weather isn't doing me any favors. French summers are more forgiving to one's aches and pains."

"Your wife gave me those when the gold coats came for her," the woman spoke with a faraway look in her eyes. "Sarah and I were rushed to the secret door. Everything happened so fast. One moment Sansa was handing me a key and stack of letters and the next I had young Alex in my keeping as the soldiers sacked the house. She knew. Lady Sansa knew they would look for him. She wanted me to wait until it was safe and find a way to bring your son to you. The man, Brune, had run off leaving them. She had no other choice but to save the boy," Mrs. Ames lamented staring at the letters. "Sarah and I swore an oath never to reveal the secrets of this house. Frankly, I didn't know how much time I had left, as old as I am. It was too much to burden one young maid. Other than us, only William knows. You know you can trust them completely."

Petyr put the letters aside and stared at the old woman.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You won't be able to keep it a secret for much longer, I fear," she added, nodding to Caty on the floor. "Northerners still cling to the old beliefs. I don't know if it is wise to keep this little one here."

"Why? Is she in danger? If these people were a threat to us why let them on my land? You know what I've done," he said discreetly in his daughter's presence. "...what I'm capable of. I won't flinch to do it again."

"She knows things. She's too innocent to understand what she says. Sooner or later the wrong person is going to hear it, see what she really is," Mrs. Ames sighed.

Caty ignored the both of them and continued with her drawings as if they weren't even there.

Petyr hissed, "She's not one of them."

"I didn't say she was but it's unnatural for a child of her age to know such things. You see how animals, nature responds to her don't you? I fear they're using her or perhaps luring you to bring her to them in hopes to see her mother again. Don't let Sansa's sacrifice be for nothing. She's not coming back. I know that's why you've returned."

At that, Caty's head rose and stared at the housekeeper with a look of what Petyr could only construe as betrayal?

"Cadhla..."

"Dá laghad," the woman rebuked, her eyes flaring a bit.

Absolutely not...

The little Petyr knew of the old northern language was enough to understand what Mrs. Ames had said. He looked between the housekeeper and his daughter. They had been together all afternoon the previous day.

"What's going on between you two?" he demanded coolly.

"Take your daughter and leave. Staying here... nothing good will come of it except pain and sadness," the woman replied with tears in her eyes. "She doesn't belong here. You're chasing the past, look to your future, your children's future."

"Mrs. Ames, what has Caty told you?" Petyr ordered but the woman turned and left the room without a word. Flying out of the chair, he grabbed the old housekeeper, spinning her around, her cane clanking to the floor. "Don't walk away from me. What do you know?"

Gasping from his harsh grip, Mrs. Ames' eyes had a ghostly pallor as she stared at him. Petyr was furious and tired of waiting. What he needed to know was here in this house.

"What I know..." she breathed. "Two of you are moving on and two of you are not."

More riddles? Petyr was sick of it and clenched her wrist tighter, making the woman cry out in pain.

"Papa, stop!" a small voice pulled him back to sanity, dropping Mrs. Ames' arm. The child picked up the cane and held it out to the household matriarch.

"It's alright, child. Look after your father. Soon enough I'll be gone and no longer a thorn in his side," Mrs. Ames' rubbed her wrist before taking her walking stick. "You are set on a path. Perhaps it is fate that wishes it so. I'm glad I'll be finally sleeping under earth's blanket and let this world go. I don't think I can bear to watch these events unfold... when you finally understand."

Mrs. Ames backed away, but not in fear of her employer. Glancing at the little girl, her face was filled with sorrow.

"Tá a fhios againn an fhírinne, ná muid?" the woman asked the child.

Petyr recognized three words in that question not meant for him.

"What truth?"

The housekeeper stopped in front of Sansa's portrait but kept her eyes downcast.

"She was never meant for this world."

That night, Petyr tucked his daughter in her own bed. She refused to sleep in her mother's room and for the first time in his child's life, he locked Caty in her room. Lady stayed with the young girl as if protecting her and it seemed to Petyr that this wolf understood as well as he did. Someone needed to watch over her at all times.

Mrs. Ames words swam through Petyr's mind until he finally fell into a restless slumber. Caty was an other-worldly child and many had remarked about it throughout the years. The locals here knew what happened to Sansa. Whether it was the truth or some sordid fairy tale they concocted, everyone spoke of the burning. The northerners hired for household and grounds looked upon the daughter as some kind of miracle herself. The few times Petyr ventured into town, he overheard a few whispers about his return and the children. Duncan and Myranda had definitely left their mark in one way or another.

They were in awe of him and the return of the children, but at the same time there seemed to be an underlining fear. They had been away for so long and the gossip had certainly taken a foot hold. In a strange way, they had become a faerie tale of their own making. Some said Sansa was dead. Others proclaimed she haunted the woods by the lake. Petyr only heard the term 'red witch' once and that was the reason he ran away with the children.

They are all superstitious fools. They know nothing. If they did, the truth would only scare them more.

Without knowing how he got there, Petyr was suddenly at the tree again. It glowed in hues of gold and amber and a horrible pain seared through his hand. The blood was dripping down, creating a thick pool in the emerald moss beneath his feet.

Someone was gripping his hand so hard, Petyr thought the bones would break. He woke with a start as the early morning sun streamed into Sansa's windows. Glancing down, a tiny hand clutched his fiercely and yet he couldn't free himself from her tight grasp. Pain pulsed as something cut his palm and Petyr could feel the warmth of his blood.

"At the rise of the solstice sun," a voice echoed eerily, and Petyr looked at his daughter in horror. That was not her voice.

Caty stood as if made of stone, even as her father tried to pull his hand away. Her face was void of emotion and life and something else chilled Petyr to the bone. Her eyes were no longer green but a brilliant blue. It was then Petyr recognized the voice, one he had not heard in seven years.

"From the depths of the waters she will come.

Dusk's purple hues, a calling to the wolf's tree,

As blood of the soul is the key.

A day to remember, a night to love,

The other world is not to be spoken of.

By first light of dawn she must return,

Or forever in her lover's arms will she burn."

Petyr couldn't breathe as he stared at the little girl. Only then he noticed that Lady sat quietly next her, the scruff of her white fur in Caty's other hand. Before Petyr could comprehend what she said, Caty started reciting the poem over from the beginning, unblinking and in the same voice of her mother.

The pain in his hand swelled and blood began to drip onto the satin below. Petyr tried to peel her fingers off, but she held him in a vice grip. She had the strength of ten men.

"Caty," he winced. "Wake up, darling."

Again, she repeated the poem, her voice growing stronger and Petyr stopped to listen intently. She wanted him to hear this. Sansa wanted him to hear her...

"Or forever in her lover's arms will she burn," Caty finished and finally stood in silence with those piercing blue eyes staring into his soul.

"Sparrow?" he nervously asked, waiting for the riddle to start all over again.

Her hand fell away from Lady and suddenly the girl blinked sleepily as she had just woken from a dream. Caty's grip on him lessened dramatically as Petyr carefully pulled his hand back all while watching his daughter in fear. Opening his palm, Sansa's ring lay within covered in his blood.

"The key is in your hand, Papa..." her little voice whispered and Petyr glanced back at his little girl that simply smiled at him as if nothing had happened.

"The ring?" he wondered aloud.

"Two days," Caty yawned and crawled into bed. Petyr wiped his blood off the ring and set it on the table as his daughter snuggled against him. He needed to bind his hand but Caty wasn't going to let him off this bed at the moment.

"Two days," he murmured. "Is she coming in two days, Sparrow?"

Caty cuddled deeper into his chest. "You have to call her... she's waiting."

"How?" he desperately asked, recalling the riddle line for line.

Caty was sound asleep. Petyr didn't want to know how she managed to get out of a locked room... or who let her out. Whatever touched and spoke to him wasn't his daughter. In horror, and as much as Sansa desired it so, he wasn't sure if it was truly Sansa either.

Carefully, Petyr slipped out of bed and tended his hand with a cloth before sitting at Sansa's writing desk. He quickly scrolled out the poem from memory, recalling it's entirety with ease.

Two days...

The solstice. It was strange phenomenon that occurred twice of year signaling the longest and shortest days of the year. Pagans might have celebrated these times, Petyr learned in his studies over the years. He even found that the celebration of Christmas could very well have been reworked from paganism. It would have been a sacrilege to say so openly and surely most scientists would refrain from making such a claim. It wasn't just northerners, Vikings or even Roman times. Such fables probably went all the way back to even Egyptian times. Petyr had learned a stone had been found around the turn of the century with writing from three different cultures opening up to learning more about these ancient peoples. He wouldn't be surprised to learn they were all so similar. Old north legends had elements he discovered in multiple countries he visited. Perhaps they all had their version of faeries and some other world that paralleled our own.

The wolf's tree, blood of the soul is the key...

Petyr read the riddle over and over again. Dusky hues were obvious enough and in his dreams he was either at that tree at dawn or dusk. The next two lines signified a day. Would Sansa only come back for just one day?

You did say many times over the years that even a few minutes would be worth it to see her again, didn't you?

They clearly weren't allowed to talk about that *other* place and Sansa had to return the next day or suffer the fate of burning.

Seeing the bloody ring on the table, Petyr couldn't figure out how that was the key. He had take the ring to the oak tree many times and nothing happened...

A thought made Petyr rush into his study looking for a particular book he found while in the Scandinavian countries. He flipped through sections until finding it. Pagan's celebrated two solstices a year. One in winter and one in summer. They fell on specific dates. In winter, it was past mid-month of December and coincided very close to the birth of Christ. Ancient scientific men such as Aristotle, DiVinci, Galileo, even more recently Newton knew generations past apparently understood mathematics and astronomy.

Petyr pulled two other books and scanned their pages. Today was the eighteenth of June. Sansa was taken June twenty-first, seven years ago. Caty said he had two days. Maybe it varied from year to year. Petyr was good at numbers but he was not astronomer and there was no time to write one.

Marching downstairs in his night clothes, he banged on the housekeeper's chamber door.

"Mrs. Ames!" he bellowed and pounded the door furiously. "Wake up, I must speak you with this instant."

After a few minutes, the old woman opened her door wary of the man on the other side.

"Is Caty alright? She's not..." Mrs. Ames gasped in terror at why the master of the house was at her door so early.

"The solstice. When is it? You know don't you?" Petyr demanded of her.

"The solstice?" she blinked in surprise. "Have you gone mad? Why do you want to know?"

"Is it two days from now? Tell me."

Realization finally hit her, and a sorrow fell over Mrs. Ames' wrinkled face.

"That's when they took her, isn't it?" he insisted again.

Sighing, the woman pushed open the door, allowing him in before sitting down tiredly on her bed.

"It is, isn't it?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"That's why every time I went back there, nothing happened. It has to be on that day, doesn't it?" he claimed and waiting impatiently for her to answer.

"I don't know," she sniffed and looked at Petyr properly. "Honestly, I don't. When I left, I don't recall it being a solstice. Maybe for Sansa it's different. That's when they told her to bring the child to them."

Her face filled with terror and shook her head in dismay at Petyr's determination.

"Oh God, you're not taking that innocent child out there are you? Can't you see it is a lie? They will take her from you. Why are you asking about the solstice all of a sudden? They told you, didn't they?"

"Caty told me herself, in a dreamlike state. It was Sansa's voice, I tell you. I would know if it wasn't her," Petyr explained.

"You lovesick fool..." Mrs. Ames lamented.

"Is it in two days?" he demanded again.

Defeated, the old woman gazed at him overwhelmed with grief.

"Yes," she sighed. "I know now I wouldn't be able to stop you even by lying. You will go there no matter what I say."

That was all Petyr needed and didn't waste another moment with the woman who could have explained this years ago. Twice that year, Petyr could have gone on the right day and just maybe he would have been able to see his beloved sweetling. Then again, he couldn't understand his dreams. It took his daughter to spell it out to him. It all made sense now. Petyr rebuked himself for all the time he wasted looking for her, when Sansa was right here. Perhaps Caty had to be that conduit to her his love.

Finding Caty still fast asleep in bed Petyr cursed himself and made one promise. In two days, if he returned to that tree with the ring and Sansa didn't come back, he would let her go for good. Mrs. Ames, Petyr felt, was wrong. Caty wasn't the key in that way.

The key is in your hand, Papa.

Cleaning the dried blood off Sansa's ring, Petyr turned it around in his hand. In his dreams, he was holding this, cutting it his hand. He was always bleeding. Thinking back to that fateful morning, Petyr could feel her hand in his and he desperately tried to pull her back from the tree. When she disappeared, the bark overtook her lifeless arm and hand, cutting through his. Were they joined in some strange way after all this time?

Blood of the soul...

That had to be it. The ring wasn't the key... it was him. His blood. Sansa had his ring and Petyr had hers.

Mine for yours.

The next two days were the slowest in Petyr's life. He could barely sleep or eat. Caty never spoke of the spooky recital in her mother's voice and the girl had never been happier or filled with excitement. She knew, just as Mrs. Ames predicted. Caty knew her mother was coming and Petyr wasn't sure if it filled him with the same happiness or dread. What if it wasn't her? Would he be able to tell? What if Mrs. Ames was right and they only wanted his daughter?

At the rise of the solstice sun,

From the depths of the waters she will come.

Dusk's purple hues, a calling to the wolf's tree

Looking out at the sunset from his bedroom, Petyr knew it was almost time. He changed his clothes and washed up as if he were going to a soiree and not some foolish journey to the woods. Wiping the lather from his clean shaved face, Petyr sighed. Where had those wrinkles and grey hair come from? Was he really seven years older? Petyr wasn't nearly forty when he took Sansa from Riverrun. A marriage, two children... Now, he was in his early fifties and it showed. What would his little witch think when she saw him again? Luckily, Petyr hadn't gained weight, for traveling kept him somewhat fit. There were days he didn't feel it and yet others reminded him of the years that had crept up on him. Sansa wasn't even out of her twenties when they took her. Would she look any different? Would she feel differently about him after all this time? The fear that they could very well be strangers meeting for the first time tomorrow struck Petyr with such trepidation. Love made him stay the course all this time. It would change now when he could be so very close.

He commanded Sarah watch Caty in her room and that they not leave until he returned. Mounting his horse, with Sansa's ring stowed in his waistcoat pocket and the dagger inside his coat, Petyr rode back to the woods where it all happened – back to that old oak tree.

Petyr paused before the great oak tree in silence. He could hear Lady's howls and Caty's cries. The sun, bright in deep hues of red and orange, was dipping below the horizon. It reminded him of that horrible morning that he saw his love disappear, except now, it was the wrong time of day. Petyr could still see it, as though time had stood still. The sun lit up her fiery hair as she was pulled back into that damned tree...into that other world.

Her screams, dear God, her screams haunted him. She didn't want him to let her go, even though she begged him to only moments before to do the exact opposite. She was frightened as he held

onto her. Her hand was so delicate and small in his, gripping it for dear life. In an instant, she was gone and he was all alone. Petyr felt as if he never left this place. Part of him stayed, waiting for his return. The answer was always here.

Breathing in the evening air, Petyr stared at that cursed tree. How long had he been out here? The stars twinkled just above the dusky midnight blues of the sky but he knew daybreak would come soon. The forest was eerily quiet tonight and he vaguely wondered if that was a sign. A breeze whispered through the leaves and Petyr could feel it. There was a charge in the air.

“You know I’m here, don’t you?”

After all this time, Petyr felt he finally had an answer to that question. How many times did he come here after that fateful morning? Everyday, sometimes twice a day? For weeks, he was here every morning when the sun rose and when nothing happened, he started coming at sunset. He inspected every centimeter of that tree. The branch that unnervingly still looked like her forearm and hand which had sprouted sparse leaves. Bringing her ring every time, Petyr tried to place the ring on what appeared to be her fourth finger, hoping that was what was needed. He tried putting his mangled hand in hers, replicating the moment they took her but to no avail. No matter what he did or said, it was just him lingering and studying an old oak tree, like a madman... waiting for someone who was never to return.

Petyr gazed down at his hand holding the dagger. He wore a glove most of the time now to cover the burned and scarred flesh. People always stared and it was better to keep it hidden than to answer the same questions over and over again. He knew what they wanted to ask but were too frightened. He knew what they said about him... and her. Not once did he care what any of them thought. Petyr knew the truth of it. The old woman knew. It was his children that he constantly worried and obsessed over, especially Alex.

I couldn’t make him believe. I wish I could have been a better father, the one you said I would be. Don’t judge me too harshly, sweetling... I did the best I could...

Petyr closed his eyes and felt as though he had never left this place. Every emotion came back in a rush over his senses and played out in his mind as if it were only yesterday.

I will find you.

Opening his eyes, Petyr walked closer the tree, feeling the rough bark under his fingers, tracing along the branch that resembled her delicate arm.

I did find you, sweetling, just as I promised. You never left and I have been such a fool. I should have stayed.

A breeze kicked up again as if responding him. Petyr felt a strange humming and the sun finally dipped below the horizon. By morning, Petyr would either be the greatest of fools or his love would return from the depths of the lake just like his dreams told him. She would come from the waters at dawn and he would be there waiting for her on that shore. If he had only one day with his sweetling, Petyr would be forever grateful. He could tell her all the things that needed to be said. Most importantly, Sansa would be able to see and hold her daughter again. Petyr wished that Alex was home, but he wouldn’t return to see his mother one more time. Maybe it was better this way. Alex had five years with his mother and Caty only had a few weeks as a newborn. As much as Petyr desires were more selfish, Sansa needed to know her daughter was safe and happy.

The decision made, Petyr unsheathed the dagger and his mangled hand wrapped around the sharp blade. With a quick swipe, the metal cut deep and the blood began to flow. Droplets covered the damp moss as he approached. When his bloody hand grasped the branch, Petyr thought he heard something on the wind. It sounded like his name and he smiled.

His little witch was coming home.

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